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The rise of the anti-establishment right highlights the power of ideology over identity

What is the political psychology behind the surge in support for figures like Donald Trump? Taking stock of the research, Jennifer Sheehy-Skeffington *argues that we need to go beyond crude identity politics to consider variation in ideological views among ethnic and racial minorities.*

One often hears that we in the "liberal elite" are to blame for the political revolts that have shaken the social democratic consensus since 2016. While these claims can veer into simplistic caricature, one thing I think they get right concerns the empirical limits of a crude form of identity politics.

When the pages of *The Guardian* and *The New York Times* feature bewilderment at the recent large swings toward Donald Trump among African and Latine Americans and at rising ethnic minority support for the Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) party in Germany, it is a sign that our analytical lens needs sharpening.

Behind such bewilderment lies an assumption that people will vote solely in line with the interest of their group, where the most meaningful group to them is their ethnic or racial identity. As Trump and the AfD are associated with racist rhetoric and policies, the argument goes, so ethnic minorities should vote with their group interest in favour of the socially liberal alternative.

But analysis of public opinion data reveals again and again that while there are, on average, differences between ethnic and racial groups in their propensity to vote for one party over another, there is also stable and meaningful variation *within* each group. This variation gets overlooked from the standpoint of a simple form of identity politics. Only by recognising that there is as much nuance in the attitudes of ethnic and racial minorities as there is among majorities can we get closer to understanding the (seemingly surprising) breadth of support for the anti-establishment right.

Two key dimensions: social coordination and resource allocation

The past thirty years of research in political psychology has converged on an account of the underlying dynamics at play. We have found that there are stable individual differences in ideological orientations that tap into core psychological motivations that we can think of as akin to "political personality traits". Once we know where someone falls on these traits, we can predict a great deal about their policy attitudes and political behaviour, independently of their membership in salient social groups.

As Lotte Thomsen and I have recently argued, at root these traits are relational in nature, representing our intuitive stance toward two basic social dilemmas that have animated our politics for millennia: how to coordinate within social groups, and how to distribute resources between people of varying levels of social power.

Variation in one's stance toward *social coordination* is most commonly assessed through the concept of authoritarianism. Those high on trait authoritarianism believe that society needs to submit to a strong leader who will ensure conformity to traditional social norms, harshly punishing those who deviate from them. Right-wing authoritarianism has been studied since the end of World War II, and the modern version of it has been found to play a key role in predicting support for Trump and the European far right.

Variation in one's stance toward *resource distribution* is most commonly measured in the form of social dominance orientation, or how much one is opposed to equality of outcomes across social groups. Those high in this form of intergroup anti-egalitarianism are tolerant of social inequality as they believe societies are best organised along a hierarchy of social groups, where those at the top have both more power and more resources than those at the bottom. Our research has demonstrated that while intergroup anti-egalitarianism is lower on average among those from marginalised ethnic groups, it varies substantially within all ethnic groups, such that there is a sizeable number of ethnic minorities who believe in a world in which stronger social groups should dominate weaker ones, even if they do so for different reasons than ethnic majority group members. Among both ethnic minorities and majorities, those higher in trait anti-egalitarianism (as measured in this way) are the ones more likely to have swung from Obama to Trump in 2016 and to support the far right across Europe.

In terms of where these two political orientations come from, we argue that one needs to consider both dynamic societal forces and enduring influences from our evolutionary past. Working with the Norwegian Twin Registry, we find evidence that people's views about social coordination and resource distribution have a common genetic foundation. We suspect this reflects *a need to regulate the social hierarchy* – a need that is deeply rooted in our ancestral past. This evolutionary logic may even explain a pattern notable in many photos of celebrating MAGA crowds: that men

who are higher in physical size and strength tend to be particularly low in egalitarianism, as if their attitudes are calibrated toward their ability to defend resources in an ancestral dominance hierarchy.

The consequences of analysing political personality traits

Does this mean that we should abandon the notion of group interest – and that the political stage can no longer be anything more than a struggle between different kinds of ideologues whose incommensurability is biologically determined? Not at all. Grounding political differences in terms of age-old social tensions helps us understand the universal importance of societal issues such as group-based inequality, and why we are so sensitive to particular political platforms and economic developments. That is, ideology can change, but it changes in a systematic manner.

This approach also reveals how most ideological positions are based on morally-relevant beliefs about the kinds of social relationships people believe to be appropriate and fair. Saying they are morally relevant is not to legitimise them. As the political psychologist John Jost argued when he announced "the end of the end of ideology" back in 2006, "one can simultaneously critique the manifest content of an ideology and still understand why it possesses psychological resonance".

We also don't need to abandon the notion of identity politics altogether, as group interests continue to play a powerful role in politics, especially once we go beyond ethnicity/race to identities linked to social class or the nation. Research in my lab led by Denise Baron, for example, demonstrated how the three strongest predictors of British voters' choices between political candidates were attitudes around authoritarianism, egalitarianism, and identification with the national group.

What we do need to do, however, is understand that group identity is but one force pulling on voters. The anti-establishment right is exploiting the opportunity to foreground the other forces that pull on voters – toward strong leaders and a hierarchical social order.

One might even argue that today's liberal elite discourse on issues of identity fits with where political psychology was *back in the 1990s*. Back then, social identity was seen as the core motivator in collective life, echoing a Marxian analysis of the struggle between group interests. Much as the leftist in me might wish this to be the whole story, twenty-first century political psychology has taught me otherwise. Only by grappling with the fact that people of all stripes will continue to differ in their views regarding group leadership and inequality can we gain a deeper understanding of the fissures of our age.

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Posted In: Democracy and culture

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