Who Decides When The Party Doesn't? Authoritarian Voters and the Rise of Donald Trump

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While the party decides theory explains the outcomes of past nomination battles for president, this year in the Republican presidential contest party insiders failed to anoint a standard bearer. Who decides when the party elites don't? In 2016, it was America's authoritarian voters. And their candidate of choice, Donald Trump, is anathema to party leaders. I argue that Trump's rise is in part the result of authoritarian voters' response to his unvarnished, us-versus-them rhetoric. The failure of Republican Party insiders to coalesce behind one candidate opened the door for Trump. Authoritarian-driven partisan polarization (Hetherington and Weiler 2009), increasing fear of real and imagined threats, and terrorist incidents abroad and at home provided the fuel for Trump's campaign. And Trump's message and manner ignited that fuel, propelling him to the Republican nomination for president.

eading scholars of American politics argue that political party insiders, defined quite broadly, exert considerable influence over the presidential nomination process. Starting with what they call the "invisible primaries" and continuing to actual primary nominating contests where votes are cast and delegates are selected, "candidates put themselves forward, but the party coalition chooses among them, now as in the past" (Cohen et al. 2008, 11).

Meticulously researched and persuasively presented, the party decides theory of presidential nominations quickly became gospel for Americanists and the lens through which the popular media handicapped and interpreted the presidential primaries and caucuses. But in 2016, confronted with an historically unprecedented number of major candidates for the Republican nomination for president, 1 party insiders failed to anoint a standard bearer.

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On June 16, 2015, the day Donald Trump announced his campaign for president, three Republican Party insider favorites, former Governor Jeb Bush, Governor Scott Walker, and Senator

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Marco Rubio, led the Republican presidential field.² The invisible primary predicted by the party decides theory appeared in full tilt, with party insiders seemingly in control of the process while Trump's candidacy was simply an unwelcome diversion. One month and two days later, polling showed Trump leading Bush, Walker's support stagnating, and Rubio fading.³ To the dismay, then alarm, and finally the horror of the Republican Party establishment, Trump led the RealClearPolitics poll-of-polls average thereafter and, after the New Hampshire primary, the delegate count as well.⁴

I argue that Trump's rise is in part the result of authoritarian voters' response to his unvarnished, us-versus-them rhetoric. Beginning with his June announcement speech, Trump's message and manner was an unapologetic siren call to American authoritarians. He warned that our "enemies are getting stronger and stronger ... and we, as a country, are getting weaker." He identified and targeted "others" who threaten and take advantage of us at every turn. And he denigrated his opponents as weaklings, calling for "a truly great leader" with the strength to make America great again. The leader, whose strength and savvy could protect us from them was, of course, Donald Trump.

The failure of Republican Party insiders to coalesce behind one candidate opened the door for Trump. Authoritarian-driven partisan polarization (Hetherington and Weiler 2009), increasing fear of real and imagined threats, and terrorist incidents abroad and at home provided the fuel for Trump's campaign. And Trump's message and manner ignited that fuel, propelling him to the Republican nomination for president.

Before presenting data that demonstrates the important role authoritarians played in Trump's ascendancy, I begin with a brief overview of authoritarian theory: defining what authoritarianism is and how it is measured, detailing how it is activated, and describing Hetherington and Weiler's authoritarian partisan polarization hypothesis. Building from this theoretical base, I offer two hypotheses that together explain Trump's rise. Then, I discuss the source of my data and what it says about authoritarianism, fear and threat, and the dominance of Donald Trump during America's authoritarian spring. Trump's strongman manner and message is not a unique development in contemporary

Today, some scholars argue that authoritarianism is activated by normative threat (Feldman 2003; Stenner 2005). Hetherington et al. (2011; 2009) assert, as did Lipset (1959) and countless other students of authoritarianism, that physical threats are also drivers of authoritarian attitudes and behavior.

