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# The One Weird Trait That Predicts Whether You’re a Trump Supporter

And it’s not gender, age, income, race or religion.

By Matthew MacWilliams

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If I asked you what most defines Donald Trump supporters, what would you say? They’re white? They’re poor? They’re uneducated?

You’d be wrong.

In fact, I’ve found a single statistically significant variable predicts whether a voter supports Trump—and it’s not race, income or education levels: It’s authoritarianism.

That’s right, Trump’s electoral strength—and his staying power—have been buoyed, above all, by Americans with authoritarian inclinations. And because of the prevalence of authoritarians in the American electorate, among Democrats as well as Republicans, it’s very possible that Trump’s fan base will continue to grow.

My finding is the result of a national poll I conducted in the last five days of December under the auspices of the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, sampling 1,800 registered voters across the country and the political spectrum.

Running a standard statistical analysis, I found that education, income, gender, age, ideology and religiosity had no significant bearing on a Republican voter’s preferred candidate.

Only two of the variables I looked at were statistically significant:

* authoritarianism, followed by
* fear of terrorism,

though the former was far more significant than the latter.

Authoritarianism is not a new, untested concept in the American electorate. Since the rise of Nazi Germany, it has been one of the most widely studied ideas in social science. While its causes are still debated, the political behavior of authoritarians is not. Authoritarians obey. They rally to and follow strong leaders. And they respond aggressively to outsiders, especially when they feel threatened. From pledging to “make America great again” by building a wall on the border to promising to close mosques and ban Muslims from visiting the United States, Trump is playing directly to authoritarian inclinations.

Not all authoritarians are Republicans by any means; in national surveys since 1992, many authoritarians have also self-identified as independents and Democrats. And in the 2008 Democratic primary, the political scientist Marc Hetherington found that authoritarianism mattered more than income, ideology, gender, age and education in predicting whether voters preferred Hillary Clinton over Barack Obama. But Hetherington has also found, based on 14 years of polling, that authoritarians have steadily moved from the Democratic to the Republican Party over time. He hypothesizes that the trend began decades ago, as Democrats embraced civil rights, gay rights, employment protections and other political positions valuing freedom and equality. In my poll results, authoritarianism was not a statistically significant factor in the Democratic primary race, at least not so far, but it does appear to be playing an important role on the Republican side. Indeed, 49 percent of likely Republican primary voters I surveyed score in the top quarter of the authoritarian scale—more than twice as many as Democratic voters.

Political pollsters have missed this key component of Trump’s support because they simply don’t include questions about authoritarianism in their polls. In addition to the typical battery of

1. demographic,
2. horse race,
3. thermometer-scale and
4. policy

questions, my poll asked a set of four simple survey questions that political scientists have employed since 1992 to measure inclination toward authoritarianism. These questions pertain to child-rearing: whether it is more important for the voter to have a child who is respectful or independent; obedient or self-reliant; well-behaved or considerate; and well-mannered or curious. Respondents who pick the first option in each of these questions are strongly authoritarian.

Based on these questions, Trump was the only candidate—Republican or Democrat—whose support among authoritarians was statistically significant.

So what does this mean for the election? It doesn’t just help us understand what motivates Trump’s backers—it suggests that his support isn’t capped. In a statistical analysis of the polling results, I found that Trump has alreadycaptured 43 percent of Republican primary voters who are strong authoritarians, and 37 percent of Republican authoritarians overall. A majority of Republican authoritarians in my poll also strongly supported Trump’s proposals to deport 11 million illegal immigrants, prohibit Muslims from entering the United States, shutter mosques and establish a nationwide database that track Muslims.

And in a general election, Trump’s strongman rhetoric will surely appeal to some of the 39 percent of independents in my poll who identify as authoritarians and the 17 percent of self-identified Democrats who are strong authoritarians.

What’s more, the number of Americans worried about the threat of terrorism is growing. In 2011, Hetherington published research finding that non-authoritarians respond to the perception of threat by behaving more like authoritarians. More fear and more threats—of the kind we’ve seen recently in the San Bernardino and Paris terrorist attacks—mean more voters are susceptible to Trump’s message about protecting Americans. In my survey, 52 percent of those voters expressing the most fear that another terrorist attack will occur in the United States in the next 12 months were non-authoritarians—ripe targets for Trump’s message.

Take activated authoritarians from across the partisan spectrum and the growing cadre of threatened non-authoritarians, then add them to the base of Republican general election voters, and the potential electoral path to a Trump presidency becomes clearer.

So, those who say a Trump presidency “can’t happen here” should check their conventional wisdom at the door. The candidate has confounded conventional expectations this primary season because those expectations are based on an oversimplified caricature of the electorate in general and his supporters in particular. Conditions are ripe for an authoritarian leader to emerge. Trump is seizing the opportunity. And the institutions—from the Republican Party to the press—that are supposed to guard against what James Madison called “the infection of violent passions” among the people have either been cowed by Trump’s bluster or are asleep on the job.

It is time for those who would appeal to our better angels to take his insurgency seriously and stop dismissing his supporters as a small band of the dispossessed. Trump support is firmly rooted in American authoritarianism and, once awakened, it is a force to be reckoned with. That means it’s also time for political pollsters to take authoritarianism seriously and begin measuring it in their polls.

Matthew MacWilliams is founder of MacWilliams Sanders, a political communications firms[sic], and a Ph.D. candidate in political science at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, where he is writing his dissertation about authoritarianism.