

The Authoritarian Predisposition and American Public Support for Social Security

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Abstract

Authoritarianism, an individual-level predisposition that favors security, conformity, and certainty, has been powerfully linked with cultural conservatism and support for “strongman” politicians but weakly and inconsistently linked with public opinion toward economic issues. In examining this latter relationship, past work has tended to pose a dichotomous question, is authoritarianism associated with economic liberalism/conservatism or not? Here, I diverge from this approach and argue that authoritarianism is associated with support for one specific program—Social Security. I argue that the unique framing of this program, which emphasizes rule-following, certainty, and deservingness, should resonate with authoritarian-minded individuals. I test this with survey data, primarily from the American National Election Studies (ANES). Overall, I find a positive and substantively significant relationship between authoritarianism and support for Social Security but not for other types of domestic social welfare spending. These findings help us better understand the correlates of mass support for Social Security as well as the policy consequences of authoritarianism. These findings also suggest that Social Security will likely remain popular in an increasingly authoritarian Republican Party.

Keywords

Authoritarianism, Social Security, Public Opinion, United States

Authoritarianism, an individual-level predisposition that Stenner (2005, 17) defines as “a normative worldview about the social value of obedience and conformity” has wide-ranging consequences for American mass politics (Hetherington and Weiler 2009; 2018). Authoritarianism is strongly and broadly associated with political intolerance and cultural conservatism, that is, animus toward ethnic, religious, and sexual minorities, and opposition to parties, candidates, policies that seek to advance the rights and power of such groups (e.g., Barker and Tinnick 2006; Cizmar et al. 2014; Feldman and Stenner 1997; MacWilliams 2016b; Velez and Lavine 2017). While we know a good deal about the relationship between authoritarianism and attitudes toward social/cultural issues, we know less about the relationship between authoritarianism and attitudes toward economic issues. Unlike socio-cultural issues, for example, those involving race, immigration, crime, abortion, and/or gay rights, all of which center around threats/changes to the existing social order, it is less obvious as to why we should expect a relationship between authoritarianism and economic issue attitudes.

On one hand, a positive relationship could result from a need for certainty (Stenner 2005) and a desire to mitigate the negative societal consequences associated with underfunded social services, that is, unemployment, poverty, and crime (e.g., Arikan and Sekercioglu 2019; Malka, Lelkes, and Soto 2019; Rueda and Stegmüller 2016). On the other hand, a negative relationship could result because economic conservatism is typically associated with the political right, a group that has a natural appeal to people who score high in authoritarianism (Hetherington and Weiler 2009). Authoritarians may also oppose economic redistribution and social spending because it is perceived to disproportionately benefit non-conforming populations, for example, racial minorities and/or non-English-speaking immigrants (e.g., Garand, Xu and Davis 2017; Gilens 1999; Haselswerdt 2020; Kinder and Sanders 1996; Winter 2006). Finally, a null

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relationship could result because economics are simply, as Hetherington and Weiler (2009, 30) argue, “nonauthoritarian” issues.

Past work in the United States has posed a dichotomous question, is authoritarianism associated with economic liberalism/conservatism or not, and has found either a null relationship (Cizmar et al. 2014), or a negative one, conditional on political sophistication (Johnston, Federico, and Lavine 2017).¹ However, because different types of government spending evoke varying frames and target groups (Schneider and Ingram 1993), I argue that a superior approach is to examine *which* programs are linked with authoritarianism and which are not.

I do this here, arguing that authoritarianism is not linked with support for/opposition to economic liberalism writ large, but rather with support for one specific type of government spending—programs that benefit deserving, conforming, and rule-following populations *and* protect people from economic insecurity and uncertainty. In the United States, the program most strongly associated with these themes is Social Security. Elite discourse surrounding this program tends to focus on frames such as “rule-following” and “deservingness,” and touts the program as “insurance” against the vulnerabilities associated with old age and retirement (Beechey 2016; Winter 2006). I argue that such frames should resonate with people who score higher in authoritarianism. Accordingly, we should expect to observe a uniquely positive relationship (relative to other spending programs and economic policies) between authoritarianism and support for Social Security.

I test this with nationally representative survey data, primarily from the American National Election Studies (ANES). Overall, I find that authoritarianism has a positive, robust, and substantively significant relationship with support for spending on Social Security. In contrast, I find that authoritarianism is neither positively nor consistently linked with support for spending on other domestic programs. Overall, these findings help us to better understand the correlates of mass support for Social Security as well as the policy consequences of authoritarianism.

How and Why Authoritarianism Shapes Public Opinion Toward Social Security

Social Security, the crown jewel of the New Deal, has long been portrayed as an “insurance program” that protects people during a vulnerable period in their lives and as an “earned benefit” that is conferred upon deserving populations in exchange for a lifetime of rule-following and hard work (Beechey 2016; Campbell 2002; Winter 2006). In contrast to other domestic spending programs

and economic policies, particularly those that purport to redistribute resources from the “haves” to the “have-nots,” I argue that Social Security uniquely emphasizes themes and frames, for example, security, certainty, rule-following, and deservingness that should appeal to authoritarian-minded citizens. Indeed, people who score higher in authoritarianism tend to favor social order, conformity, and rule-following and exhibit a psychological need for security and certainty (Hetherington and Weiler 2009; Stenner 2005).

I argue that the frames and rhetoric associated with Social Security, which emphasize “rule-following” and “certainty” (more so than other domestic economic programs/policies) should resonate with and appeal to people who score higher in authoritarianism. As evidence of how Social Security has been historically portrayed by political elites, I present relevant quotes from a series of U.S. presidents and senators from both political parties.

