Political Ideologies Class—Life Long Learners—Handout # 5

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Fascism

Fascism tends to be a post-industrial and post-democratic phenomenon and has occurred in wealthier and more technologically advanced nations. Fascism is a totalitarian method to deal with societal problems and dislocations associated with industrialization and technological change.

Groups to whom fascist appeals are effective:

1. Industrialists and Land Owners.
2. The lower middle class which dreads the loss of status.
3. The military.

Psychological focus of fascism:

Appeals to a latent parent-child relationship where a person seeks security through dependence, i.e. dependence on the leader.

Adorno—*Authoritarian Personality*:

A. Tendency to orthodoxly conform to convention
B. Emotional rigidity
C. Limited imagination and creativity
D. Strong loyalty to one's own group, i.e. the in-group coupled by a vehement dislike of those outside that group, i.e. the out-group.
E. Emphasis on discipline and obedience rather than freedom and spontaneity in human relations.

Fascism directs the latent hostility of people against real or imaginary enemies.

Principle Elements of Fascism

1. Distrust of reason
2. The denial of basic human equality
3. Code of behavior based on lies and violence

4. Government by an elite
5. Totalitarianism
6. Racism and imperialism
7. Opposition to international law and order.

Excerpts from Avi Tushman—*Our Political Nature*

43% of Americans--Right Wing Authoritarians

8% of Americans--Left Wing Authoritarians

Voters are not rational, issue voters

Psychological characteristics of Left and Right

Left—More open, more creative, curious, imaginative, more tolerant of differences.

Right--Stress reliability, organization, dependability, self-disciple, achievement and adherence to tradition and rules.

Characteristics of authoritarians:

a. Rigid conventionalism
b. Submission to authority figures
c. Aggressiveness toward the out group and nonconventional members of the out groups.
d. Superstitions, stereotypes, mystical determination. Rigid categorical thinking.
e. Power and toughness as overwhelming values
f. Destructiveness and cynicism
g. Rigid emotionally
h. Concerned particularly about sexual stereotypes and sexual norms.

Right Wing Authoritarians

A. Authoritarian submission to leader and authority
B. Authoritarian aggression against the out-group
C. Conventionalism

D. Tend to be religious

E. Tribal

F. Not bothered by inequality

G. Support a traditional, hierarchical family structure

H. See human nature as competitive with winners and losers

I. Might makes right.

CONTEMPORARY SIGNIFICANCE OF FASCISM

The contemporary relevance of fascism lies in its evolution from a 20th-century historical phenomenon into a modernized "neofascist" framework that operates within democratic systems to advance authoritarian agendas. While many scholars view historical fascism as a specific interwar European event, others argue its core traits—extreme nationalism, scapegoating of outsiders, and the rejection of democracy—transcend time and geography, making it a critical lens for understanding modern far-right movements.

Fascism remains relevant today as a recurring, adaptable political response to crises in capitalist societies, characterized by hyper-nationalism, authoritarianism, and xenophobia.

Key Aspects of the Contemporary Relevance of Fascism:

- **Rise of Far-Right Populism:** Elements of fascism—nationalism, xenophobia, and white supremacy—have become more prominent in mainstream politics by the 2020s, appearing in democratic societies.

- **Digital Mobilization:** Unlike historical radio, modern fascistic movements utilize the internet and social media to create a fabricated reality of a "struggle between good and evil," allowing for rapid, mobilization. Modern fascist movements are adept at using the internet and social media.

- **Response to Disarray:** Similar to the 1920s, contemporary fascism gains traction amid economic disruption, social instability, and distrust in institutions.

- **Authoritarian Leaders:** Observers note that leaders in countries such as Russia, Hungary, and others have employed tactics echoing fascist ideologies, such as military expansionism and the cult of personality.

- **Core Characteristics:** Modern manifestations often include the "othering" of minorities, the demand for a strong, singular leader to restore national greatness, and the claim that democratic checks and balances prevent the true "will of the people".

