

The Dark Authoritarians: Profiling the Personality, Emotional Style, and Authoritarian Attitudes
of the Major American Parties

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Abstract

Many are concerned that authoritarianism is increasing across the political spectrum. In the current study, we investigated the extent to which dark personality variables (i.e., psychopathy, narcissism, Machiavellianism) predict both right- and left-wing authoritarianism (RWA and LWA) between Republicans and Democrats. We developed profiles of individuals' political and personality characteristics concomitant with endorsement of authoritarianism. Our findings ($n = 527$) suggest a complex interaction between dark traits and political views. Using latent profile analysis, we uncovered underlying profiles characterizing distinct groups of individuals across party identification, LWA, RWA, and dark traits. Four latent profiles emerged: (1) a typical Democrat, low in dark traits and higher in LWA; (2) a typical Republican, low in dark traits and higher in RWA; (3) a *dark Democrat*, high in dark traits and high in both RWA and LWA; (4) a *dark Republican*, high in dark traits and high in both RWA and LWA. Together, these data suggest that authoritarianism manifests differentially across the political spectrum and is influenced by emotional style.

1. Introduction

Authoritarian regimes such as those run by Recep Erdogan in Turkey, Vladimir Putin in Russia, and Xi Jinping in China have established a tight grip on power across the globe. Although the extent to which the Trump administration represented the spread of authoritarianism in America remains controversial, the 2016 election brought the issue into sharp focus (Burston, 2017; Conway III & McFarland, 2019; MacWilliams, 2016). The characterization of “authoritarian” is not exclusive to the rhetorical ammunition of one political party but is a persistent theme for both in their pitch against the other. Historically, most research on authoritarianism has concentrated on the right-wing and focused on the personality traits and

cognitive styles associated with authoritarian attitudes. Here, we examine authoritarianism in the left- and right-wing and argue that by examining emotional style along with personality and political constructs, we can better understand how authoritarian attitudes manifest within individuals and groups in the American political landscape.

1.1. Personality in politics

Psychologists and political scientists have long been interested in links between personality and ideology. The authoritarian personality has been described as *conventional*, *submissive* to legitimate authority, and *aggressive* towards perceived outsiders (Altemeyer, 1981). Since the influential work of Adorno et al. (1950), much work has investigated authoritarianism and its concomitant traits (Jost et al., 2003). Using the Big Five (BFI), studies demonstrate associations between conservatives and conscientiousness, while liberals often score higher on openness to experience (Alford & Hibbing, 2007; Carney et al., 2008; De Neve, 2015; Hirsh et al., 2010; Sibley et al., 2012). Using the Dark Triad Dirty Dozen measure (Jonason & Webster, 2010), investigators found that narcissism, psychopathy, and honesty were associated with conservatism while Machiavellianism was associated with low liberalism but not necessarily high conservatism (Jonason, 2014). Research demonstrates that psychopathic traits higher in Republicans than in Democrats, and dark traits are associated with politically adjacent variables such as Social Dominance Orientation (SDO), intergroup threat, and prejudice (Hodson et al., 2009).

Measures of authoritarianism may be better indicators of political ideology than personality (Gerber et al., 2010). Altemeyer's (1998) Right Wing Authoritarianism (RWA) scale and SDO have been shown to be strong predictors of political conservatism (Pratto et al., 1994). Work by Altemeyer (1998), Altemeyer and Altemeyer (1996) and Jost et al. (2003) primarily

focuses on the personality traits associated with authoritarianism on the political right. Investigation of relationships between personality traits and authoritarianism have typically observed that RWA is moderately negatively associated with openness and with a weaker, positive association with conscientiousness (for a review, see (Sibley & Duckett, 2008)). Using the dark triad scale (Paulhus & Williams, 2002), Hodson et al. (2009) found negative correlations between Machiavellianism and psychopathy with authoritarianism.