U.S. Presidents’ Social Security Rhetoric

Consider the following select quotes by eight U.S. presidents, four Democrats, and four Republicans, spanning seventy-five years. Despite their ideological differences, each of these presidents used language that emphasized themes such as hard work, security, certainty, deservingness, and rule-following when discussing Social Security.²

Franklin D. Roosevelt – 1935

This social security measure gives at least some protection to thirty million of our citizens who will reap direct benefits through unemployment compensation, through old-age pensions and through increased services for the protection of children and the prevention of ill health. We can never insure one hundred percent of the population against one hundred percent of the hazards and vicissitudes of life, but we have tried to frame a law which will give some measure of protection to the average citizen and to his family against the loss of a job and against poverty-ridden old age.

Dwight Eisenhower – 1953

Retirement systems, by which individuals contribute to their own security according to their own respective abilities, have become an essential part of our economic and social life. These systems are but a reflection of the American heritage of sturdy self-reliance which has made our country strong and kept it free; the self-reliance without which we would have had no Pilgrim Fathers, no hardship-defying pioneers, and no eagerness today to push to ever widening horizons in every aspect of our national life. The Social Security program furnishes, on a national scale, the opportunity for our citizens, through that same self-reliance, to build the foundation for their security. We are resolved to extend that opportunity to millions of our citizens who heretofore have been unable to avail themselves of it.

Lyndon B. Johnson – 1964

Nearly thirty years ago, this nation took the first long step to meet the needs of its older citizens by adopting the Social Security program. Today, most Americans look toward retirement with some confidence that they will be able to meet their basic needs for food and shelter.

Richard Nixon – 1969

In the 34 years since the Social Security program was first established, it has become a central part of life for a growing number of Americans. Today approximately 25 million people are receiving cash payments from this source. Three-quarters of these are older Americans; the Social Security check generally represents the greater part of total income. Millions of younger people receive benefits under the disability or survivor provisions of Social Security.

Ronald Reagan – 1983

Our elderly need no longer fear that the checks they depend on will be stopped or reduced. These amendments protect them. Americans of middle age need no longer worry whether their career-long investment will pay off. These amendments guarantee it. And younger people can feel confident that social security will still be around when they need it to cushion their retirement.

Bill Clinton – 1998

Social Security, as many of you know from your own experience, and as all our panelists will be able to discuss in one way or the other, is more than a monthly check or an ID number. It represents a sacred trust among the generations. It represents a trust not only between grandparents, parents, and children, those in retirement and those that work, but also the able-bodied and those who are disabled. It is our obligation to one another, and it reflects our deepest values as Americans. And it must maintain a rock-solid guarantee.

George W. Bush – 2001

Social Security is one of the greatest achievements of the American government and one of the deepest commitments to the American people. For more than six decades, it has protected our elderly against poverty and assured young people of a more secure future. It must continue to do this important work for decades to come.

Barack Obama – 2010

Seventy-five years ago today, in the midst of the Great Depression, Franklin Roosevelt signed Social Security into law, laying a cornerstone in the foundation of America's middle class, and assuring generations of America's seniors that after a lifetime of hard work, they'd have a chance to retire with dignity. We have an obligation to keep that promise; to safeguard Social Security for our seniors, people with disabilities, and all Americans—today, tomorrow, and forever.

U.S. Senators' Framing of Social Security in 2005

As further evidence, consider the following quotes by four U.S. senators, two Democrats, and two Republicans, during the 2005 congressional debate over then President George W. Bush's proposal to partially privatize Social Security (Beechey 2016). Despite sharp disagreements over President Bush's plan, all four of these senators touted the historic success of Social Security in reducing old-age poverty and used language emphasizing frames such as hard work, security, certainty, and rule-following.³

Harry Reid (D-NV)

It promises Americans if they work hard, contribute, and play by the rules, they can retire and live in dignity, and their families will be protected if they become disabled or pass away. A third of the benefits paid out by Social Security are not, as my grandmother referred to it, old-age pensions. They are for people who are disabled, widows, orphans. Social Security is not a handout. It promises benefits that people earn through their hard work. That is as it should be, and we need to do everything we can to make good on that promise.

Debbie Stabenow (D-MI)

Social Security represents the best of who we are, the best in American values. Our belief is that if you work hard and you play by the rules, you earn retirement security. We pay into that, all of us together pay into this insurance policy called Social Security. We deserve a basic quality of life and dignity in older years. Everyone does.

Mitch McConnell (R-KY)

We all know that Social Security is one of this country's greatest success stories in the 20th century. But why? Is it the hundreds of thousands of elderly who were saved from poverty or is it the millions of seniors who have retired with the stability of their monthly Social Security checks? Actually, there are two reasons. For me, the first is an Army sergeant who served in World War II and went to the European Theater. The second is the woman from Alabama he married. Although they were never a family of great means, they worked hard, paid into the system all their lives, and got the money they were owed from Social Security when they retired. Of course, those two people I am referring to were my parents. It is because of what Social Security did for them and their friends that we all know it is a success story. I am sure millions of Americans feel the same way.

John Thune (R-SD)

My father Harold Thune turned 85 this last December. He is a retired teacher, still living in the town I grew up in, Murdo, South Dakota, with my wonderful mother who was the

school librarian. My father also served his country as a decorated World War II fighter pilot. He is the essence of hard work and sacrifice. He has put in his time. I would never do anything to the Social Security benefit that he has earned. Because my parents never struck it rich working for the Murdo public school system, they depend upon their Social Security check. Many other retired Americans are in similar situations.