- The underlying mechanisms of fascism remain a potent, dangerous force in the modern world.

Right Wing Authoritarianism and Left-Wing Authoritarianism

PREVALENCE OF RIGHT-WING AUTHORITARIANISM

Approximately 43% of Americans score high or very high on the Right-Wing Authoritarianism Scale (RWAS), according to a 2024 PRRI survey. This group is characterized by a preference for societal order, submission to traditional authority, and aggression toward those who defy those norms. High authoritarianism is heavily concentrated among Republicans, with two-thirds scoring high, and is strongly linked to Christian nationalist beliefs.

- **Key Demographic Trends:** Authoritarianism tends to increase with age (54% of seniors vs. 37% of 18–29-year-olds) and decreases with higher education levels (52% without a college degree vs. 28% with one score high/very high).

- **Political and Media Correlations:** Roughly 78% of those who trust conservative news outlets (e.g., Fox News) high on the RWAS, compared to 35% of those who trust mainstream news.

- **Political Violence:** Individuals with high RWA scores are significantly more likely to support political violence to "save the country".

- **Alternative Data:** Some studies, such as those from Morning Consult Pro, have placed the highly, strongly, or "right-wing authoritarian" population closer to 26% of the U.S. population, still higher than in peer nations.

Recent surveys of the American population show varying percentages for Right-Wing Authoritarianism (RWA) depending on the specific scale and the timing of the study. As

of late 2025, approximately **35% of Americans** score "high" or "very high" on the Right-Wing Authoritarianism Scale (RWAS).

Current Prevalence of Authoritarianism

The Public Religion Research Institute (PRRI) has tracked these metrics through 2024 and 2025. Their most recent data indicates a slight decline in the highest levels of authoritarianism compared to earlier periods.

- **High or Very High RWA:** 35% of Americans (13% score "very high" and 22% score "high"). Other studies show 43%

- **Mixed Opinions:** 23% of the population.

- **Low or Very Low RWA:** 41% of Americans (18% score "low" and 23% score "very low").

Key Demographics and Political Affiliation (2024−2025 Data)

Authoritarian views are significantly more prevalent among specific subgroups:

- **Political Party:** Two-thirds of Republicans (67%) score high on the RWAS, compared to 35% of independents and 28% of Democrats.

- **Trump Support:** Republicans with a favorable view of Donald Trump are nearly twice as likely to score high on the RWAS (75%) compared to those with an unfavorable view (39%).

- **Religion:** White evangelical Protestants are the most likely religious group to score high (64%), followed by Hispanic Protestants (54%) and white Catholics (54%).

- **Media Consumption:** Nearly 80% of those who trust conservative news outlets the most score "high" or "very high" on the scale.

Core Characteristics of RWA

Studies using the definition developed by Bob Altemeyer define Right-Wing Authoritarianism through three primary traits:

1. **Submission:** A desire to submit to perceived legitimate authorities.

2. **Aggression:** Targeted aggression against individuals or groups that authorities identify as targets.

3. **Conventionalism:** A strong desire for everyone to follow the norms and social conventions established by authority figures.

Alternative Authoritarian Measures

Researchers sometimes use the **Child-Rearing Authoritarian Scale (CRAS)**, which measures authoritarianism through preferred childhood traits (e.g., obedience vs. independence) rather than political ideology.

- Approximately **41% of Americans** score high on the CRAS.

- This is a notable decrease from 2016, when 57% of Americans scored high on this specific scale.

Broader Context of Democratic Decline

While the percentage of individuals scoring high on these scales has fluctuated, experts express concern about broader systemic trends. A 2025 "Democracy Meter" report noted a nearly 28% drop in U.S. democratic health, suggesting a slide into authoritarianism at the institutional level. Additionally, mid-2025 surveys found that **32.5% of American adults** agree at least somewhat that having a "strong leader" is more important for the country than having a democracy.
Source: Public Religion Research Institute—Non-partisan. Considered very reliable.