1.2. Authoritarian symmetry

Conversely, Eysenck (2018) suggests authoritarianism does exist within individuals and parties of the political left, but it may be disguised or expressed to the extent that the ideology appeals to the larger society. Altemeyer (2007) concedes this but argues that the bulk of the authoritarians are on the political right. Others claim that the focus on RWA has led to an inherently biased perspective, reflexively producing “damning evidence about authoritarians” (Martin, 2001, p. 1).

Evidence of authoritarian support/ideology in the left-wing, however, has begun to emerge. Conway III et al. (2018) developed the Left- Wing Authoritarianism (LWA) scale, mirroring the RWA scale by Altemeyer (1998) to test the authoritarian symmetry hypothesis – the idea that the same processes which lead to authoritarian personality attributes in right-wing individuals also exist in left-wing individuals (Conway III et al., 2016; Crawford, 2012; Suedfeld et al., 1994). The authors found support for authoritarian symmetry; their LWA measure was positively associated with prejudice, dogmatism, attitude strength, and liberalism, demonstrating the viability of the LWA construct in American samples.

1.3. Rationale for investigation of dark personality and emotion in authoritarianism

A recent Pew report found that 91% of Americans perceive the conflict between Democrats and Republicans as either “strong” or “very strong”, up from 81% in 2012 and 85% in the month after the 2016 election (Schaeffer, 2020). Additionally, specific traits are related to polarization and negative affect in evaluations of opposing party members (Webster, 2018). High extraversion and low neuroticism are also associated with higher levels of participation in the political process (e.g., voter turnout) (Gerber et al., 2011; Mondak et al., 2010). Politics have also become increasingly personalized (Bittner & Peterson, 2018). In fact, 76% of the 2016 general election campaign television advertisements were character-based (i.e., questioning the character of the opposing candidate) – far surpassing the 31% of character ads between 1952 and 2008 (Bhat et al., 2016). These negative ads may contribute to political affective polarization (Lau et al., 2017).

Prior literature largely focuses on common personality measures (e. g., BFI, HEXACO), indicating important relationships between personality and political behaviors such as political hostility (Webster, 2018), likelihood to participate in demonstrations (Fazekas & Hatemi, 2021), and engagement in political activism/participation (Gallego & Oberski, 2012; Vecchione et al., 2015). The BFI is also related to RWA (Nicol & France, 2016), though much less is known regarding LWA. However, LWA is associated with negative attitudes towards racial groups and support for restrictive free speech norms (Conway III et al., 2020), and participants scoring high in LWA and RWA show comparatively greater behavioral aggression (Costello et al., 2021). Although LWA predicts voting for liberal political parties, among Eastern European participants, higher LWA scores decrease favorability towards democracy (Conway III & McFarland, 2019). Fasce and Avendaño (2020) argue that LWA represents an illiberal backlash against

conservatism. While LWA predicts liberal voting patterns, it is also associated with negative sociopolitical attitudes and behaviors.

Current events highlight the rise in polarization and political violence in America. For instance, the U.S. Capitol insurrection on January 6th, 2021 – characterized by the extreme political right – and violent protests/riots in Portland, Oregon through several months of 2020 – characterized by the extreme political left. Consequently, we focus our attention on the antisocial aspects of personality. The dark triad predicts a range of antisocial behaviors such as academic misconduct (Ternes et al., 2019) and counterproductive work behaviors (Forsyth et al., 2012). Thus, the dark triad may shed light on salient antisocial manifestations of authoritarianism across the political spectrum.

However, emotion has received relatively little attention in the political literature and where it has been explored, researchers have focused largely on RWA; however, the findings indicate an important role for emotion in authoritarianism. RWA is strongly associated with the regular experience of discrete negative emotions (i.e., anger, fear, and sadness) (Kossowska et al., 2008) and those on the extreme ends of the political spectrum experience more negative feelings about political issues than moderates (van Prooijen et al., 2015). RWA has also been associated with autonomic dysregulation during and after the experience of stress (Lepage et al., 2020) and is strongly related to poor emotion recognition (Ruffman et al., 2016). Therefore, studying emotion may yield valuable insight into authoritarianism.