Social Security is consistently framed as an insurance program that provides a sense of certainty and financial security during a vulnerable period in peoples' lives. It is also portrayed as an earned benefit that results from a lifetime of working hard and diligently saving for retirement, that is, conforming to the standards that society expects of rule-following citizens.⁴ Furthermore, Social Security enjoys support from politicians on the ideological left and right, meaning that authoritarian-minded Americans can more easily reconcile their support for this type of spending, in contrast to welfare benefits or universal health insurance, for example, with their support for Republican political candidates.

In contrast, no other program is framed in such a manner, with emphasis on security, certainty, deservingness, and rule-following. In particular, welfare is framed in nearly the opposite manner (Gilens 1999; Winter 2006), with frequent references to "undeservingness" and violations of cherished societal norms such as the "Protestant work ethic." In short, the elite discourse and frames associated with Social Security, in contrast to most other domestic economic programs/policies in the United States, should make it particularly attractive to authoritarian-minded citizens.⁵

Data and Methods

To test this, I use a variety of survey data, primarily pooled cross-sectional data (1992–2016) from the ANES, a long-running nationally representative survey that includes valid measures of both authoritarianism and attitudes toward Social Security. I also supplement my main analyses with cross-sectional data from the 2016 ANES and panel data from the 2008–2014 General Social Survey (GSS). In the following section, I discuss the research design associated with my main (1992–2016) analyses.⁶

Dependent Variable—Attitudes Toward Social Security

To measure support for Social Security, I use a question that asks *should federal spending on Social Security should be increased, decreased, or kept about the same?* I code the responses as follows (0 = *decreased/kept the same*; 1 = *increased*; mean = 0.570).⁷

Independent Variable—Authoritarianism

Authoritarianism is a notoriously difficult concept to measure. The dominant approach, particularly in political science, has been to use a four-question scale that asks people about their child-rearing preferences (Feldman and Stenner 1997; Hetherington and Weiler 2009). This measure is desirable because it possesses construct validity, that is, it correlates with the outcome variables we expect it to and because it is distinct from the political variables that it purports to explain (Engelhardt, Feldman, and Hetherington 2021).

These questions ask respondents to choose between pairs of desirable qualities for children, specifically which one is more important for a child to have. The four paired choices are: (1) *curiosity vs. good manners*, (2) *obedience vs. self-reliance*, (3) *being considerate vs. being well-behaved*, and (4) *independence vs. respect for elders*. Respondents who choose the "strict parenting" option (good manners, obedience, well-behaved, and respect for elders) are coded at a value of "1" while respondents who chose the "non-strict" option (curiosity, self-reliance, considerate, and independence) are coded at a value of "0." This variable thus ranges from 0 to 4 with lower (higher) values indicating lower (higher) levels of authoritarianism ($\alpha = 0.650$). I rescale this variable to range from 0 to 1 (mean = 0.560; SD = 0.330).⁸

Control Variables

To minimize spuriousness and omitted variable bias, I include a battery of theoretically appropriate control variables. I specifically control for gender (female vs. male), race (White, non-Hispanic vs. not), education (college degree vs. not), income (five categories), marital status (married vs. not), home ownership (own home/paying mortgage vs. not), and region of residence (former Confederacy vs. not). I also account for economic self-interest by controlling for whether a respondent is likely to be in the "target population" to receive Social Security. I specifically account for age group (age 62 or older vs. younger than 62), retirement status (retired vs. not), and disability status (permanently disabled vs. not).

I also control for partisanship (7-point, strong Democrat→strong Republican) and ideological self-placement (7-point, extremely liberal→extremely conservative). To avoid dropping cases, I code respondents who indicated that they "hadn't thought much" about their ideological identification at the midpoint value of "4" (Kinder and Kalmoe 2017). I also include year-fixed effects (dummy variables for each ANES survey year); this can control for factors such as national economic conditions, partisan control of the federal government, and presidential campaign rhetoric. All of these variables

Table 1. Authoritarianism and Support for Social Security, 1992–2016.

	DV = Social Security \$
Authoritarianism	0.355*** (0.047)
Female	0.196*** (0.028)
White	-0.074** (0.034)
Married	0.068** (0.031)
Homeowner	0.021 (0.034)
Age 62+	-0.048 (0.046)
Retired	0.022 (0.050)
Disabled	0.391*** (0.072)
Income	-0.382*** (0.061)
College	-0.349*** (0.032)
South	0.035 (0.030)
Partisanship	-0.470*** (0.050)
Ideology	-0.361*** (0.078)
Constant	0.318*** (0.063)
Year fixed effects	Yes
Observations	13,604
Pseudo R ²	0.082

Dependent variable is support for increasing federal spending on Social Security (0 vs. 1). Probit coefficients with robust standard errors in parentheses. Source is the Cumulative ANES (1992, 2000, 2004, 2008, 2012, and 2016), survey weights applied.

* $p < .10$. ** $p < .05$. *** $p < .01$, two-tailed.

are either categorical or are scaled to range between 0 and 1.

Results

The main results in Table 1, based on a probit regression model, show that there is a positive and significant relationship between authoritarianism and support for increased federal spending on Social Security. This is consistent with hypothesized expectations.

As the probit coefficients in Table 1 are not directly interpretable, I discuss the main substantive results in term of predicted probabilities. Substantively, a shift in authoritarianism from its minimum to its maximum value (from 0 to 1) is associated with a 0.13 change in the predicted probability (Δpr) of supporting increased spending on Social Security. Figure 1 shows that the predicted probability (of supporting increased spending on Social Security) increases meaningfully across the observed range of authoritarianism, from approximately 0.48 at the lowest levels, to 0.54 at the midpoint, and to approximately 0.61 at the highest levels. For reference, the difference (Δpr) resulting from a 0→1 shift) between strong Democrats and strong Republicans is -0.17, the difference between extreme liberals and extreme conservatives is -0.13, the difference between college and non-college graduates is -0.13, and the difference between

the most and least affluent respondents is -0.14. In short, authoritarianism has both a statistically *and* substantively significant relationship with attitudes toward Social Security.