Authoritarian activation is, however, a contested question. To Stenner, authoritarianism is not always on. Authoritarian behavior is activated "when needed" in reaction to a particular threat (2005, 14). But Hetherington et al. contend that authoritarians are in a state of constant hypervigilance and hold authoritarian attitudes even when physical or normative threats are not extant.

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American politics,⁶ but his success, in the face of uniform and dogged opposition from party elites, certainly is.

THEORY & HYPOTHESES

The discussion of my hypotheses—that authoritarian voters activated by Trump's message and heightened fears concerning terrorism filled the vacuum left by the failure of party insiders to decide—begins with a brief review of three elements of authoritarian theory and ends with the presentation of survey data on the political behavior of authoritarians.

First, whether authoritarianism is conceptualized as an individual personality trait forged in the crucible of childhood (Adorno et al. 1950), a socially-learned attitude (Altemeyer 1981a, 1988, 1996, and 2006), or a predisposition (Stenner 2005), authoritarians are described as rigid thinkers who perceive the world in black-and-white terms (Adorno et al. 1950; Altemeyer 1981a, 1988, 1996; Duckitt 1989; Feldman 2003; Feldman and Stenner 1997; Hetherington and Weiler 2009; Jost et al. 2003; Lavine et al. 2005; Stenner 2005). Uniformity and order are authoritarian watch words. Authoritarians obey. They seek order. They follow authoritarian leaders. They eschew diversity, fear "the other," act aggressively toward others, and, once they have identified friend from foe, hold tight to their decision.⁷

Throughout his campaign, Trump constantly used us-versusthem language to define the others who allegedly pose a threat to us and order. From Mexicans to Muslims, the others, as described by Trump, do not hold our values and are not like us. To Trump and the crowds who follow his lead, he alone recognizes the threat the others pose and he alone possesses the will to neutralize them. Only Trump rejects the political correctness that has allowed others to infiltrate our society, has the will to deport those among us now, and would prohibit more of them from entering our homeland. Trump's messaging and strongman manner was a practical application of authoritarian theory to real politics—a clear, clarion call to American authoritarians that drove them to support his candidacy.

Second, the linkage between threat and authoritarianism has remained a central tenet of authoritarian studies for more than seven decades (Fromm 1941), as threat and fear have been theorized to play an important role in the activation of authoritarian behavior and the expression of authoritarian attitudes (Adorno et al. 1950; Altemeyer 1981b; Hetherington and Suhay 2011).

Thus, it is nonauthoritarians who become more authoritarian when a physical threat appears, since authoritarians are always activated and "have little place to travel in terms of their opinions" (Hetherington and Suhay 2011, 547).

With the terrorist incidents in Paris and San Bernardino driving media coverage of the threat posed by terrorism and, in early December 2015, the fear of terrorism rising to its highest point in the United States since 9/11,8 threat was posed to play an important role in shaping the Republican nominating process. And Donald Trump was positioned to be its main beneficiary.

Finally, authoritarianism was recently identified as an important determinant of partisan polarization. Hetherington and Weiler argue that "consistent with the issues evolution framework (Carmines and Stimson 1986; 1990), a coalitional reconfiguration of the parties is in the works, with authoritarians increasingly gravitating toward the Republican Party and nonauthoritarians increasingly gravitating toward the Democratic" (Hetherington and Weiler 2009, 158). Their theory is based on cross-sectional data from four ANES surveys spanning 14 years.

Building on these theories of authoritarian behavior, activation, and authoritarianism's role in partisan polarization, I developed two, codependent theories to explain Trump's domination of the Republican nominating process. First, I hypothesize (H1) that Trump's authoritarian message and manner rallied authoritarian voters to his us-versus-them banner. The slow but steady movement of authoritarians into the Republican Party demonstrated by Hetherington and Weiler (2009) created a tipping point in 2016 (a large enough cadre of authoritarian voters within the Republican primary electorate) for a candidate with an authoritarian message like Trump's not only to emerge but, because party insiders abrogated their leadership role, to win.

