

JOIBS: May 2025. ISSN 2992-9253

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Review of Conway & Houck (2025)

Joseph Manson, University of California, Los Angeles, USA. E-mail: jmanson@anthro.ucla.edu

Funding: None.

Competing interests: None.

Citation: Manson, J. H. (2025). Review of Conway & Houck (2025). *Journal of Open Inquiry in the Behavioral Sciences*. <https://doi.org/10.58408/issn.2992-9253.2025.04.03.0003>

This paper tests four hypotheses accounting for the existence of incongruent authoritarians: people who lean left yet score higher than average on right-wing authoritarianism, or who lean right yet score higher than average on left-wing authoritarianism. The authors justify this line of inquiry partly by citing work showing that in specific national and historical contexts outside the U.S., incongruent right-wing authoritarians are an identifiable population.

Situating political psychological research within specific national and historical contexts is, indeed, essential. Unfortunately, it's also very difficult during periods of political upheaval and rapid coalitional realignments, which is what most of the world, especially the West, has been experiencing since the mid-2010s. Political psychologists prefer that their constructs, especially individual difference dimensions, maintain consistent content and consistent nomological networks, so that researchers can use the same instruments and assume that they're measuring the same things, year after year, allowing them to build up a cumulative body of knowledge. But unlike, for example, Big Five personality traits, political constructs evolve historically. What's more, their narrower components break apart and recombine in kaleidoscopic fashion. For example, vegetarianism has been Left-coded in the West since the 1960s, but in early 20th century Germany, it was a component of right-wing variants of the *Lebensreform* movement.

The authors raise (and then dismiss based on their data) the possibility that apparent incongruent authoritarianism represents mere measurement error, e.g. some participants misunderstand the labels "liberal" and "conservative." I think there's likely to be a deeper problem with those labels (and even more so with the party affiliations Democrat and Republican), not attributable to participants' ignorance or inattentiveness, but to the kaleidoscopic reshuffle that characterizes the current U.S. political scene. American liberals used to distrust large corporations, while conservatives endorsed the slogan "caveat emptor." Today, it's the Trump-aligned MAHA movement that takes aim at Big Ag and Big Pharma, while Democrat congresspersons defend them. In the 1960s, leftists at UC Berkeley founded the Free Speech movement; today it's the right that protests government collusion with social media companies to suppress dissenting speech. The Democrats used to be the peace party; today they welcome the Cheneys into their

fold. And yet, of course, there are still many self-professed liberals who distrust big corporations and who favor free speech and a non-interventionist foreign policy. Using, as this manuscript does, two single-item measures of liberalism vs. conservatism (rather than items tapping opinions about specific issues), obscures the disintegrating coherence of the labels "liberal" and "conservative" (and, even more so, Democrat and Republican) in contemporary America. (In contrast, the term "Progressive" seems to have a relatively coherent and stable meaning at this historical moment).

As for authoritarianism, I wonder whether Conway's LWA scale has been similarly overtaken by the events of the past decade. A high-scorer on this instrument wants a strong leader who will crush the fundamentalist Christians, anti-abortion activists, proponents of school prayer, and people who are skeptical of climate change and evolution. That's all. Based on what's prominent in media and social media, I would characterize a 2024 American left-wing authoritarian as wanting a strong leader to deal appropriately with those kinds of people, sure, but more importantly one who will crush the white supremacists/white nationalists, xenophobes/nativists, Islamophobes, Putin fans, Zionists, anti-vaxxers, and the (potentially homicidal) incels. Also the transphobes, some of whom are TERFs, not fundamentalist Christians. I wonder whether the research reported in this paper, re-done using an appropriately updated LWA scale, would yield the same patterns with respect to incongruent left-wing authoritarians.

Minor point, related to the above: Table 1 should include a column on when the data were collected (not just when they were published).

Another minor point: As far as I can see, nowhere in this paper do the authors report the percentage of Ps in each sample who were classified as incongruent authoritarians.