Additional Spending Programs

In Figure 2, I examine how authoritarianism shapes opinion toward other economic policies and other types of government spending beyond Social Security. This is important to do because I have argued that authoritarianism should be, in contrast to most other spending programs/economic policies, positively associated with support for Social Security. I do this using cross-sectional data from the 2016 ANES.⁹

Beyond Social Security, I examine how authoritarianism shapes support for increased federal spending on child-care, aid to the poor, public schools, welfare programs, increased government spending to help people pay for health care, whether the minimum wage should be raised, and whether income taxes should be increased on people making over one million dollars. I also examine support for government increasing defense spending and support for increased federal spending on “dealing with crime.” I do this to compare the magnitude of the authoritarianism-Social Security relationship with support for spending on two policies (defense and crime) that are strongly favored by authoritarian-minded citizens (e.g., Barker and Tinnick 2006; Cizmar et al. 2014; Feldman and Stenner 1997).¹⁰

Figure 2 shows that authoritarianism is neither positively nor significantly associated with support for increased spending on “non-Social Security” domestic programs. Authoritarian-minded citizens are significantly less likely to support increased spending on health care, welfare, and child-care. They are also less likely to support increasing income taxes on millionaires. Authoritarianism is not significantly associated with support for raising the minimum wage nor increasing spending on public schools or aid to the poor. Indeed, Social Security stands out as the only domestic economic program (among those examined here) that is positively *and* significantly associated with authoritarianism. I attribute this to the unique framing of this program that sets it apart from most other domestic programs/policies in the United States. The magnitude of this relationship is also substantively meaningful. Indeed, a shift in authoritarianism from its minimum to its maximum (from 0 to 1) is associated with a 0.13 increase in the probability of supporting increased spending on Social Security. The magnitude of this relationship is comparable to the “defense spending” ($\Delta pr = 0.14$) and the “dealing with crime” models ($\Delta pr = 0.23$).

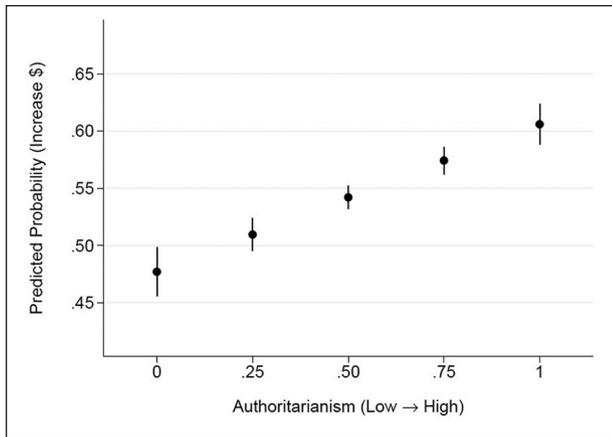


Figure 1. Authoritarianism and support for Social Security, 1992–2016.

Shows the predicted probability (based on a probit model) of supporting increased federal spending on Social Security across the observed range of authoritarianism. Based on the probit model in Table 1. All controls are held at their observed values. Bars represent 95 percent confidence intervals. See Appendix Table B1 for the full model.

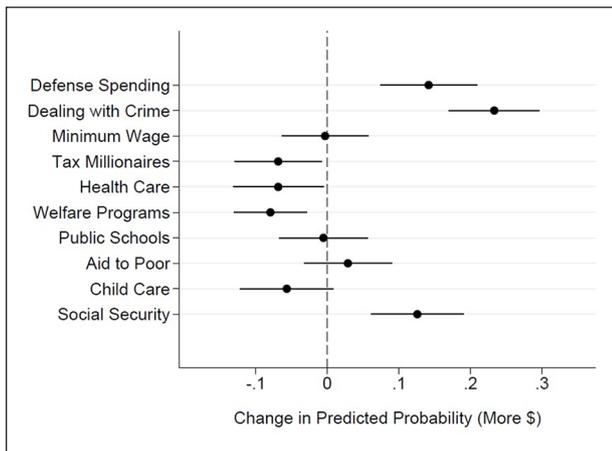


Figure 2. Authoritarianism and support for various policies, 2016.

Shows the change in the predicted probability (based on ten probit models) of supporting more spending on each program, an increased minimum wage, and higher taxes on millionaires when authoritarianism is shifted from its minimum to its maximum (from 0 to 1). Model also controls for survey mode, gender, race, age, age-squared, education, income, marital status, home ownership, region, partisanship, and ideology. All controls are held at their observed values. Bars represent 95 percent confidence intervals. Source is the 2016 ANES, survey weights applied. *N* ranges from 2,913 to 3,341. See Appendix Table B2 for the full models.