Whether authoritarians are activated by threat or nonauthoritarians act more authoritarian when threatened, my second hypothesis (H2) submits that a fearful electorate is a ready audience for the finger pointing of a fearmongering, demagogic candidate like Trump. As such, fear was another factor that favored the emergence of a Donald Trump candidacy in 2016, as Republican voters who were more concerned about terrorist threats were more likely to support a candidate who calls for vigilance and aggression. Moreover, employing Hetherington et al.'s negative interaction theory, I expected that nonauthoritarians who were more worried about terrorism would also be more likely to

support Trump, providing him with a likely pool of core voters that extended beyond strong authoritarians.

DATA & MEASUREMENT

To test the hypotheses that threatened authoritarians, activated by Trump's rhetoric, form the core of Trump's support and fearful nonauthoritarians added to his base, I fielded a national online survey in December 2015. The survey sampled 1,800 registered voters and was conducted approximately one month before the opening contests in Iowa and New Hampshire. It included standard demographic questions; feeling thermometers on political figures, groups of people, and organizations; screens to identify likely primary and general voters; candidate preference questions; items assessing respondents' worries about the sociotropic and personal threats posed by terrorism; and a bevy of values and policy questions.

At the beginning of the poll, immediately following demographic queries, four child-rearing questions were asked. These questions first appeared on the 1992 ANES survey and have since been used by some authoritarian scholars to estimate authoritarianism (Feldman and Stenner 1997; Hetherington and Suhay 2011; Hetherington and Weiler 2009; Stenner 2005).9 These questions tap deep-seated preconceptions about children and child rearing: whether it is more important for a child to be respectful or independent, obedient or self-reliant, well-behaved or considerate, and well-mannered or curious. Survey respondents who pick the first option in each of these pairs are strong authoritarians.¹⁰

The questions neatly divorce the measurement of authoritarians from the dependent variables authoritarianism is supposed to explain, while capturing the hypothesized predispositional foundation of authoritarianism. Stenner's succinct explanation of the theoretical basis of the four questions elegantly sums up their unique utility: "Child-rearing values ... can effectively and unobtrusively reflect *one's fundamental orientations* toward authority/uniformity versus autonomy/difference," the key dimension on which authoritarianism is arrayed (Stenner 2005, 24). The four-item child-rearing battery "enables us to distinguish authoritarian predisposition from authoritarian 'products' (attitudes) ... which are sometimes manifested but sometimes not, and whose specific content may vary across time and space" (2005, 24).

RESULTS

The results of the survey support the first hypothesis that authoritarians are more likely to support Donald Trump than other Republican candidates.¹¹ A multivariate analysis of data from this survey finds that authoritarianism is one of only two variables that is a statistically and substantively significant predictor of Trump support among likely Republican primary voters. The other statistically significant variable in the model is fear of personal threat from terrorism (table 1).¹²

Other independent variables in the model were standard demographics including gender, age, education, ideology, evangelicalism, church attendance, race, and income. Since the model sample only included likely Republican primary voters, partisan identification was not an independent variable.¹³

Importantly, when it comes to authoritarianism, Trump supporters are also distinct in their attitudes from the followers of the other Republican candidates for president. Support models estimated using the same set of independent variables reveal that

Table 1
Trump Support

Among Likely Republican Primary Voters

	Without Interaction Term	With Interaction Term	
Authoritarianism	0.273**	0.347*	
Std. Err.	0.084	0.160	
Terror Threat	0.150**	0.212	
Std. Err.	0.053	0.124	
Gender	-0.126	-0.126	
Std. Err.	0.200	0.200	
Education	-0.415	-0.423	
Std. Err.	0.381	0.381	
Age	-0.013	-0.009	
Std. Err.	0.433	0.433	
Evangelicalism	0.025	0.035	
Std. Err.	0.214	0.215	
Ideology	0.053	0.052	
Std. Err.	0.214	0.061	
Church Attendance	-0.387	-0.385	
Std. Err.	0.220	0.220	
Race	0.253	0.253	
Std. Err.	0.257	0.257	
Income	-0.066	-0.058	
Std. Err.	0.437	0.437	
Authoritarian*Terror		-0.604	
Std. Err.		1.099	
Intercept	-1.917	-2.161	
Std. Err	0.619	0.765	
R-Squared	0.667	0.665	
Adj. Count R-Squared	0.037	0.032	
N	540	540	

Source: Univeristy of Massachusetts Amherst, Political Science Department, 12/10/2015 National Survey.