The first major developer of the idea of right wing and left wing authoritarianism scales was Robert Anthony Altemeyer (6 June 1940 – 7 February 2024) He was a Canadian psychologist who was Professor of Psychology at the University of Manitoba. Altemeyer produced the right-wing authoritarianism scale, or RWA Scale, and the related left-wing authoritarianism scale, or LWA Scale.

Altemeyer first defined the right-wing authoritarian personality in 1981, as a refinement of the authoritarian personality theory pioneered by University of California, Berkeley researchers Theodor W. Adorno, Else Frenkel-Brunswik, Daniel Levinson, and Nevitt Sanford. Altemeyer defined the right-wing authoritarian personality as someone who:

Left Wing Authoritarianism

The Left-Wing Authoritarianism (LWA) scale is a psychological tool designed to measure authoritarian traits—specifically **submission to ingroup authorities, aggression toward outgroups, and conventionalism**—within the context of political liberalism. It was developed to mirror the widely used Right-Wing Authoritarianism (RWA) scale, operating under the premise that authoritarianism is not exclusive to the right, but a personality trait that can exist on both sides of the political spectrum.

Key Aspects of the LWA Scale
- **Core Components:** Like the RWA, the LWA scale assesses three main dimensions:

    - **Authoritarian Submission:** A high level of submission to authorities perceived as "liberal" or "progressive".

    - **Authoritarian Aggression:** A tendency to act aggressively against those who do not share left-wing, anti-hierarchical, or progressive values.

    - **Conventionalism:** A strong, rigid adherence to the social norms and conventions favored by the left.

- **Key Researchers:** The concept has been developed by researchers such as Lucian Gideon Conway III, Shannon C. Houck, and Thomas Costello.

- **Measurement:** The scale includes items that measure a desire to use institutional or social power to enforce ideological conformity, such as punishing those who support traditional hierarchies.

- **Findings:** Research using this scale has indicated that left-wing authoritarians share a similar psychological, and behavioral core with right-wing authoritarians, particularly regarding the desire to silence dissenters.

Common LWA Scale Examples
- "The rich should be stripped of their belongings and status".

- "I am in favor of allowing the government to shut down right-wing internet sites and blogs that promote nutty, hateful positions".

- "Anyone who opposes gay marriage must be homophobic"

Research into **Left-Wing Authoritarianism (LWA)** has gained significant traction since 2021, challenging the long-standing academic view that authoritarianism is exclusively a right-wing phenomenon. While researchers generally agree that it is less prevalent than **Right-Wing Authoritarianism (RWA)** in Western contexts, it is a measurable and "meaningfully large" presence in modern society.

Prevalence and Scale

- **Population Estimates:** A 2024 study using latent profile analysis found that approximately **7.52%** of respondents fell into a distinct "Left-wing Authoritarian" profile, compared to **35.67%** for moderate right-wing authoritarians.

- **Comparison to Right-Wing Authoritarianism:** In the United States, researchers hypothesize that right-wing authoritarians outnumber their left-wing counterparts by roughly **three to one**.

- **Global Context:** While RWA is more common in Western capitalist nations, LWA has been historically more prevalent in ex-communist countries, such as Russia and parts of Eastern Europe, where authoritarianism correlates with left-wing or communist preferences.

Core Traits of LWA

Modern indices typically define LWA through three specific sub-dimensions:

1. **Anti-Hierarchical Aggression:** The desire to use force or state power to overthrow established hierarchies (e.g., "the 1%" or traditional institutions).

2. **Top-Down Censorship:** Support for using government or institutional authority to silence views deemed offensive or "incorrect".

3. **Anti-Conventionalism:** Hostility toward traditional or conservative values and a demand for strict adherence to progressive social norms (sometimes termed "political correctness").

