National Threat and Political Culture: Authoritarianism, Anti-Authoritarianism, and the September 11 Attacks

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Political Culture and Authoritarianism

- Political culture as evaluative repertoire
- Evaluation of new political phenomena involves comparison with pre-existing, pre-evaluated phenomena
- Schudson: what resources do Americans “think with” politically?
Objectives of This Project

- Conceptualize authoritarianism and anti-authoritarianism as political cultural elements, not psychological traits
- Authoritarianism and anti-authoritarianism as “set of binary relations” (Alexander and Smith)
- Measure changes in political discourse before and after Sept. 11
- Test and further specify the perceived threat-authoritarianism link
Measuring Public Discourse

- Discourse is not the same thing as public opinion
- Letters to the editor as a discursive form:
  - Widely-used, widely-consumed form
  - Perceived as an open public forum
  - Rarely studied or used as data
Freeze their assets (Raleigh *N&O*, 1/27/02)

...one important action the Bush administration could and should take now... is to freeze the estimated $1.1 billion that Enron executives collectively walked away with, plus all their assets, until all Enron employees’ 401(k) accounts are made whole.

...

These men have destroyed countless people’s lives. I call that a cowardly sneak attack on America’s values.
The Data

- Whole data set: all letters published in 17 papers nationwide:

  Control: 11 Aug 2001 – 10 Sep 2001

- Whole data set: $N = 8,101$ (3,840 pre-Sept. 11; 4,261 post)

- Random subset (stratified by exposure to Sept. 11)
  hand-coded; $N = 410$ (203 pre, 207 post)
Coding Scheme

- 9-factor scale to predict susceptibility to authoritarian messages
- Subsequent work: similar scale with adjustments for political skew and historically-specific items
- My innovation: same 9 factors, three scores:

  1: Pro-authoritarian stance
  0: No stance
  -1: Anti-authoritarian stance
Authoritarian Factors

- Conventionalism
- Authoritarian Submission: “uncritical attitude”
- Authoritarian Aggression: condemn and punish others
- Anti-intraception: anti-artistic, anti-intellectual
- Superstition and Stereotypy: mystical determinants of fate
- Power and “Toughness”
- Destructiveness and Cynicism: generalized hostility
- Projectivity: “it’s a dangerous world”
- Sex: exaggerated concern with sexual “goings-on”
Example: Authoritarian Letter

**Paper:** Arkansas Democrat-Gazette  
**Date:** Sept. 27, 2001

We are all Americans, people in this country. The idiot who wrote in saying that George W. Bush started this war should be horsewhipped. His letter was an insult to all the victims, rescue workers and just plain loyal Americans. As for the so-called university crowd, I remember a time when they would be tried for treason. Bush said it best: If you’re not for us, you’re for the terrorists.
Example: Anti-Authoritarian Letter

**Paper:** State Journal-Register; **Date:** Aug. 14, 2001

...To describe Chris Britt’s cartoons as “communist propaganda” smacks of pure ignorance on [prior letter-writer] Gamble’s part. Instead I would gather that like many people brainwashed in today’s society Gamble automatically labels anything he disagrees with as being communist or anti-American.... I wonder which is more dangerous to American society - a cartoonist whose job it is to poke fun at politics and make us think about social issues, or a person who would take away the cartoonist’s right to say what he wants. No, it is not Chris Britt who should live in Beijing. It is Gamble who should go back in time and live in Germany in 1938. It is to that country and that time where closed-minded individuals like Gamble belong. Remember: Never underestimate the danger of ignorant people in large groups.
Some Letters Have Pro- and Anti- Elements

Paper: Chattanooga Times/Free Press
Date: Sept. 23, 2001

Show America why we’re Volunteer State
Let’s help our American brothers and sisters in New York and Washington in ways that will show why we are called The Volunteer State – not just for something that happened in the past, not because we support UT, but because of the way we still answer the call for help and the call to action.

Let’s also support our president and military in ways that will show all enemies and potential enemies that if they touch any member of our American family they will have to fight all of us.
Hypotheses

1. Expressed authoritarian sentiment will be greater in times of generally perceived threat than in settled times.

2. In times of greater authoritarianism, anti-authoritarian sentiment will be greater than in settled times.
Data Analysis

Four aggregate measures:

**Authoritarian Sum:** Sum of factor scores ($-9 \rightarrow 9$)

**Pro-Authoritarian Sum:** Sum of positive factor scores ($0 \rightarrow 9$)

**Anti-Authoritarian Sum:** Inverse of sum of negative factor scores ($0 \rightarrow 9$)

**Authoritarian Valence:** Sum of absolute factor scores ($0 \rightarrow 9$)
Factors Before and After Sept. 11

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<th>Measure</th>
<th>Pre-Sept. 11</th>
<th>Post-Sept. 11</th>
<th>Δ</th>
<th>p</th>
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<tr>
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<td>2.97</td>
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</table>
Authoritarian Sum

Chi-Square: 33.88; p < .01
Pre−9/11 Post−9/11

Chi−Square: 35.43; p< .001

Pro–Authoritarian Sum
Anti–Authoritarian Sum

Chi–Square: 13.636; p = .092
Authoritarian Valence

Chi-Square: 46.54; p < .001
Conclusions

- Authoritarianism and anti-authoritarianism rose significantly in the post-attack period
- Authoritarianism rose substantially more than anti-authoritarianism did
- Authoritarianism and anti-authoritarianism do seem conceptually linked to one another, at least through the mechanism of perceived threat.
Two Causal Stories

Threat → Authoritarianism → Anti-Authoritarianism

Threat

Authoritarianism

Anti-Authoritarianism
Ongoing and Future Research

- Letters nested in papers and regions
- Statistical pattern recognition for automatic coding
- Surveying one paper’s complete letters discourse