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Author(s): Andrew J. Perrin

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National Threat and Political Culture: Authoritarianism, Antiauthoritarianism, and the September 11 Attacks

Andrew J. Perrin

University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill

This paper uses published letters to the editor of major U.S. newspapers to investigate the cultural effects of a major national threat: the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks. It is based on a hand-coded, stratified random sample of 1,100 letters to the editor published in 17 major papers in the United States (544 pre-September 11, 556 post-September 11). The letters are drawn from a population of 8,101 published letters. Degrees of both authoritarianism and antiauthoritarianism, as well as the general salience of questions of authoritarianism, rose significantly in the post-attack period. The paper suggests that, instead of a simple threat-authoritarianism causal link, authoritarianism and antiauthoritarianism are paired elements of political culture that are invoked together in the face of a national threat.

KEYWORDS: authoritarianism; discourse; threat; terrorism; September 11, 2001

What effect does a major, national threat have on authoritarian and antiauthoritarian political discourse? In this paper, I offer a novel approach to investigating changes in American political discourse in the wake of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. I use a large sample of published letters to the editor to investigate the influence on authoritarian and antiauthoritarian discourse of a major threat of national scope. Letters published in the month following September 11 are compared with those published in the month immediately preceding the attacks. The prevalence of *both* authoritarian and antiauthoritarian sentiments expressed in published letters increased significantly in the post-attack period, suggesting that a significant, national threat induces the authoritarian/antiauthoritarian axis in American political culture.

Authoritarianism, Antiauthoritarianism, and Political Culture

Responding to the horrors of the Holocaust and the abiding concern that mass culture—and American culture in specific—lent itself to authoritarian tendencies (Horkheimer & Adorno, 1969), *The Authoritarian Personality* (Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswick, Levinson, & Sanford, 1950, hereafter TAP) argued that there were certain traits of individuals that made them likely to adopt authoritarian political positions.¹ Since TAP most theories of authoritarianism have included the likelihood that perception of *threat* increases authoritarian sentiment. Previous research (e.g., Doty, Peterson, & Winder, 1991; Feldman & Stenner, 1997; Sales, 1972, 1973) has presented evidence for such a link, and new research by Lavine, Lodge, & Freitas (2005) in this issue underscores this pathway with experimental research.

Recently, Martin (2001) published a broad critique of the tradition of studies of authoritarianism, arguing that TAP inappropriately assigned authoritarian “types” to individuals using nominalist measures. Essentially, Martin argues, the authors *assumed* an authoritarian personality existed, then proceeded to locate and even, when necessary, invent one. Research in authoritarianism, though, need not be vulnerable to that charge. Whether authoritarianism is an individual trait or (along the lines of Pettigrew, 1999) a set of cultural scripts (Alexander & Smith, 1993) invoked in different ways and at different times, its *elements* may be specified, located, and discussed.

For the purposes of this paper, I think about authoritarianism more as *form* than as *content* in order to guard against the political and epistemological biases of which research following TAP has been accused. That is, authoritarianism (as trait or as cultural script) can be identified by the mode of argument and the tendency to repress, censor, or punish others, *not* by the specific political positions in which it argues for such actions (Altemeyer, 1996).

For analytical tools in a cultural understanding of authoritarianism, I turn to cultural theory in sociology. Recent thinking in the sociology of culture has suggested that culture is best understood as both *strategic* and *discursive*. Cultures provide their participants with structures for interpreting and participating in social life by defining a set of rules, strategies, and resources available in social settings (Swidler, 2001, 30). Contemporary frameworks for understanding culture—among others, Swidler (1986), Bourdieu (1990), and Sewell (1992)—share some important points. These authors see culture as providing a repertoire of resources and guidelines, thereby at once enabling and constraining the available choices of social action. Alexander and Smith (1993) have demonstrated that

¹ In other works, Adorno grew less committed to this individualist take. In Adorno (2000), he followed Arendt (1953), analyzing the role available cultural messages play in building and sustaining political authoritarianism. And in Adorno (1975) he specifically calls for a version of public opinion research that understands publicity as an element of public opinion.

elements of political culture may occur in opposing pairs. In this context, that is, events that evoke authoritarianism may also evoke antiauthoritarian positions.