Psychological & Behavioral Profile

- **Aggression and Violence:** High scorers in LWA are two to three times more likely to report participation in **political violence** compared to the average population.

- **Personality Links:** LWA is positively correlated with traits like **neuroticism**, **Machiavellianism**, and **psychopathy**, as well as a heightened perception of societal threat.

Cognitive Style: While similar to RWA in their dogmatism and desire for social control, left-wing authoritarians often show slightly lower levels of cognitive rigidity but higher levels of "negative emotionality".

PSYCHOLOGICAL REASONS FOR AUTORITARIANISM

The rise of authoritarianism is driven by deep-seated psychological needs for security, order, and belonging, particularly during times of intense fear, uncertainty, and social change. Key factors include a cognitive preference for simple, black-and-white rules (low tolerance for ambiguity), high levels of anxiety and social anxiety, and a desire to align with strong, dominant leaders who promise to protect in-group values.

Key Psychological Drivers:

- **Fear and Threat Perception:** A central driver is fear—whether economic, social, or existential—which activates the brain's "fight or flight" mode (amygdala hijacking), reducing complex thinking and increasing the desire for a strong, protective leader.

- **Anxiety over Uncertainty:** When societal changes feel overwhelming, individuals may experience a "fear of freedom" or anxiety about the future. Authoritarianism offers a sense of stability and rigid structure in response.

- **Cognitive Rigidity and Need for Structure:** Individuals with higher authoritarian tendencies often struggle with nuance and prefer clear, unambiguous rules, relying on simple, "black-and-white" thinking.

- **Social Conformity and In-Group Favoritism:** A desire to follow established traditions and norms leads to "authoritarian submission" (obeying leaders) and "authoritarian aggression" toward those perceived as threats to the group.

- **Anger and Resentment:** Social or economic suffering often fosters anger, which is easily displaced onto scapegoats (minority groups, outsiders) chosen by authoritarian leaders.

- **Personality Traits (Big Five):** High levels of conscientiousness (desire for order) and lower openness to experience are linked to authoritarian tendencies.

Authoritarianism thrives when these psychological needs are met with a "bully" figure who demands loyalty, creates a sense of belonging, and promises to restore lost status

RISE OF AUTHORITARIANISM: THE PSYCHOLOGICAL APPEAL OF AUTHORITARIANISM

The rise of authoritarianism is rarely just about politics or economics; it is deeply rooted in how the human brain processes **fear, identity, and complexity**. When the world feels overwhelming, certain psychological mechanisms trigger a preference for "strongman" leadership and strict social hierarchies.

Here are the primary psychological factors driving this trend:

1. The "Authoritarian Dynamic" (Fear & Threat)

Psychologist Karen Stenner argues that many people have a latent "authoritarian predisposition" that stays dormant until they perceive a **normative threat**.

- **Perceived Chaos:** When people feel that social order, traditional values, or national safety are collapsing, they experience high levels of anxiety.

- **The Safety Pivot:** To alleviate this anxiety, the psyche pivots toward a leader who promises "law and order," even at the expense of individual liberties.

2. Social Identity and "In-group" Defense

Human beings are evolutionarily wired for tribalism. Authoritarianism thrives by weaponizing **Social Identity Theory**:

- **Us vs. Them:** Leaders often designate a specific "out-group" (immigrants, elites, or political rivals) as the cause of all problems.

- **Collective Narcissism:** This is the belief that one's own group is exceptional but underappreciated or victimized by others. It creates a powerful emotional bond between the follower and a leader who promises to restore the group's "rightful" status.

3. Cognitive Complexity and Need for Closure

We live in an era of rapid technological change and information overload. This creates a psychological burden called **cognitive load**.

- **Preference for Simplicity:** Complexity causes mental fatigue. Authoritarianism offers "moral clarity" through simple narratives and binary choices (Right vs. Wrong, Good vs. Evil).