Robustness of Findings

In this section, I demonstrate the robustness of my main findings. First, I show, using data from the Cumulative ANES, that my results are robust to the inclusion of a large battery of control variables (Figure 3). Second, I

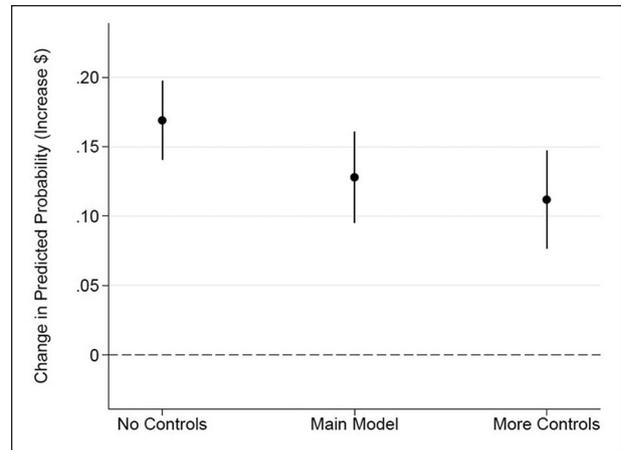


Figure 3. Authoritarianism and Social Security by model specification, 1992–2016.

Shows the change in the predicted probability (based on three probit models) of supporting increased federal spending on Social Security when authoritarianism is shifted from its minimum to its maximum (from 0 to 1). The *No Controls* specification is a simple bivariate model. The *Main Model* specification is based on Table 1. The *More Controls* specification includes the same variables as Table 1 along with: egalitarianism, limited government, moral traditionalism, feelings toward poor people, and stereotype ratings (lazy vs. hard working) of Whites, Blacks, Hispanics, and Asians. All controls are held at their observed values. Bars represent 95 percent confidence intervals. Source is the Cumulative ANES (1992, 2000, 2004, 2008, 2012, and 2016), survey weights applied. *N* = 15,599 (*No Controls*), *N* = 13,604 (*Main Model*), *N* = 12,555 (*More Controls*). See Appendix Table B3 for the full models.

show, using panel data from the GSS, that authoritarianism appears to drive Social Security attitudes rather than the reverse (Table 2).

Additional Controls

The main results show that there is a positive and substantively significant relationship between authoritarianism and public support for Social Security. Despite a large battery of demographic variables and controls for partisanship and ideological self-identification, these models are still vulnerable to omitted variable bias. I address potential concerns about this in Figure 3. I specifically include additional controls for egalitarianism (4-question index; $\alpha = 0.638$), limited government (3-question index; $\alpha = 0.740$), moral traditionalism (4-question index; $\alpha = 0.670$), and stereotype ratings (lazy vs. hard working) of the following groups: Whites, Blacks, Hispanics, and Asians. I also include a feeling thermometer rating for poor people (cold→warm), given the importance of class attitudes in shaping attitudes toward domestic social welfare spending (Piston 2018). All of these variables are either categorical or are scaled to range between 0 and 1.

I also show the simple bivariate relationship between authoritarianism and support for Social Security. This can

Table 2. Panel Analyses of Authoritarianism and Social Security, 2008–2014.

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
	Authoritarianism ₁₂	Social Security ₁₂	Authoritarianism ₁₄	Social Security ₁₄
Authoritarianism ₀₈	0.473* (0.033)	0.106* (0.049)		
Social Security ₀₈	−0.002 (0.019)	0.409* (0.034)		
Authoritarianism ₁₀			0.544* (0.032)	0.137* (0.050)
Social Security ₁₀			0.016 (0.018)	0.418* (0.033)
Observations	822	811	839	816
R ²	0.250	0.161	0.299	0.184

Shows the cross-lagged relationship between authoritarianism (ranges: 0–1) and attitudes toward Social Security spending (0 vs. 1). OLS coefficients with robust standard errors in parentheses. Sources are the 2008–2012 and 2010–2014 GSS panel studies.

* $p < .05$, two-tailed.

help compare models, showing how much the relationship is attenuated by the inclusion of various controls.¹¹ These additional control variables are not a panacea, that is, they do not solve all of the issues associated with observational studies. Their inclusion also does not mean that I have demonstrated a precisely estimated causal effect. However, they should assuage *some* concerns about potential omitted variable bias and thus help to further demonstrate the robustness of the main findings. Overall, the results in Figure 3 show that the authoritarianism-Social Security relationship is only slightly smaller (and not significantly different) when including the aforementioned additional controls.¹²

Panel Data

In Table 2, I address additional endogeneity concerns, specifically the issue of “reverse causality.” Authoritarianism is viewed as a strong predisposition that occupies a central place in mass belief systems (Engelhardt, Feldman, and Hetherington 2021). In contrast, attitudes toward government spending tend to be comparatively weak and unstable over time, occupying a less central place in mass belief systems (e.g., Converse 1964; Freeder, Lenz, and Turney 2019). As such, it is likely that authoritarianism drives support for Social Security rather than the reverse. However, recent work finds, using panel data, that authoritarianism is less stable over time and endogenous to “culture war” attitudes toward abortion and gay rights (Goren and Chapp 2019) and that people adjust their authoritarian attitudes in response to elite cues during political campaigns (Luttig 2021; Smith et al. 2021). As such, it is prudent to empirically demonstrate that authoritarianism drives support for Social Security, rather than simply assuming the direction of this relationship.