Swidler (1986, 278–79) has suggested that “unsettled lives”—and, by extension, unsettled times—are likely to see more explicit production of cultural strategies. Marcus (2002), introducing the theory of affective intelligence, argues that anxiety leads individuals to rational deliberation by forcing them to reevaluate habitual political behavior in the face of new concerns. But cultural production and anxiety-provoked deliberation need not be oriented toward tolerance. Extant theories of threat and authoritarianism, in fact, suggest that the threat of unsettled times may send cultures retreating into an inward-focused authoritarian stance. Lavine et al. (2005) suggest a two-stage process, in which individuals with authoritarian tendencies retreat into political authoritarianism in the context of threat-induced anxiety.

I build on this theoretical base to theorize that *authoritarianism and anti-authoritarianism are elements of Americans’ political-cultural repertoire*. That means, to varying degrees and in varying circumstances, Americans may invoke authoritarianism or antiauthoritarianism as ways of interpreting and responding to events. The experience of a major national threat is likely to encourage the expression of these elements. I use the case of a major, national-scale threat and its empirical effect on political discourse to evaluate that hypothesis.

Approaching authoritarianism and antiauthoritarianism as cultural elements neither accepts nor contradicts the possibility of their being personal traits, as social psychological accounts (e.g., Adorno et al., 1950; Oesterreich, 2005; Stellmacher & Petzel, 2004) have suggested. One possible mechanism, for example, is emotion: individuals who react to new information with *anger* may adopt authoritarian stances, while those who react with *anxiety* may adopt antiauthoritarian stances (Marcus, Neuman, & MacKuen, 2000).² Other individual-level mechanisms are also plausible. This study aims to evaluate the impact of national threat on culturally expressed authoritarianism and antiauthoritarianism; it must remain theoretically and empirically agnostic on the etiology of such expression.

The Threat and its Aftermath

The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, are well known. A group of 19 hijackers took control of four transcontinental flights—two from Boston’s Logan International Airport, one from Newark International Airport, and one from Washington’s Dulles International Airport—and crashed them into major sites. The twin towers of New York’s World Trade Center were destroyed, and the Pentagon was severely damaged. Media coverage—television, radio, print, and internet—of the attacks was immediate and ubiquitous, insuring that essentially the entire country was aware of the situation and its implications. This was the first

² I am grateful to George Marcus for this insight.

foreign attack on U.S. soil in nearly 60 years. As portrayed in the media and perceived by most citizens, it was national in scope, immediate (that is, confined to a specific time), and unpredictable. These factors made the level of perceived threat in the U.S. population after September 11 significantly greater than it had been beforehand (Huddy, Khatib, & Capelos, 2002b, 420).

In the months following the attacks, there was much discussion of how the events would affect American public opinion and political culture. The most visible consideration of the political-cultural fallout of September 11 has been the work of Robert Putnam (Putnam, 2002). Putnam claims that September 11 provided the focus needed for a renewal of citizenship (Putnam, 2000, pp. 402–403). Indeed, the events were so uniting that, Putnam claims, Americans became *simultaneously* more community-minded, more patriotic, and more tolerant of ideological and ethnic differences. In this view, September 11 was a catalyst allowing Americans to resolve the sociological dualism, present at least since Tönnies (1887) and Durkheim (1984/1893), by which community identification and tolerance of difference stand in opposition to one another. Extant theories of authoritarianism predict the opposite: in the face of threat, authoritarian sentiment should grow, either as authoritarian *personalities* are activated (Adorno et al., 1950) or as authoritarian *cultural tools* become more attractive (Martin, 2001; Pettigrew, 1999; Swidler, 2001). There have been attempts to evaluate these predictions using public-opinion polling data (see Huddy et al., 2002b), although conclusive evaluations are not yet available.