- **Need for Closure:** People with a high "need for closure" feel significant distress in the face of ambiguity. They prefer a firm, decisive leader over a slow, deliberative democratic process.

4. System Justification Theory

This theory suggests that people have a psychological need to believe that the system they live in is fair and stable.

- **The Paradox of Inequality:** Surprisingly, when people feel the most vulnerable or disadvantaged, they sometimes support authoritarian structures because it provides a sense of **predictability**. Even a harsh system can feel safer than a "broken" or unpredictable one.

5. Learned Helplessness and the "Strongman" Archetype

When citizens feel that their vote doesn't matter or that institutions are unresponsive, they can fall into **learned helplessness**.

- **The Savior Complex:** In this state, the individual stops trying to solve problems through civic engagement and instead looks for a "hero" or "strongman" to bypass the system and fix everything on their behalf.

Comparison of Mindsets

Democratic Mindset	Authoritarian Mindset
High tolerance for ambiguity	Low tolerance for ambiguity
Views "the other" as a competitor	Views "the other" as an existential threat
Values process and debate	Values results and decisiveness
Focuses on individual rights	Focuses on collective conformity

Understanding these factors helps explain why logical arguments often fail to change minds in a polarized environment—the attraction is **emotional and protective**, rather han purely ideological.

ALIENATION AND AUTHORITARIANSM

Feelings of alienation—powerlessness, isolation, and normlessness—act as a psychological catalyst for authoritarianism, driving individuals to seek security in rigid, top-down structures. Disillusioned, isolated, and anxious people often embrace strong leaders who promise to restore order, provide belonging, and punish perceived enemies.

Key Connections Between Alienation and Authoritarianism
- **The Search for Belonging:** Alienation—feeling disconnected from society or one's own life—creates a "terrifying emptiness". Authoritarian movements exploit this by offering a rigid sense of community, purpose, and identity to those who feel excluded.

- **Powerlessness and Control:** When people feel they have no influence over their lives (political powerlessness), they may surrender to authoritative figures who promise stability, often favoring tradition and conformity.

- **Fear and Aggression:** Alienation is often rooted in fear and anxiety, leading to a "dangerous worldview". This fear, combined with a sense of humiliation, can turn into aggression against out-groups, a core feature of right-wing authoritarianism.

- **Meaninglessness and Dogmatism:** A sense of purposelessness, or "normlessness," makes individuals more susceptible to rigid, dogmatic belief systems that promise a clear, albeit authoritarian, set of rules.

Why They Are Linked
Alienation thrives in times of social disruption, and authoritarianism offers a seductive, though often destructive, alternative to that confusion. It is a compensatory mechanism: individuals who feel they have lost control of their lives or society often embrace authoritarian regimes as a way to feel "connected" through shared, often aggressive, obedience.

The relationship between **alienation** and **authoritarianism** is a central theme in sociology and political psychology. At its core, the connection is about a search for certainty and belonging in a world that feels increasingly fragmented, indifferent, or hostile.

When individuals feel disconnected from their society, their work, or their own sense of agency, they become more susceptible to the "strongman" appeal.

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1. The Psychological Bridge: Uncertainty to Order

Alienation often manifests as a sense of **anomie**—a breakdown of social standards and values. When people feel the "rules of the game" no longer work or that they have no voice, it creates deep psychological anxiety.

- **The Escape from Freedom:** Erich Fromm, a prominent social psychologist, argued that modern humans feel isolated by their independence. To escape the "burden" of this isolation, individuals may seek to fuse themselves with a powerful leader or movement.

- **The Need for Cognitive Closure:** Alienated individuals often crave clear "in-group" vs. "out-group" distinctions. Authoritarianism provides a simplified worldview: a clear enemy to blame and a clear leader to follow.

2. Social Disconnection and "Mass Society"

The theory of **Mass Society** suggests that as traditional community bonds (family, church, local guilds) weaken, individuals become "atomized."

