

Measuring Right-Wing Authoritarianism and Ideology

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Abstract

The present study examines the relationship between right-wing authoritarianism and various facets of political ideology (economic issues, social issues, intolerance, and racial/ethnic resentment). Partial correlations revealed strong and significantly positive relationships between RWA and social conservatism, and intolerance, along with a weak but significant relationship between RWA and racial/ethnic resentment. The findings refute Ray's (1973) contention that RWA is merely another measure of conservatism. Rather, when conservatism is treated as a multidimensional construct, RWA is related to some dimensions, but not others (such as economic conservatism).

Introduction

One on-going debate in the literature on right-wing authoritarianism (RWA) is in regard to the relationship between RWA and conservatism. Some psychologists have argued that the F-Scale (Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswick, Levinson, & Sanford, 1950) and RWA Scale (Altemeyer, 1981, 1988, 1996) merely measure conservatism (see, e.g., Ray, 1973, 1985, 1990). However, those making such arguments have often only vaguely defined conservatism (Altemeyer, 1996). Part of the problem is that definitions of conservatism often vary depending upon who is being asked. As Altemeyer (1996) has noted, for some individuals, conservatism could amount to a desire for obedience of governmental authorities, but for others conservatism is synonymous with being against government interventions as a matter of principle. The concept of conservatism, and ideology more broadly, is likely to be multifaceted, suggesting that any measurement of ideology will, in order to have scientific merit, need to be multidimensional in its scope.

The present study will utilize a relatively precise, multidimensional measurement of political ideology (Weems, Ross, & Aman, 2012) and examine the relationship of its dimensions to a relatively precise measurement of RWA (Funke, 2005). The measurement of political ideology is based on the research of Weems et al. (2012), and operationally defines political attitudes along four dimensions: economic, social issues, racial/ethnic resentment, and intolerance. By measuring political attitudes along these four dimensions, rather than on a single dimension, it is possible to more fairly test Ray's (1973) assertions regarding the constructs of authoritarianism and conservatism.

In essence, the following study is intended to present a destructive test between Ray's (1973) and Altemeyer's (1996) perspectives regarding the relationship between conservatism and authoritarianism. If Altemeyer's (1996) assessment is correct, it would be expected that overall RWA scores should correlate significantly with various measures of social conservatism (social issues, racial/ethnic resentment, and intolerance) but not for economic conservatism. If, on the other hand, Ray's (1973) assessment is correct that it does not matter how conservatism is defined, then RWA should correlate with all measures of conservatism as defined by Weems et al. (2012).

Method

Participants

The sample consisted of 215 (144 women, 70 men, 1 missing) participants, recruited by email and social media. Most participants resided in Northwest Arkansas. Average age of participants was 30.40, with an age range of 18-75.

Materials

The Right-Wing Authoritarianism Scale (RWA) used in the present study was developed by Funke (2005), and measures three dimensions proposed by Altemeyer (1996): authoritarian submission,

authoritarian aggression, and conventionalism. RWA is measured using a scale consisting of 12 items on a 1 to 7 point Likert scale, with higher scores indicative of higher levels of authoritarianism.

The Revised Conservatism/Liberalism Scale, based on the research of Weems, et al. (2012) consisted of 21 items on a seven point Likert scale, in which a score of 1 indicated strong disagreement and a score of 7 indicated strong agreement. The Revised Conservatism/Liberalism Scale includes four sub-scales: Economic Attitudes (five items), Social Attitudes (seven items), Racial/Ethnic Resentment (four items), and Intolerance (five items). Higher scores on each of these subscales indicated higher levels of conservatism.

Procedure

Participants were recruited through emails and messages left through social media websites which contained a link to the study on instant.ly. Upon reading and explicitly agreeing to the informed consent statement, participants completed a series of questionnaires: the RWA scale (Funke, 2005), the Conservatism/Liberalism Scale (Weems et al., 2012), and a demographics questionnaire. Upon completion of the questionnaires, participants read a debriefing statement describing the purpose of the study and thanking them for their participation. The study took approximately 10 to 15 minutes to complete.

Results

Because of the strong intercorrelations between the subscales comprising the Conservatism/Liberalism Scale, partial correlations were computed between each Conservatism/Liberalism subscale and RWA. By doing so, the extent of the relationship between RWA and each subscale could be measured, with the other subscales held constant. A series of partial correlations were computed between RWA and the subscales of the Conservatism/Liberalism Scale. RWA was significant correlation with social conservatism, $r = .65, p < .001$, Intolerance $r = .29, p < .001$, and Racial/Ethnic Resentment $r = .14, p = .05$, RWA was not correlated with economic conservatism, $r = .10, p < .17$.

Discussion

Partial correlation analyses confirmed the primary hypothesis that authoritarianism was strongly and positively associated with social conservatism and intolerance, but not correlated with economic conservatism. Additional findings suggested a weak, but significant relationship between racial/ethnic resentment and authoritarianism. Furthermore, the findings suggested a presence of high levels of authoritarianism among those showing some political preferences (e.g., Tea Party, Conservative Republicans) but not others (e.g., Libertarians, moderates of either Democratic or Republican Parties). The findings, then, are consistent with the perspective advanced by Altemeyer (1996). The extent to which RWA is synonymous with conservatism depends on how conservatism is measured. The findings from the present study would suggest that if conservatism is measured in terms of adherence to a particular set of beliefs regarding social issues, then one could make an argument that RWA and conservatism are highly similar, if not quite identical. However, if conservatism is measured in terms of an adherence to a particular set of beliefs regarding economic matters, one would find Ray's (1973) argument regarding the similarity of RWA and conservatism to be without empirical support.

Furthermore, the findings support Altemeyer's (1996) assertion regarding the importance of precisely measuring conservatism, or political ideology more broadly. By operationally defining conservatism along several dimensions, it was possible to address the various nuances that exist among those who might hold conservative viewpoints in a manner that could be independently verified by other researchers interested in how ideology and authoritarianism intersect. Doing so elevates the discussion of the relationship between authoritarianism and conservatism from that of subjective speculation and interpretation that is itself often ideologically driven to one driven more by the presence of empirical data.

The present findings should be considered tentative pending replication, whether utilizing the questionnaire developed initially by Weems et al. (2012) or utilizing another multidimensional measure of conservatism. Clearly, one concern is one of sampling. Although the present sample was sufficiently large, and included participants outside of the university, the sample was also disproportionately female and based on residents of a region of the US known as "Little Dixie" (see, e.g., Weems et al., 2012). A replication utilizing a more representative sample is advisable.

In summary, the findings reported in this study should serve to refute Ray's (1973) remarks regarding RWA and conservatism, and as supporting Altemeyer's (1996) assertion of the need for more precise measures of conservatism in order to better understand the relationship between RWA and conservatism. In the process, the present findings support the theoretical work of Adorno et al. (1950) and Altemeyer (1996). It appears that highly authoritarian individuals are likely to hold attitudes that are socially conservative, and to an extent intolerant, regardless of their economic attitudes.

References

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Author Notes

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