Note: Estimates Produced Using Logit Analysis.

*p < .05, **p < .01, and ***p < .001.

authoritarianism has no effect on support for Ted Cruz, Ben Carson, Marco Rubio, and Jeb Bush (table 2).

The authoritarian inclinations of Trump voters are abundantly clear when a predicted probability of supporting Trump is arrayed across the authoritarian scale. And the difference between the predicted authoritarian support for Trump and all other Republican candidates is readily apparent when combined in one chart (figure 1). In this chart, authoritarianism is arrayed across the X-axis with the least authoritarian voters found at 0 on the scale and the most authoritarian voters at 1. The chart's Y-axis represents the predicted probability of supporting a candidate for president. The solid line represents predicted support for Trump and that support rises as the authoritarianism of voter's increases.

When looking at this figure, it is important to remember that authoritarianism is only a statistically significant variable for Trump. Thus, while the difference between the predicted value of Trump's support among authoritarians and nonauthoritarians

Table 2 **Authoritarianism and Support for Other Republican Candidates**

Among Likely	/ Rep	oublican	ı Primary	/ Voters
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	Cruz	Carson	Rubio	Bush
Authoritarianism	0.357	-0.028	0.091	-0.060
Std. Err.	0.226	0.256	0.206	0.206
Terror Threat	0.367**	-0.064	-0.074	-0.075
Std. Err.	0.171	0.199	0.167	0.164
Gender	-0.276	0.089	-0.480	0.443
Std. Err.	0.291	0.320	0.319	0.307
Education	-0.075	-0.731	0.543	0.040
Std. Err.	0.554	0.625	0.594	0.581
Age	-1.616**	1.956***	0.183	-1.575**
Std. Err.	0.636	0.702	0.677	0.672
Evangelicalism	0.447	-0.326	-0.024	-0.506
Std. Err.	0.308	0.338	0.341	0.361
ldeology	0.239**	0.07	0.031	-0.275**
Std. Err.	0.102	0.094	0.096	0.093
Church Attendance	0.062	0.947***	-0.528	-0.054
Std. Err.	0.303	0.324	0.355	0.345
Race	-0.087	0.234	-0.392	0.644
Std. Err.	0.370	0.407	0.342	0.343
Income	-0.251	0.753	0.588	0.682
Std. Err.	0.616	0.725	0.659	0.664
Authoritarian*Terror	-4.008**	1.486	-0.049	0.193
Std. Err.	1.637	1.714	1.624	1.542
Intercept	-3.175	-4.278	1.800	0.278
Std. Err	1.100	1.218	1.048	1.000
R-Squared	0.878	0.664	0.894	0.891
N	540	540	540	540

is statistically meaningful, any variation in support across the authoritarian scale for other candidates is not.

Note: Estimates Produced Using Logit Analysis.

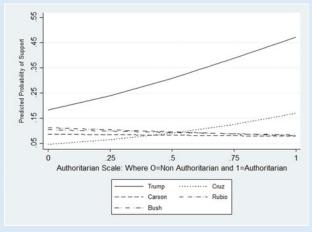
< *p < .05, **p < .01, and ***p < .001.

As demonstrated in table 1, fear of the threat of terrorism is another statistically significant predictor of Trump support. Thus, as the second hypothesis contends, fearful voters were a fertile electorate for Donald Trump. By comparison, fear of terrorism was not a statistically or substantively significant predictor of support for Carson, Cruz, Rubio, or Bush (figure 2).