A burgeoning medical literature has found substantial evidence of negative psychological outcomes to the attacks. Schuster et al. found an extremely high incidence of stress reactions; 90% of respondents to their survey reported one or more “substantial symptoms of stress” (2001, p. 1509). Galea et al. (2002) and Piotrkowski and Brannen (2002), similarly, found high occurrences of symptoms of depression and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) following the attacks. Schlenger et al. (2002) noted that these symptoms were significantly more likely to occur in residents of New York City than elsewhere, including the Washington, D.C., area. Hoge and Pavlin (2002) used epidemiologic surveillance techniques to detect significantly higher rates of treatment for anxiety and post-traumatic stress reactions among children, and for adjustment reactions among adults.

Ford, Udry, Gleiter, and Chantala (2003) found evidence of “transient” psychological symptoms and noted that the only long-lasting effect of exposure to news of the attacks was significantly higher levels of trust in government at all levels (federal, state, and local).³ In a retrospective, longitudinal study, Silver, Holman, McIntosh, Poulin, and Gil-Rivas (2002) confirmed that psychological symptoms declined over a six-month time period, but they remained elevated, particularly among those who coped using “disengaging” strategies (giving up,

³ I am currently working with the data used in Ford et al. (2003) to investigate that finding further.

denial, and self distraction). Noting the important theoretical difference between personal and national threat, Huddy et al. (2002a) show that different kinds of perceived threats in a sample of New York-area respondents evoke different protective beliefs and responses.

Letters to the Editor as a Mediated Public Sphere

Published letters to the editor have rarely been used on a large scale as social scientific data. There have been some small-scale studies of local letter-writers' opinions on specific issues (Hill, 1981; Kinloch, 1997), but no study has sought to consider the general tone or content of the Letters column over a specific period of time. This is particularly surprising since letters to the editor are a perfect non-reactive measure (Webb, Campbell, Schwartz, Sechrest, & Grove, 1981): they are a documentary byproduct of everyday civic life and a forum in which citizens choose to participate in a public sphere—albeit one that is constrained and mediated (Hart, 2001; Page, 1996).

In the face of relatively rare and constrained opportunities for public deliberation (Page, 1996), citizens may search for alternative modes of deliberation that offer some form of communication. The newspaper—which has historically been a technology of community identification (Anderson, 1991; Schudson, 1995)—is an obvious place for them to turn. Other similar spaces may include Internet chat rooms and radio and television call-in shows. These fora share the characteristics of allowing nonelite citizens to participate in public discussion, while significantly limiting the content, style, and scope of that discussion. I term these spaces *mediated public spheres* (see also Clayman, 2004) to point out the opportunities and constraints they represent.

Very little recent research considers letters to the editor, either from the point of view of journalistic practice or from that of public discourse. Hart (2001) found that letter writers were significantly older and more politically engaged than non-writers in their communities, but did not consider the relationship between letters' content and the local public. Rosenau's (1974) classic investigation of nonelectoral political participation refers to it only in passing and combined with the practice of writing letters to representatives. Early studies (e.g., Buell, 1975; Volgy, Krigmaum, Langan, & Mosher, 1977) refuted the commonly held notion that letter-writers were simply cranks and eccentrics, arguing instead that the forum provided a space for serious political talk.

