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## Authoritarianism



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### Synonyms

[Autocracy](#); [Despotism](#); [Dictatorship](#); [Totalitarianism](#); [Tyranny](#)

### Definition

Authoritarianism is a form of government characterized by strong central power and limited political freedoms.

Authoritarianism is an individual difference that has been studied for several decades (e.g., Adorno et al. 1950). This entry will examine the characteristics of authoritarianism, some of its behavioral consequences, its origins and development, as well as efforts to distinguish between right-wing and left-wing authoritarianism.

Although initial research on authoritarianism was begun by Adorno et al. (1950), our contemporary conceptualization of authoritarianism was developed by Altemeyer (1981, 1988, 1996), who used the term right-wing authoritarianism. Factor analyses of the right-wing authoritarianism scale were found to measure three distinctive characteristics of right-wing authoritarians: conventionalism,

authoritarian submission, and authoritarian aggression. Many recent authoritarianism researchers appear to accept these three characteristics as defining the right-wing authoritarianism construct, although others define right-wing authoritarianism, and authoritarianism more broadly, as a desire for conformity over autonomy (e.g., Osborne et al. 2023).

### Characteristics of Right-Wing Authoritarianism

Conventionalism is defined as a tendency to go along with the prevailing societal norms, especially those norms sanctioned by authority figures in the home, church, school, and other social and organizational contexts. Highly authoritarian individuals are more prone to adhere to tradition and are resistant to changes in social norms, such as gender roles.

Authoritarian submission is defined as a tendency to be relatively unquestionably obedient to authorities deemed legitimate, according to their worldview. Individuals who are highly authoritarian have a strong tendency to submit to implicit and explicit commands from authority figures.

Authoritarian aggression is the tendency to approve of and engage in an aggressive and violent behavior that is sanctioned by authority figures. Individuals who are authoritarian are not necessarily more aggressive or violent than non-authoritarians, but are more prone to accept

aggressive and violent actions or engage in such, as they have reason to believe that is what their authority figures expect of them.

### **Consequences of Right-Wing Authoritarianism**

The characteristic of conventionalism can manifest itself in terms of hostile attitudes toward immigrants and members of different ethnicities (e.g., McFarland et al. 1993). In other words, authoritarianism is associated with higher levels of hostility, prejudice, and discrimination toward those considered different or deviant. Dogmatism, or the tendency to rigidly adhere to one's beliefs and reject different beliefs and perspectives is also associated with authoritarianism.

As noted earlier, although authoritarians are no more or less disposed to aggressive or violent behavior than non-authoritarians, authoritarians show a tendency to behave in a punitive or aggressive manner when sanctioned by authority figures. For example, Altemeyer (1981) demonstrated that authoritarians tended to be more punitive (i.e., deliver higher shock levels) than non-authoritarian individuals in a modified version of Milgram's (1974) teacher-learner experiments. In a series of global simulation game studies, Altemeyer (1996, 2003) showed that authoritarians are more prone to threaten war and initiate wars compared to those without such authoritarian inclinations. Similarly, Altemeyer (1988, 1996) demonstrated that authoritarians tended to hold more favorable attitudes toward vigilante behavior than non-authoritarians. There is ample evidence that authoritarians are more prone to accept various forms of violence, such as war, harsh treatment of penal code violators, torture, and corporal punishment than non-authoritarians (Benjamin 2006, 2016). In summary, authoritarians are more likely to accept and resort to extreme punitive measures in order to maintain the perception that they are preserving their way of life (Altemeyer 1988).

Osborne et al. (2023) discuss numerous other social consequences of authoritarianism. Right-wing authoritarians tend to gravitate more toward

nationalism than do non-authoritarians, which is manifest in such activities a tendency to support nationalist and populist leaders and political parties. In addition, right-wing authoritarians tend to support any of several illiberal policies, including reducing or eliminating the right to terminate pregnancies and reproductive rights more broadly, as well as voting rights of those perceived to be members of out-groups.