When authoritarianism and fear of terrorism are combined in an interaction term and added to the model, however, the sign of the interaction term is negative, as Hetherington's negative interaction theory predicts, but not statistically significant. In other words, nonauthoritarians who were more afraid of the threat posed by terrorism were not statistically more likely to support Trump than threatened authoritarians.14

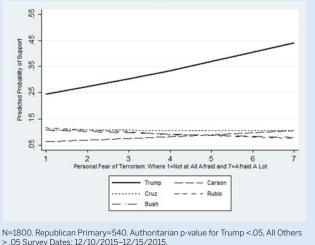
Figure 3 captures this dynamic by mapping support for Trump among the highest and lowest authoritarians on the Y-axis against

Figure 1 Support for Trump, Cruz, Carson, Rubio, and Bush by Authoritarianism (among likely Republican primary voters)



N=1800. Republican Primary=540. Authoritarian p-value for Trump <.05, All Others > .05 Survey Dates: 12/10/2015-12/15/2015.

Figure 2 Support for Trump, Cruz, Carson, Rubio, and Bush by Fear of Terrorism



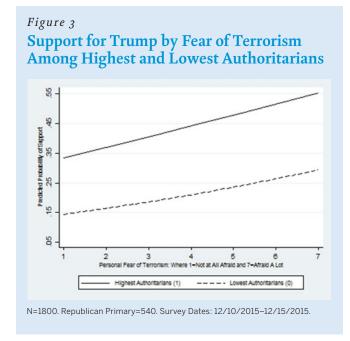
> .05 Survey Dates: 12/10/2015-12/15/2015.

fear of terrorism on the X-axis. While support for Trump increases as fear of terrorism increases among both groups, the increase is only statistically significant between high authoritarians who are not at all afraid and those who are very afraid of terrorism.

SUMMARY

In her State of the Union response to president Barack Obama last January, South Carolina's Republican Governor Nikki Haley warned her party and the nation to resist the temptation "to follow the siren call of the angriest voices."15 The angry soloist to whom Governor Haley referred was Donald Trump. As my survey reveals, Governor Haley's caution was well founded.

The movement of authoritarian voters into the Republican Party, rising fears over terrorism, and the terrorist attacks in Paris



and San Bernardino created conditions ripe for Trump's rise. Trump's rhetoric and behavior electrified Americans disposed to authoritarianism and activated by fear. While they rallied to his banner and obediently followed his lead,¹⁶ party insiders dithered, failing to choose a standard bearer and opening the door to a Trump victory. Trump's hegemony among authoritarians and their intractable allegiance to him created an advantage for him in multi-candidate primary contests in which other Republic candidates simply could not compete.

The *National Review*'s last-minute condemnation of Trump as "a free-floating populist with strongman overtones"¹⁷ is a testament to the political freefall that befell the party of Lincoln. Coalescing against a candidate, however, is not the same as closing ranks and deciding to support one. The result of the party not deciding in 2016 is Donald Trump.

Future Republican nomination battles may very well revert to the control of party insiders and the demands of the invisible primary. But today's insiders may be replaced by a new cadre of leaders who speak to and for the newly empowered authoritarian faction of the Republican Party that rose to power as a result of the party's failure to decide in 2016.

NOTES

- 1. Beginning on March 23, 2015, with Senator Ted Cruz's announcement, a total of 17 major candidates ran for the Republican nomination for president. This is the largest field of candidates to have competed for the nomination, surpassing the previous record of 15 competitors in the 1948 election.
- The RealClearPolitics (RCP) poll-of-polls average on June 16, 2016, shows Bush, Walker and Rubio in a virtual tie with each garnering between 10% and 10.8% of the vote. http://www.realclearpolitics.com/epolls/2016/president/us/2016_ republican_presidential_nomination-3823.html
- On July 16, 2016, Bush led the RCP poll-of-polls average with 15.5% followed by Trump at 15%. Walker's support was at 9%. Rubio's support had fallen to just 6%.
 On July 18, 2016, Trump surpassed Bush. http://www.realclearpolitics.com/epolls/2016/president/us/2016_republican_presidential_nomination-3823.html
- http://www.realclearpolitics.com/epolls/2016/president/us/2016_republican_ presidential_nomination-3823.html
- 5. http://time.com/3923128/donald-trump-announcement-speech/
- Pat Buchanan's 1992 and 1996 presidential bids were the last major party national campaigns to feature unabashed us-versus-them rhetoric. Historically, Trump and Andrew Jackson's demeanor and message share much in common.