To demonstrate that authoritarianism predicts attitudes toward Social Security rather than the reverse, I use data from the 2008–2012 and 2010–2014 GSS panel studies. I use these data to run two cross-lagged regression models,

presenting the results in Table 2. While the GSS lacks the four-question child-rearing scale that is available on the ANES, it does include a variable (asked in multiple waves) that can serve as a reasonable proxy measure. This is a five-category variable that asks respondents the following: *if you had to choose, which thing on this list would you pick as the most important for a child to learn to prepare him or her for life?* Respondents are asked to rank the following qualities/traits: (1) to obey, (2) to be well liked or popular, (3) to think for himself or herself, (4) to work hard, and (5) to help others when they need help. People who ranked *to obey* as more (less) important are coded as being more (less) authoritarian.¹³ The GSS also includes a question about Social Security in multiple waves, specifically asking the following: *are we currently spending too little, too much, or about the right amount on Social Security?* I code responses to this variable as follows (0 = *too much/about the right amount*; 1 = *too little*).¹⁴

The cross-lagged regressions in Table 2 show, consistent with theoretical expectations, that authoritarianism predicts attitudes toward Social Security rather than the reverse. As shown in columns 1 and 3, past (2008/2010) values of Social Security attitudes are neither positively nor significantly related to future (2012/2014) values of authoritarianism. The opposite pattern manifests in columns 2 and 4. Here, past values of authoritarianism positively and significantly predict future values of support for Social Security. Overall, these panel data should serve to further address endogeneity concerns, bolstering the validity of the main cross-sectional results.¹⁵

Heterogeneity in the Relationship

Having demonstrated a robust, positive, and statistically significant relationship between authoritarianism and mass support for Social Security, I next turn to exploring possible heterogeneity in this relationship. I specifically examine whether the authoritarianism-Social Security

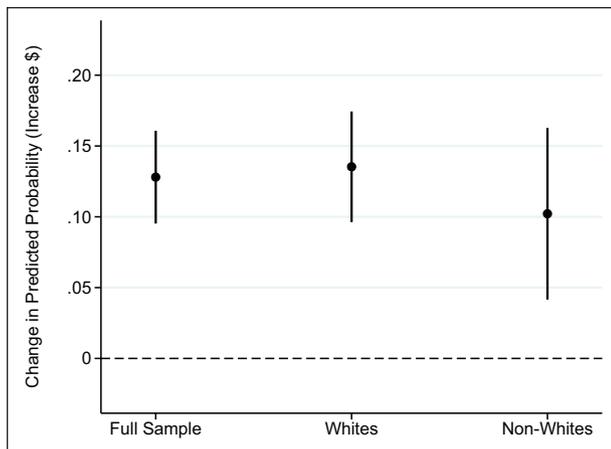


Figure 4. Authoritarianism and Social Security by race/ethnicity, 1992–2016.

Shows the change in the predicted probability (based on two probit models) of supporting increased federal spending on Social Security when authoritarianism is shifted from its minimum to its maximum (from 0 to 1). All models include the same variables as in Table 1. All controls are held at their observed values. Bars represent 95 percent confidence intervals. Source is the Cumulative ANES (1992, 2000, 2004, 2008, 2012, and 2016), survey weights applied. $N = 13,604$ (Main Model); $N = 8,973$ (Whites); $N = 4,931$ (non-Whites). See Appendix Table B4 for the full models.

relationship is conditioned by race/ethnicity (Figure 4) or by political information (Figure 5). All of these models use Cumulative ANES data (1992–2016) and the same set of controls as the main analyses in Table 1.

Variation by Race/Ethnicity

In Figure 4, I examine whether the relationship is conditioned by race. It is important to do so given work by Pérez and Hetherington (2014) showing that the child-rearing measure of authoritarianism lacks measurement invariance, that is, it possesses strong construct validity for Whites, but not for Blacks and Hispanics. However, there is evidence to suggest that these four child-rearing questions *do* seem to possess cross-group validity. First, ANES data show that these four questions form a reasonably valid scale for Whites, Blacks, and Hispanics ($\alpha = 0.642, 0.643, \text{ and } 0.603$, respectively). Second, ANES data show that all four of these questions also load onto a single factor among all three racial/ethnic groups. Third, in his dissertation, MacWilliams (2016a) convincingly demonstrates that the child-rearing measure of authoritarianism possesses construct validity among both Whites and Blacks. Finally, recent work by Engelhardt, Feldman, and Hetherington (2021) shows that the child-rearing scale appears to be valid among both Whites and non-Whites.

Given that there are some questions about whether the child-rearing scale is valid for non-Whites, it is prudent to

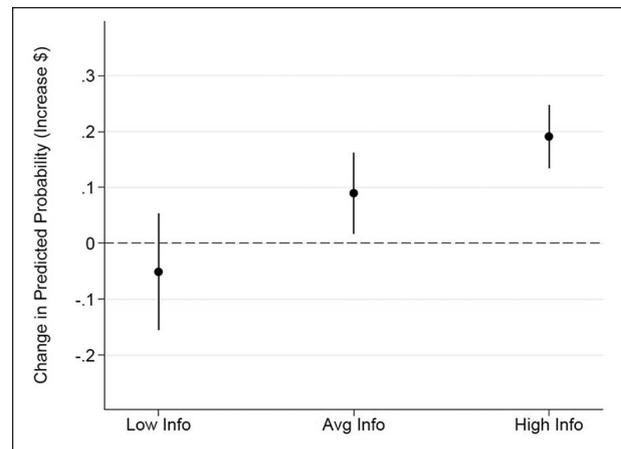


Figure 5. Authoritarianism and Social Security by political information, 1992–2016.

