

Authoritarianism and information processing

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Predicted relationships between media preference and authoritarianism were derived from theoretical and experimental studies. It was hypothesized that authoritarians would be more likely to believe their preferred media sources than would nonauthoritarians, and that the authoritarian's position on political issues would be closer to the position represented by positively evaluated media but farther from the position of negatively evaluated media. Results from mail questionnaires obtained from 445 Detroit adults supported the hypotheses. Coercive force also was strongly related to authoritarianism when the media were described as disagreeing with the views of important political leaders.

This investigation tested theoretical formulations of the relationship between authoritarianism and information processing utilizing data obtained from a field survey.

Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswik, Levinson, and Sanford (1950) described the authoritarian as a conformist who is dependent upon authority, while Rokeach's (1960) extension emphasized the inability of the authoritarian to tolerate ambiguity and to differentiate the source from the message. Support for the rigidity of authoritarians has been obtained by Barker (1963), Lee and Warr (1969), and Rokeach and Fruchter (1956), and the association between authoritarians and conformity is supported by studies reported in Kirscht and Dillehay's (1967) review, Sales (1973), and Sales and Friend (1973). Rokeach (1954, 1956) has additionally argued that authoritarians overidentify with a cause or group and make a greater distinction between belief and disbelief systems than do nonauthoritarians. Vacchiano, Strauss, and Hochman (1969) have indicated experimental support for these positions in their review.

The above conceptualizations have been examined in a series of experimental studies. Vidulich and Kaiman (1961) found that dogmatists are influenced by a high-status source. Wilson (1964), however, found that while authoritarians were influenced by a positive source that had coercive force, a boomerang effect occurred for a negative source that lacked coercive force. Finally, Steiner and Johnson (1963) found that when two positive sources disagreed with each other, authoritarians were more likely to assimilate the position of one of the sources and reject the other source's position than were nonauthoritarians (i.e., authoritarians were more likely to resolve the conflict).

The above theory and findings lead to several predictions about the relationship between authoritar-

ianism and preferred sources for news. These hypotheses are as follows: (1) Since authoritarians conform to a high-status source, they should believe their preferred media sources more often than nonauthoritarians. Consequently, authoritarians should also be closer to their perceived positions of the source. (2) However, since authoritarians generally support governmental authority and the media have frequently reported news detrimental to governmental authority, results should differ depending on whether the media are seen as a positive or negative source. (a) If the media are positive, then the greater the authoritarianism, the smaller should be the difference between the respondent's perception of the media's position on an issue and his own position. (b) If the media are negative, then the greater the authoritarianism, the greater the discrepancy between the perceived media position and the respondent's position. (3) Among those respondents who voted for Nixon (an index of Nixon as positive) and who perceive the media source as believable (an index of positivity of the source), authoritarians should indicate greater preference for Nixon if the two disagree, since they assimilate one of the sources (Steiner & Johnson, 1963) and are influenced by coercive force (Wilson, 1964) (which Nixon presumably had more of than the media).

METHOD

Data were collected in the spring of 1973, through a mail sample of Detroit registered voters selected randomly from the voter registration lists of 20 randomly selected precincts in the city. The 445 respondents represented a 40% response rate. The following authoritarianism variables were designed based upon both the Adorno et al. (1950) and Rokeach (1960) conceptualizations: commitment to an ideology, identification with national symbols, support of police power, and a final variable that combined institutional and police power, reliance on governmental authority, and identification with national symbols. All indices were formed based upon high interitem correlations.

The dependent variables were the respondents' evaluations of their most frequently watched evening national TV news programs (Cronkite on CBS, Chancellor on NBC, or Reasoner-

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Table 1
Correlations Between Authoritarianism Variables and Extent to Which the Respondents Believe Their Preferred TV News Sources

Authoritarianism Variable	TV Believability	
	On Race	On Vietnam
Ideological Commitment	.13*	.14*
Police Power	.24**	.30**
National Symbols	.26**	.30**
Composite Authoritarianism	.27**	.30**

**p* < .01.
***p* < .001.

Smith on ABC). The respondents were asked how often they believed what this preferred source told them about Vietnam and about race relations. They were then asked what the source indicated about the government's efforts on Vietnam and race relations, as well as their own opinions about the government's efforts in these areas. The media's credibility was taken as the difference between the perceived media position and the respondent's own position. Amount of discrepancy was then the absolute value of the difference.