### **Origins and Development of Authoritarianism**

Adorno et al. (1950) posited that authoritarianism was a consequence of very early childhood experiences. In particular, children raised in a punitive and strict environment were believed to be more prone to show authoritarian tendencies as they reached adulthood. Altemeyer (1981, 1988, 1996) rejected the psychodynamic approach of Adorno et al. (1950) and suggested that authoritarianism was at least in part socially learned, not only through family environment, but through observing and interacting with other authority figures and peers outside of the household. Altemeyer also demonstrated the possibility that authoritarian tendencies could be mitigated by social interactions. For example, Altemeyer showed that scores on his right-wing authoritarianism scale decreased over time among college students. Altemeyer argued that regular exposure to diverse individuals and ideas was a likely antecedent to decreased authoritarianism.

More recently, in a review of the available literature, Osborne et al. (2023) identified a number of antecedents of authoritarianism. In terms of individual differences or person variables, low cognitive engagement and uncritical acceptance of information are often correlated with extant measures of authoritarianism. Such traits include high need for cognitive closure, epistemic certainty, close-mindedness, and cognitive inflexibility. The Big-Five trait of openness to experience is negatively correlated with authoritarianism. In terms of situational antecedents, increases in homicide rate and increases in perception of

external threats (such as terrorism) tend to be positively associated with right-wing authoritarianism.

### Left-Wing Authoritarianism

Although scholars have argued that authoritarianism is not only a right-wing phenomenon, but also a left-wing phenomenon (e.g., Shils 1954), developing and demonstrating the validity of the construct of left-wing authoritarianism have been more challenging. Critics of early efforts to demonstrate left-wing authoritarianism have noted conceptual and methodological flaws, such as conflating left-wing authoritarianism as a psychological construct with left-wing authoritarian movements and governments (e.g., Stone and Smith 1993). Altemeyer (1996) attempted to develop a measure of left-wing authoritarianism in the 1990s.

Conceptually, left-wing authoritarianism was the mirror image of right-wing authoritarianism, except that those with left-wing authoritarian tendencies would show rigid adherence to left-wing group norms (conventionalism), obey left-wing authority figures (authoritarian submission), and engage in aggressive or violent actions if sanctioned by left-wing authority figures (authoritarian aggression). Altemeyer found that none of the respondents in his sample scored higher than around the middle point of the left-wing authoritarianism scale. More recent efforts to conceptualize and measure left-wing authoritarianism have emerged in recent years, that in some ways parallels right-wing authoritarianism, except with some different motives and goals, although there is much research that needs to be conducted to better understand how left-authoritarianism predicts various social and political behavioral outcomes (Osborne et al. 2023).

### Conclusion

Authoritarianism is an individual difference that is relatively stable, but can, under certain situational circumstances, increase or decrease within

individuals. Although initially believed to be the result of negative early childhood experiences in strict and punitive households, the current position is that authoritarianism is more socially learned within and outside of the family environment. Much of the research on authoritarianism has focused on right-wing authoritarianism. As a construct, right-wing authoritarianism is characterized by high degrees of conventionalism, authoritarian submission, and authoritarian aggression. Right-wing authoritarians tend to be less tolerant than non-authoritarians, more resistant to change, and more prone to approve of and engage in authority-sanctioned aggressive and violent behaviors. Although there have been efforts to develop conceptual definitions and measures for the construct of left-wing authoritarianism, those efforts have been less successful in terms of measurement. It is possible that more recent conceptualizations and measures of left-wing authoritarianism will be more successful.

### Cross-References

- ▶ [Authoritarianism, Populism, and Heroism](#)
- ▶ [Ethical Leadership](#)
- ▶ [Ethics and Heroic Leadership: Paradoxes and Implications](#)
- ▶ [False Moral Superiority and Heroism](#)
- ▶ [Good and Evil](#)
- ▶ [Heroic Leadership](#)
- ▶ [Leadership and Heroism](#)
- ▶ [Villainy and Its Relationship to Heroism](#)

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