The Emotional Style Questionnaire (ESQ) assesses global emotional health rather than the frequency or intensity of emotion experiences (Davidson & Begley, 2013), which is salient given the abundant literature linking antisocial personality traits, authoritarianism, and reduced emotional function (Lepage et al., 2020; Ray, 1972). We analyzed sensitivity to context and self-

awareness because these dimensions are most likely to be implicated in political behavior. Since self-awareness is necessary to understand one's feelings and one's beliefs, it is likely that strongly held political beliefs may be influenced by participant's self-awareness. Sensitivity to context was also chosen because this dimension of the ESQ measures sensitivity to social-environmental cues, including the rules of social engagement (Kesebir et al., 2019), which may impact political attitudes and behaviors. Political issues frequently reflect social-environmental concerns, and we therefore expect differences in context sensitivity will influence political attitudes.

Although LWA and RWA are empirically consequential, we argue that recent instances of political violence necessitate a focus on antisocial personality, emotionality, and their relationship to authoritarianism, possibly elucidating its more socially salient manifestations. We characterize personality and dispositional traits in authoritarian personalities in the two major political parties. Though these variables could be explored in a linear model, we uncover typologies based on personality and emotional style within individuals that are both highly related and meaningful for predicting political attitudes.

1.4. Political profiles

We characterized personality, political, and affective constructs using a categorical latent variable modeling procedure called latent profile analysis. This technique allows for the identification of latent subpopulations within a sample based upon underlying variables (Spurk et al., 2020). Members of a population can then be grouped into specific *types* based upon probabilistic commonalities across defining features. LPA is gaining traction, particularly in organizational science (Wang & Hanges, 2011). Beyond latent profiles of voting behavior (e.g., Alvarez et al., 2017; Greaves et al., 2015), LPA has not been broadly utilized in political psychology. We expect to observe several profiles indicating qualitatively distinct types of

authoritarians, defined by differences in emotional style, political ideology, and antisocial personality traits.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Participants and procedure

Participants were 527 individuals (34.3% female) ages ranging from 21 to 72 ($M = 37.27$, $SD = 11.05$). The sample was 67% Caucasian/ White, 15% African American/Black, 7% Asian, and 6.3% Hispanic. Participants were required to be currently residing in the United States. The sample comprised the following political party makeup: 53.1% of participants identified as Democrat, 35.3% as Republican, and 11.6% as “other”. Participants were surveyed via Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk; mturk.com), using a third-party platform, Cloud Research, to assist with recruiting and distributing surveys (Litman et al., 2017). More details on the measures used and mean scores for each variable of interest can be found in Table 1 and the Supplemental Materials.

Table 1

Mean Scores for Measured Variables and t-tests between Democrats and Republicans.

	Full Sample ($n = 527$)		Democrats ($n = 280$)		Republicans ($n = 186$)		t	df	p
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD			
Age	37.27	11.05	36.35	10.97	37.26	10.67	-0.88	464	.377
Liberal-Conservative	52.52	32.76	37.63	30.46	77.12	23.07	-15.89*	456.04	< .001
Democrat-Republican	50.73	32.81	31.18	27.24	81.58	18.09	-24.00*	464	< .001
Political Conservatism	60.80	16.23	55.23	16.16	70.29	10.76	-12.07*	464	< .001
Psychopathy	3.33	1.38	3.24	1.33	3.73	1.41	-3.77	464	< .001
Machiavellianism	4.46	1.29	4.33	1.31	4.85	1.18	-4.39	464	< .001
Narcissism	3.75	1.19	3.68	1.15	4.16	1.05	-4.71*	421.26	< .001
RWA	3.30	1.30	2.96	1.32	4.07	0.86	-11.04*	463.93	< .001
LWA	3.89	0.85	4.09	0.80	3.67	0.76	5.60	464	< .001
Self-awareness	4.73	1.46	4.81	1.43	4.34	1.42	3.51	464	< .001
Sensitivity to Context	4.21	1.62	4.32	1.56	3.82	1.63	3.31	464	.001