Shows the change in the predicted probability (based on three probit regression models) of supporting increased federal spending on Social Security when authoritarianism is shifted from its minimum to its maximum (from 0 to 1). Model includes the same variables as in Table 1. All controls are held at their observed values. Bars represent 95 percent confidence intervals. Source is the Cumulative ANES (1992, 2000, 2004, 2008, 2012, and 2016), survey weights applied. $N = 1,326$ (Low Info); $N = 2,503$ (Avg Info); $N = 3,812$ (High Info). See Appendix Table B5 for the full models.

examine this in greater detail. I do this by splitting the ANES into “Whites” and “non-Whites” dividing the sample by whether a respondent identifies as White (non-Hispanic), or not. If the results were driven solely by Whites, then we should observe (1) that the coefficient for authoritarianism will be significantly stronger when the sample is restricted to only White respondents versus when the entire sample is examined and (2) that the relationship would be substantially weaker and/or not statistically significant among non-Whites. As shown in Figure 4, this is not the case. The main results are similar, that is, the coefficient for authoritarianism is not significantly stronger when solely examining Whites versus the entire ANES sample, and the authoritarianism–Social Security relationship is positive and significant among both Whites and non-Whites. In short, this suggests that the main results are not being driven solely by White, non-Hispanic respondents.¹⁶

Variation by Political Information

In Figure 5, I examine whether the authoritarianism–Social Security relationship is conditioned by political information. In their book, Johnston, Federico, and Lavine (2017) argue that the relationship between authoritarianism and economic issue attitudes is moderated by political information. Across multiple surveys, these authors find that politically informed authoritarians, who are more likely to receive and process elite rhetoric

consistent with their predispositions, tend to oppose social spending and economic redistribution. They also find that less politically informed authoritarians, people who are less likely to receive and process such rhetoric, are *more* likely to favor economic policy liberalism.

Applying that logic here, it is possible that less politically informed/engaged citizens will be unfamiliar with the rhetorical framing of Social Security and how this resonates with their authoritarian predispositions. I test this in Figure 5 by separately examining the authoritarianism–Social Security relationship among citizens who have low, middling, and high levels of political information. To measure this, I use the ANES interviewer’s subjective pre-election rating of a respondent’s level of political information.¹⁷

Figure 5 shows that the relationship between authoritarianism and support for Social Security is indeed conditioned by political information. Among less politically informed citizens, authoritarianism is neither positively nor significantly associated with support for increased Social Security spending ($p = .336$). In contrast, authoritarianism is positively and significantly associated with support for increased spending at middling ($\Delta pr = 0.09$) and high ($\Delta pr = 0.19$) levels of political information.¹⁸

Conclusion and Political Implications

In this article, I have shown, through analyses of cross-sectional and panel data spanning three decades, that authoritarianism is a substantively significant determinant of attitudes toward government spending on Social Security. I attribute this to the political framing of Social Security, which emphasizes themes such as “rule-following,” “deservingness,” and “certainty,” arguing that this resonates with authoritarian-minded individuals.

These findings help us to better understand the policy consequences of authoritarianism, as well as the correlates of mass support for Social Security, one of the most salient and consequential domestic programs in the United States. More broadly, these findings underscore the importance of framing, and suggest that we should pay greater attention to how citizens’ attitudes and/or predispositions may differentially shape support for various types of government spending (e.g., Goren 2008; Jacoby 2000; Winter 2006).¹⁹

These findings also have implications for American electoral politics. First, they suggest that the pro-Social Security position that Donald Trump adopted in 2016 was not simply due to Trump’s general absence of ideological constraint (Barber and Pope 2019), but rather the consequence of a decidedly authoritarian campaign (Sides, Tesler, and Vavreck 2018). These findings also suggest that an increasingly authoritarian Republican electorate (Hetherington and Weiler 2018; Taub 2016)

may oppose politicians who fail to adequately protect Social Security. Indeed, many Republican politicians have not backed away from their decades-long desire to partially privatize Social Security, reduce benefits, and/or raise the retirement age for future generations (e.g., Golshan 2017; Olen 2020). This may lead to intra-party conflicts, for example, between donors and nondonors (Broockman and Malhotra 2020). This dynamic may also make it difficult for politicians to reform this massive entitlement program.

It seems highly unlikely, however, that an increasingly non-authoritarian Democratic Party will abandon its support for Social Security, one of the Party’s hallmark accomplishments. For one, authoritarian-minded citizens are also present in the Democratic Party (e.g., Luttig 2017; Wronski et al. 2018). Second, Democratic leaders, donors, and mass identifiers are generally unified in their support for expanding the size and scope of government to benefit a variety of social groups (Grossmann and Hopkins 2016), while Republicans, particularly mass-level identifiers, are more internally divided on economic issues (e.g., Bartels 2018; Lupton, Myers, and Thornton 2017).

All of this is admittedly speculative, but it is not outside the realm of possibility that future Republican politicians will follow Donald Trump in pledging to protect Social Security and other similarly framed policies, that is, those associated with “hard work,” “deservingness,” “rule-following,” “certainty,” and “security.” In short, an increasingly authoritarian Republican Party *could* potentially reduce partisan conflict over “authoritarian” economic policies but exacerbate partisan divides over “non-authoritarian” economic policies.

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Notes

1. The relationship between authoritarianism and economic issue attitudes may differ across countries, particularly in multiparty systems where political parties can offer a more heterogeneous mix of cultural conservatism and economic liberalism (e.g., Arikan and Sekercioglu 2019; Malka et al. 2014).