- **Vulnerability:** Without these intermediate social buffers, the lonely individual stands exposed to the state or a charismatic demagogue.

- **The Substitute Community:** Authoritarian movements offer a "surrogate identity." If you feel like a "nobody" in a globalized economy, being part of a "grand national movement" restores a sense of pride and importance.

3. Economic Alienation (Marxist Perspective)

From a Marxist viewpoint, alienation occurs when workers are divorced from the products of their labor and from each other.

- **Displacement of Anger:** Instead of directing frustration at systemic economic structures, alienated workers may be persuaded by authoritarian rhetoric to blame "others" (immigrants, minorities, or "intellectual elites").

- **The Promise of Restoration:** Authoritarian leaders often promise to return the worker to a "Golden Age" where their labor and identity were supposedly more respected.

Comparison of Alienation vs. Authoritarian Appeal

Feature of Alienation	How Authoritarianism "Solves" It
Powerlessness	Offers a sense of collective power through a strong leader.
Meaninglessness	Provides a grand narrative or "destiny" for the nation/group.
Social Isolation	Offers instant belonging to an "exclusive" and "superior" group.
Self-Estrangement	Replaces individual identity with a rigid, proud collective identity.

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4. The Modern Digital Context

In the 21st century, the internet has created a new paradox: we are more connected than ever but more alienated. Algorithmic silos can amplify feelings of being "under threat," which is a primary driver of **authoritarian aggression**. When people feel their way of life is being alienated by "liberal progress" or "globalism," they often turn toward authoritarianism as a defensive shield.

List of Most Valid, Independent and Reliable News Sources

1. Reuters
2. AP
3. CSPAN
4. The Christian Science Monitor
5. NPR
6. PBS
7. PEW Research
8. BBC America

What can be done to combat the extreme polarization in American Politics

Easing extreme U.S. political polarization requires a multi-pronged approach: reforming electoral systems (e.g., ranked-choice voting, open primaries) to incentivize moderation, fostering cross-partisan dialogue, correcting misinformation, and promoting local, issue-focused civic engagement. Other key strategies include strengthening local news, encouraging interparty collaboration among leaders, and supporting bridging organizations.

Here are specific, research-backed actions to reduce political polarization:

1. Electoral and Political Structural Changes

- **Ranked-Choice Voting (RCV):** Implementing RCV can encourage candidates to appeal to a broader base rather than just their base, reducing the incentive for extreme positions.

- **Open Primaries:** Allowing independents to vote in primaries can lead to the nomination of less extreme candidates.

- **Redistricting Reform:** Using independent commissions for redistricting can reduce gerrymandering, which often creates "safe" seats that favor extremist candidates.

- **Incentivizing Moderate Behavior:** Changing campaign finance and candidate selection to reward politicians who engage in bipartisan cooperation.

2. Media and Information Literacy

- **Diversifying Media Consumption:** Actively seeking out news from varied, reputable sources (e.g., using tools like AllSides) can break echo chambers.

- **Combating Misinformation:** Supporting fact-checking initiatives to debunk conspiracy theories and misinformation that drive division.

- **Strengthening Local News:** Investing in local news helps foster a shared sense of community, which is often less polarized than national politics.

3. Interpersonal and Community Actions

- **Encouraging Dialogue:** Engaging in respectful, active listening with people who hold different perspectives, focusing on shared values rather than polarizing topics.

- **Shared Projects:** Participating in local community projects that bring people together across political lines.

- **Bridging Organizations:** Supporting initiatives like Braver Angels that organize workshops and debates to help bridge divides.

4. Leadership and Civic Education

- **Responsible Leadership:** Leaders should prioritize unity, empathy, and bipartisan cooperation over divisive rhetoric.

- **Civic Education:** Expanding civic education to focus on critical thinking, media literacy, and constructive engagement in democratic processes.

- **Citizens' Assemblies:** Creating representative forums where citizens can deliberate on policy issues to find common ground, similar to models used in other nations.