* indicates unequal variances between democrats and republican

2.2. Measures

All measures consisted of a five-point Likert scale, unless otherwise noted (see Supplemental Materials). Participants were surveyed on age, sex, race, and political party. Participants were asked to endorse one of three options: Democrat, Republican or “other”. For those who selected “other”, participants were asked to write the political party they identify with. Examples of written responses include “progressive”, “libertarian”, and “conservative”. We included two sliding scale items on which participants could indicate their political agreement by sliding a dial left or right from a center point. Each scale ranged from 0 (i.e., total agreement with left) to 100 (i.e., total agreement with right). The items were introduced with the dial at 50. For the first item, participants indicated their agreement between “Democrat” (0) and “Republican” (100); for the second item, the scale ranged from “liberal” (0) to “conservative” (100), allowing participants who do not directly identify with either major political party to be included in the analyses. We created continuous variables for each participant based upon their level of agreement along the political spectrum, so that participants may identify as having higher levels of “Democrat” or “liberal” agreement than other members of the same party.

2.3. Latent profile analysis

Latent profile analysis was conducted in R using the open-source software package *tidyLPA* (Rosenberg et al., 2019). To identify the optimal model, *tidyLPA* utilizes an analytic hierarchy process, comparing model fit across several indices (e.g., Akaike Information Criterion (AIC), Approximate Weight of Evidence (AWE), Bayesian Information Criterion (BIC)), – weighted based on relative performance (see (Akogul & Erisoglu, 2017)) – and identifies the model of best fit, then estimates distinct groups within the full sample based on patterns of scores across continuous variables. Finally, we examined the model entropy criterion – a measure of the model performance in terms of certainty of classification (Celeux & Soromenho, 1996). Entropy

values range from 0 to 1, where 0 indicates high uncertainty and 1 indicates high certainty that the classes are clearly delineated and, thus, the predictive power of a model in appropriately assigning a case/participant to a distinct class or profile.

3. Results

3.1. Political party differences

We ran independent samples *t*-tests for all variables between participants who identified as either “Republican” or “Democrat” (Table 1). Democrats and Republicans did not significantly differ in terms of age or sex, $\chi^2(1, 466) = 0.109, p = .741$. Republicans were higher in self-reported liberalism-conservatism, Democrat-Republican agreement, social and economic conservatism, and RWA. Democrats were higher in LWA. Republicans were higher in all three facets of dark personality. Lastly, Democrats were higher in self-awareness and sensitivity to context.

3.2. Latent profiles

The best fitting model yielded a 4-class solution (Fig. 1) with an entropy value of 0.896. We characterized four profiles as representing *Democrats*, *Republicans*, *Dark Democrats*, and *Dark Republicans*. *Democrats* and *Republicans* have relatively low Dark Triad scores and relatively high scores on Emotional Style, while *Dark Democrats* and *Dark Republicans* show the opposite pattern.

While *Democrats* and *Republicans* show a predictable pattern of responding across the LWA and RWA measures (i.e., *Democrats* score higher on LWA and lower on RWA than *Republicans*), *Dark Democrats* and *Dark Republicans* score higher overall and almost identically on RWA, and slightly above the mean and almost identically on LWA. These findings imply low levels of healthy emotionality coincide with high levels of dark personality traits, increasing the

likelihood that Democrats will endorse RWA attitudes and Republicans will endorse LWA attitudes. Indicated by Figs. 2 and 3, it appears that those with higher levels dark of personality traits, both Republicans and Democrats are almost equal in terms of RWA and LWA.