2. See the following link for various presidents' (FDR—Obama) remarks on Social Security. <https://www.ssa.gov/history/presmtmts.html>.
3. See Beechey (2016) for additional quotes and for a broader treatment on political discourse and framing during the 2005 Social Security debate.
4. Winter (2006) argues that the elite discourse surrounding Social Security implicitly links this program with “Whiteness” and portrays it as an “in-group” benefit for the white majority. Given authoritarians’ general aversion to racial/ethnic diversity, prejudice could be the reason why authoritarianism is linked with support for Social Security. In Figure 3, I show that this relationship is not significantly attenuated when controls for racial attitudes (stereotype ratings of Whites, Blacks, Hispanics, and Asians) are included. Furthermore, many minorities, particularly Blacks and Hispanics, are heavily reliant on Social Security (<https://www.nasi.org/learn/socialsecurity/people-of-color>). In short, racial attitudes could be one potential mechanism through which authoritarianism shapes attitudes toward Social Security, but it does not appear to be the sole reason nor the main driving factor.
5. Unfortunately, academic surveys such as the ANES and GSS, both of which include reasonably valid measures of authoritarian attitudes do not ask about preferences toward Medicare, another old-age program in the United States. Pending question availability, future work would do well to examine the possible relationship between authoritarianism and support for Medicare.
6. See Supplemental Appendix A for greater detail on question wording and variable coding.
7. The results are substantively similar, and the main conclusions remain the same if this is treated as an ordinal variable (1 = *decreased*; 2 = *kept the same*; 3 = *increased*) and modeled using an ordered probit (choices range: 1–3), rather than binary probit (choices are 0 vs. 1), regression model.
8. Some of the ANES years included a “both” option for the four child-rearing paired questions while some respondents volunteered an answer of “both” in certain survey years. As this constitutes a small proportion of the sample (between 5 and 10 percent), I code respondents who answered “both” as choosing the nonauthoritarian/non-strict parenting option. Keeping the “both” responses as a middle option produces a 9-point scale rather than a 5-point scale but does not change the substantive results.
9. I use the 2016 ANES here (in Figure 2) because it asks about more spending programs/economic policies than does the Cumulative ANES.
10. The ten items in Figure 2 are coded so that a value of “1” indicates support for increased federal spending on each program, support for raising the minimum wage and support for increasing income taxes on millionaires, and value of “0” indicates a lack of support for those positions. See Supplemental Appendix A for greater detail on variable coding.
11. In the Supplemental Appendix (Tables B6, B7, and B8), I also show that the authoritarianism–Social Security relationship is robust to controls for subjective working-class identification, various measures of religiosity, and racial resentment.
12. There is some debate over where authoritarianism “sits” in mass belief systems, that is, whether it should be viewed as causally prior to partisan/ideological identities (see Cizmar et al. 2014, 77–78; Hetherington and Weiler 2009, 35–36 for brief relevant discussions). If the former is true, then it may be unwise to include partisanship and/or ideology as controls, given that they may be “caused” by authoritarianism. Indeed, this is the approach taken by Johnston, Lavine, and Federico (2017) in their book examining the relationship between personality traits and attitudes toward economic redistribution. However, a failure to include these controls may lead to omitted variable bias and yield anticonservative estimates. To avoid this, and in keeping with the approach of past work (e.g., Feldman and Stenner 1997; Hetherington and Suhay 2011; Velez and Lavine 2017), I control for partisanship and ideological self-placement in all models. Regardless of how I specify the model, I find evidence of a positive and substantively significant relationship between authoritarianism and support for Social Security.
13. I code this authoritarianism proxy variable as follows (1 = *to obey* is least important; 2 = *to obey* is fourth most important; 3 = *to obey* is third most important; 4 = *to obey* is second most important; 5 = *to obey* is most important), rescaling it to range from 0 to 1. This proxy measure is negatively associated with educational attainment and positively associated with support for immigration. This suggests that it is a reasonably valid proxy for the ANES child-rearing scale.
14. The use of these GSS data can help assuage concerns about potential question-wording effects, that is, that the results are being driven by how the ANES asks about government spending. These GSS data can also help assuage concerns that the main results are being driven by 2016, that is, by Donald Trump’s authoritarian *and* pro-Social Security candidacy (Sides, Tesler, and Vavreck 2018).
15. The use of this authoritarianism proxy variable would normally be problematic, as single-question survey items are typically less reliable than multi-item scales (Ansolabehere, Rodden, and Snyder 2008). Here, it works to my advantage, however. The main findings (using the four-question ANES child-rearing scale) will be bolstered if we still observe a positive and significant relationship between authoritarianism and support for Social Security when using this imperfect single-question proxy variable.
16. I also ran a simple model (using Cumulative ANES data) that regresses Social Security attitudes on an authoritarianism \times race interaction. The results of this analysis (see Appendix Table B9) show that the authoritarianism–Social Security relationship is not significantly stronger for one group (Whites, Blacks, or Hispanics) over another and that authoritarianism is positively and significantly associated with support for increased spending on Social Security among Whites, Blacks, and Hispanics, albeit with greater “noise” (larger standard errors) for the latter two groups.
17. This is a five-category measure (1 = *very low*; 2 = *fairly low*; 3 = *average*; 4 = *fairly high*; 5 = *very high*) that I

recode into three categories (1 = *very low/fairly low*; 2 = *average*; 3 = *fairly high/very high*). This variable has long been used as a valid measure (Zaller 1992) and is desirable because it is consistently asked in each year of the ANES unlike office recognition (e.g., recalling the names of the secretary of state, vice president, chief justice, etc.) questions, for example. One drawback, however, is that it is only available for survey respondents who were interviewed in-person.

18. I split the ANES sample into three groups (low, average, and high information) due to the large sample size ($N > 7,000$). I also ran a model that used the full ANES sample (in-person respondents from 1992 to 2016) and interacted authoritarianism with the five-category measure of political information. This interaction term (authoritarianism \times political information) is positive and statistically significant ($p = 0.000$).
19. There are advantages and disadvantages in examining public opinion toward specific policies versus constructing scales from multiple survey items (see Ansolabehere, Rodden, and Snyder 2008; Broockman 2016 for differing perspectives).

Supplemental Material

All replication data and supplemental materials will be made publicly available through the Harvard Dataverse. <https://dataverse.harvard.edu/>.

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