- As historian David Fischer wrote about Jackson, "Many voters were deeply troubled by the behavior of President Jackson himself—a political style characterized by intensely personal leadership, charismatic appeals to his followers, demands for extreme personal loyalty, and a violent antipathy against all who disagreed with him" (1989, 849).
- 7. This intransigent behavioral tendency of authoritarians may help explain why Trump's support can seem, as a strategist for Marco Rubio complained in *The New York Times*, like "granite." http://www.nytimes.com/2016/01/29/us/politics/marco-rubios-camp-sees-opening-if-donald-trump-wins-in-iowa.html?_r=2
- 8. http://www.gallup.com/poll/4909/terrorism-united-states.aspx
- 9. Child-rearing questions designed to measure authoritarianism first appeared on the General Social Survey (GSS) in 1973. The GSS questions do not perfectly match the questions used by NES and other surveys used by Hetherington (2009; 2011), Stenner (2005), and Feldman (1997; 2003).
- 10. Answers in each pair are rotated randomly. Respondent scores for all questions are summed and then divided by the number of questions to arrive at an authoritarian scale that varies from 0, representing the most nonauthoritarian, to 1, indicating the most authoritarian predisposition. The choice "both" was not included as an answer option. The Cronbach's alpha of the authoritarian scale is .60.
- 11. Other researchers have offered alternate explanations for the rise of Trump. For example, Rahn and Oliver contend economic populism is behind Trump's success (2016). Clifford Young of Ipsos says it's nativism (2016). Pew Research thinks it is racism and xenophobia. Byrd and Collingwood argue racial resentment is behind Trump's rise (Lopez 2016). Following Hetherington and Weiler, I stipulate that authoritarianism is a predisposition that arises causally prior to the political attitudes and behavior that it affects (2009, 145). As such, it occurs before ideology, partisanship, and the other "isms" that have been offered to explain Trump's rise.
- 12. This data comes from a question that asks: How worried are you that you or someone in your family will become a victim of terrorism? Answers are arrayed on a 7-point scale from "not at all" to "a lot."
- 13. Likely Republican voters were identified using two screening questions. First, respondents were asked whether they were likely to vote in their state's presidential primary next year. Respondents who answered "don't know" or "not at all likely" were excluded. Next, the remaining respondents were asked whether they were more likely to vote in the Republican or Democratic presidential primary. Respondents who answered "Democratic" or "don't know" were also screened out. The voters who made it through both screens were then asked to pick their first choice for the Republican nomination for president from a list of all major candidates in the race at the time of the survey. "Do not know" and "other" were also presented as answer options.
- 14. As you can see in table 2, however, the interaction between authoritarianism and threat was significant and negative for Ted Cruz, meaning that less authoritarian voters who were more afraid of terrorism were more likely to support Cruz.
- http://www.npr.org/2016/01/12/462857025/gov-nikki-haleys-republican-address-to-the-nation
- 16. As Trump joked a week after Haley's speech, "I could stand in the middle of Fifth Avenue and shoot somebody. And I wouldn't lose any voters, OK. It's like incredible." http://www.businessinsider.com/donald-trump-joke-shootsomebody-2016-1
- 17. The National Review is considered the leading publication of the conservative movement in the United States. http://www.nationalreview.com/article/430137/ donald-trump-conservative-movement-menace

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