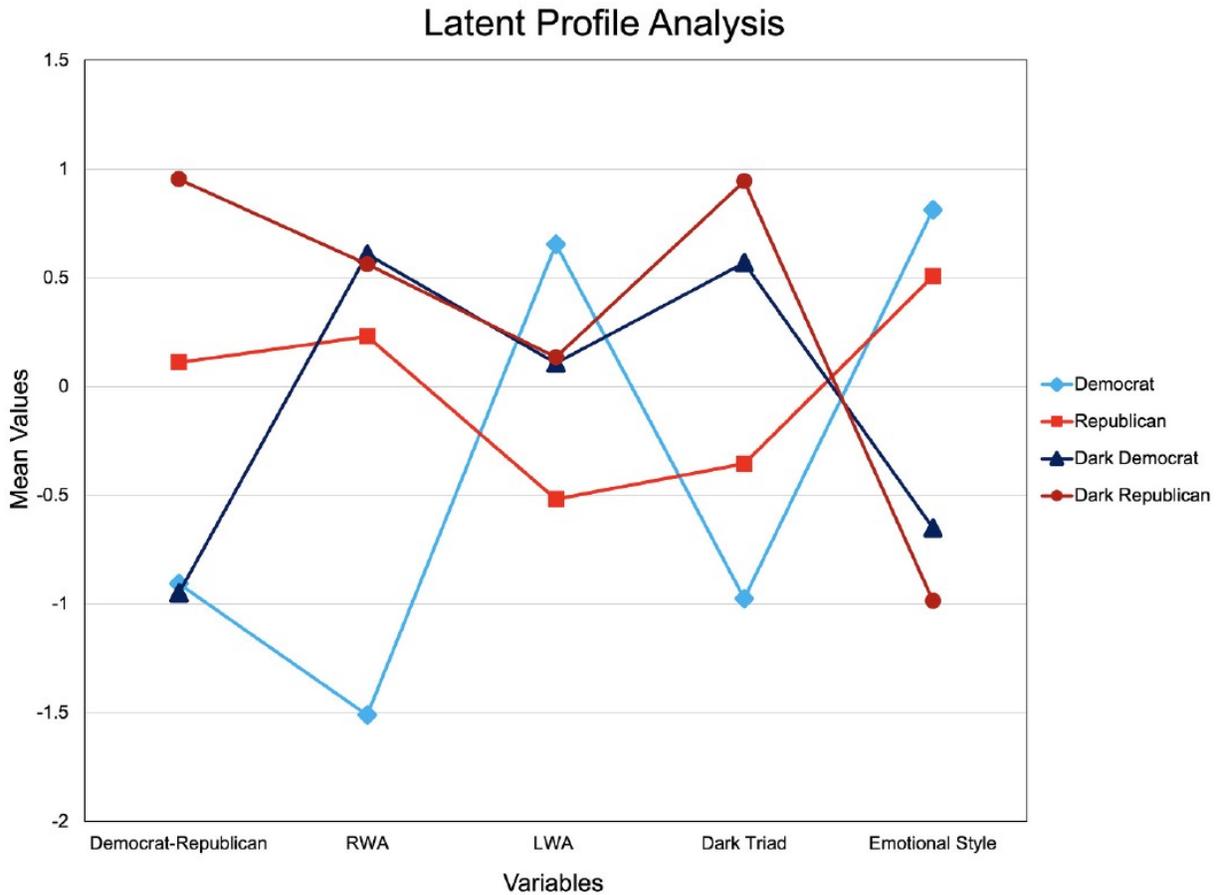


Fig. 1. Latent profile analysis. The latent profile analysis yielded a 4-class solution (i.e., 4 distinct profiles) within the full sample. We characterize the individual classes based on the pattern of responding across our variables of interest. Mean scores were standardized to allow for clean comparison of continuous variables and plotted as a percentile of maximum score.