Finally, the respondents were asked whether they were more likely to believe President Nixon or their TV sources if the two disagreed. They were also asked this question for (former) Vice President Agnew and for the late Senator Hart (Democrat, Michigan). (Since data were collected several months after McGovern's defeat, Hart was considered a more salient liberal politician to Michigan voters than was McGovern.)

RESULTS

Substantial support for the hypotheses were obtained. Table 1 indicates that increased authoritarianism is

associated with greater belief in the preferred TV news program for both the Vietnam and race issues (Hypothesis 1).

Results relevant to Hypothesis 2 are presented in Table 2. Although Columns 1 and 4 do not support the hypothesis that the greater the authoritarianism, the smaller the absolute difference between media's perceived position and own position, these results are accounted for by the fact that some respondents perceived their sources positively and others negatively. Thus, as Columns 2 and 5 indicate, if the media were perceived positively, the higher the authoritarianism, the smaller the discrepancy between the perceived media position on Vietnam and on race and the respondent's own position (Hypothesis 2a). Similarly, Columns 3 and 6 indicate strong support for Hypothesis 2b. For those who perceive the media as a negative source, the higher the authoritarianism, the larger the gap between the perceived source position and own position. Although not all of the correlations that derive from Hypotheses 2a and 2b are statistically significant, they are in the predicted direction, and the differences between the correlations are generally significant.

Results relevant to Hypothesis 3 are presented in Table 3. Column 1 represents correlations of authoritarianism and preference for Nixon in a disagreement with the media for Nixon voters who indicated positive attitudes toward their media sources. Correlations are generally in the predicted direction, but weak. However, Column 3 indicates strong support for the hypothesis when Agnew is compared to the media. Further,

Table 2
Correlations Between Authoritarianism Variables and the Differences Between Respondents' Own Positions and Their Perceptions of the Media's Position

Authoritarianism Variable	Discrepancy Between Media and Self					
	For Vietnam			For Race		
	1	2+	3-	4	5+	6-
Ideological Commitment	.06	-.08	† .28*	.04	-.13*	† .21
Police Power	-.02	-.04	† .30*	.01	-.10	†† .17
National Symbols	-.03	-.06	.13	.08	-.13*	† .24
Composite Authoritarianism	-.05	-.01	.20	.06	-.12	.04

Note—A plus (+) indicates that the media were perceived as positive; a minus (-) indicates that the media were perceived as negative. **p* < .05. †difference *p* < .05. ††difference *p* < .10.

Table 3
Correlations Between Authoritarianism Variables and the Extent to Which a Political Figure Was Preferred to the Media* When the Two Disagreed

Authoritarianism Variable	Political Figure Compared to Media					
	Nixon		Agnew		Hart	
	Nixon Voters	McGovern Voters	Nixon Voters	McGovern Voters	Nixon Voters	McGovern Voters
Ideological Commitment	.09	.03	.31†	-.07	.12	.06
Police Power	.17	.30†	.21**	.22**	-.30†	-.06
National Symbols	-.02	.41††	.13	.30†	-.15	-.04
Composite Authoritarianism	.13	.45††	.24**	.30†	-.15	-.02

*Only for those rating media as positive. ***p* < .05. †*p* < .01. ††*p* < .001.

Column 5 indicates that the correlations reverse direction when Nixon voters make a choice between Senator Hart and the media. However, Columns 2, 4, and 6 indicate results counter to those expected. Column 6 indicates no statistically significant relationship for McGovern voters between authoritarianism and preference for Hart over their preferred TV sources. For McGovern voters, an even stronger relationship is observed (Columns 2 and 4) between authoritarianism and preference for Nixon in a disagreement with the preferred TV program compared to that obtained for Nixon voters. (Of course, the stronger correlation does not mean that McGovern voters preferred Nixon in any absolute sense.)

DISCUSSION

Strong support was indicated for several theoretical and experimentally observed relationships between authoritarianism and media exposure based on results obtained from a heterogeneous group of voters who evaluated their own long-term habits and preferences. Authoritarians were more likely to believe their preferred TV news sources and to assimilate media with their own opinions when the sources were evaluated as positive. Conversely, they contrasted media and their own positions when the sources were negative. In addition, it appears that coercive force is a particularly powerful variable for authoritarians, since McGovern voters showed a strong relationship between amount of authoritarianism and the extent to which Nixon was preferred over a positively evaluated media source. There is, of course, the possibility that the Nixon administration had a positive image, even for many McGovern voters in Detroit, since the administration had achieved "peace with honor" in Vietnam shortly before the survey.

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