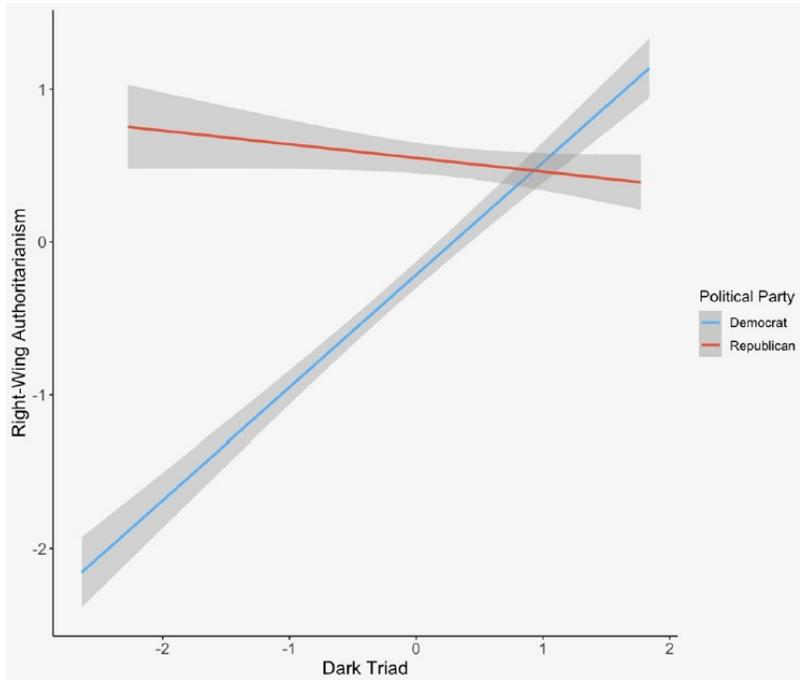


Fig. 2. Interaction plot of RWA and Dark Triads for Democrats and Republicans. Note: Standardized mean Dark Triad and RWA are displayed with regression lines, shaded regions indicate 95% confidence interval.

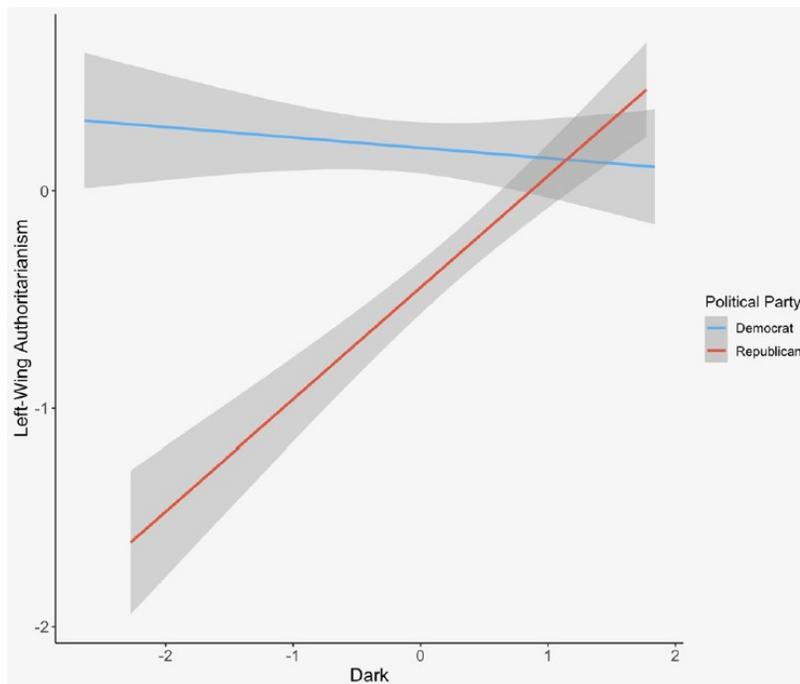


Fig. 3. Interaction plot of LWA and Dark Triads for Democrats and Republicans. Note: Standardized mean Dark Triad and LWA are displayed with regression lines, shaded regions indicate 95% confidence interval.

4. Discussion

The global ascendancy of authoritarian regimes highlights the significance of understanding authoritarian attitudes and concomitant dispositional factors. Recent polling indicates a significant increase in Americans endorsing political violence as justified in the face of election loss (Diamond et al., 2020). Anti-social personality traits are negatively associated with political knowledge (narcissism), and positively associated with increased political participation (Machiavellianism & psychopathy) (Chen et al., 2020), thus relationships between anti-social personality traits, authoritarianism, and emotion have significance for understanding political behavior. Our results show that Democrats scored higher in sensitivity to context and self-awareness, while Republicans scored higher in all three dark traits. Our results largely align with existing knowledge differentiating personality traits and politics. Arvan (2013) observed a relationship between specific “conservative” political judgments and dark triad traits in American adults, while Hirsh et al. (2010) found that liberals score higher in sub-trait compassion on the BFI than conservatives.

4.1. Emotional style and personality

Emotional style and dark triad traits were significantly negatively correlated, concordant with previous literature linking dark personality traits to avoidant attachment styles, deficits in emotion recognition, and comparatively diminished emotional intelligence (Jonason & Krause, 2013; Miao et al., 2019; Neumann et al., 2020; Petrides et al., 2011; Schimmenti et al., 2019). Therefore, different dimensions of emotional style may be uniquely related to unique aspects of anti-social personality traits. Here we show that dark triad traits are strongly associated with unhealthy emotionality.

4.2. LPA

Four latent profiles emerged which we characterize as *Dark Democrats*, *Dark Republicans*, *Democrats*, and *Republicans*. We believe our result contributes to the growing literature on LWA. We provide evidence of individuals within the U.S. who have high levels of dark personality traits in addition to authoritarian attitudes, and, despite their self-identified political orientation, these attitudes manifest as both right-*and* left-wing authoritarian. Though this effect is ostensibly contradictory, certain aspects of healthy emotionality appear to coincide with this effect. Dark personality and unhealthy emotionality characterize two unique manifestations of authoritarianism, our Dark Democrats and Dark Republicans. We speculate that these profiles may describe the subpopulations of individuals more likely to participate in the type of politically motivated aggression/violence witnessed over the course of 2020 and 2021, though more work is needed to confirm this speculation. In sum, our LPA produced four unique profiles, suggesting an important association between dark personality traits, unhealthy emotionality, and authoritarianism which may have important socio-political implications.

4.3. Limitations

Our findings should be interpreted in light of several limitations. We did not measure behavioral outcomes associated with self-report measures. Future work should include self-reports and behavioral measures of politically relevant aggression. Our data are also cross-sectional, so we cannot predict how authoritarian attitudes, emotional style, or political ideology emerge. Additional research should incorporate longitudinal designs with path analysis to assess how such attitudes, personality traits, and emotional style develop. Another limitation concerns the sample, which was predominantly white and middle-aged. Additionally, over half of the

participants identified as Democrats. However, our sample is reflective of the demographic/political orientation of the majority of the American electorate (Pew Research Center) Finally, the personality profiles identified may be meaningfully different because of culture or ethnic group, and our study exclusively collected data from MTurk in American samples. Future investigations should replicate these results in non-Western and cross-cultural samples.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Ryan T. Bird: Conceptualization, Methodology, Visualization, Investigation, Formal analysis, Writing – original draft, Project administration. **Hayden K. Hickey:** Conceptualization, Visualization, Investigation, Formal analysis, Methodology, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. **Mackenzie J. Leavitt:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. **Jennifer L. Robinson:** Supervision, Writing – review & editing, Resources.

Appendix A. Supplementary data

Descriptions of the measures, details on the analyses, as well as a link to our data and code can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2021.111298>.

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