Other work has concentrated on the biases involved in selection of letters to the editor. Renfro (1979), noting that editorial policies were a filter for which letters saw their way into print, found that the filter introduced little actual bias in a sample of letters received and published at one important newspaper. Grey and Brown (1970) found that the gatekeeping function of editors significantly biased the contents of the letters published. In contrast, Sigelman and Walkosz (1992) found that published letters to the editor reflected the general dimensions

of public opinion surrounding the Martin Luther King, Jr., holiday debate in Arizona. From another perspective, Wahl-Jorgensen (2002) noted that editorial staffs often consider letter-writers with contempt, specifically writing them off as “insane.” I am currently in the midst of a project examining all letters *received* by an important regional newspaper over a three-month period, which will allow an evaluation of the characteristics that make a letter likely to be published by a selective editor.⁴

While it is certainly true that gatekeepers structure the discourse found in the letters to the editor,⁵ I contend that using published letters is an excellent way to study political culture (as distinct from public opinion). Most editors say they try to select letters that best represent the range of available views on an issue or that represent the relative numbers of letters received on each side of a controversy (Feyer, 2003; Robinson, 1976). Like other studies that use publicly available texts as data for the study of culture (e.g., Sales, 1973; Wagner-Pacifi, 1994), this study takes seriously the idea that culture is an interactive, discursive process that cannot be measured simply by asking isolated individuals questions about preferences (Eliasoph, 1998, p. 231). But where these studies have looked at elite-produced texts (articles, television shows, cartoons, etc., all written by professional authors), letters to the editor are a far more accessible medium for “everyday” political discussion. This, then, is an investigation into authoritarian and antiauthoritarian expression in political *culture*, not into public *opinion*.⁶

Letters to the editor often refer to previously occurring articles in the same newspaper; with some frequency, they refer to other *letters*. Indeed, editorial page editors consider a reference to an item in the paper a *sine qua non* for publication, although that rule is often relaxed. The rhetoric is often both subtle and well crafted. For example, consider the following letter, which appeared in the *Chattanooga Times/Free Press* on September 23:

Watching the carnage in New York, I can't in my mind understand how a group of people can have such rage against the United States, let alone the people. It brings to mind another time in the 1940s when another land sneaked up on our back and caused great harm and damage. Then we were brought out of our isolation into the 20th century. This act of barbarism has no place in a civilized world. This act has stolen the innocents [*sic*] from this country, and its people will never again be what we were on Sept. 10. Now we will have to live in a much more brutal world

⁴ Smaller, community papers like those studied in Hart (2001) tend to publish over 90% of the letters they receive, making the gatekeeper function nearly irrelevant. Most medium- and large-size dailies, though, are more selective.

⁵ A symposium in 1976 (Robinson, 1976) discussed how these gatekeepers understood their task; there have been no published studies since then.

⁶ See Adorno (1975) for more on this distinction.

with people that have no regard for life. We will also need to place a great deal of faith in God, for He will see us through.⁷

This letter illustrates several features of letters-to-the-editor discourse. The writer draws an implicit comparison—in this case, with Pearl Harbor—to build a case for the historical significance of the September 11 attacks. The letter is rich in metaphor, conceptualizing the nation as an “innocent” body (“sneaked up on our back . . .”) at the same time as a country in need of modernization.

Comparison, as it turns out, is a common rhetorical tool in letters to the editor. Writers frequently seek to compare current issues with “settled” concerns from the past. Pearl Harbor, as well as the bombing of the Oklahoma City federal building, were the two most common comparisons in these letters. Schildkraut (2002) makes the very important point that such comparisons still require substantial interpretation; she notes that the policy prescriptions coming out of Pearl Harbor and the September 11 attacks were significantly different, even as policy makers explicitly invoked the comparison in the service of their positions.

Because of the ways writers conceptualize writing letters to the editor, as well as the structure of the column itself, we can consider letters to the editor a type of *mediated public sphere* (Clayman, 2004): a metaphorical “space” in which citizens can “enact efficacious citizenship” (Jepperson and Swidler, 1994). As Hart (2001, pp. 409–410) points out, they constitute a rich, largely untapped source of citizen discourse. As Warren (2001) has suggested, these sorts of spaces—letters to the editor along with Internet chat systems and radio and television call-in shows—offer certain important elements of political deliberation. However, they also constrain the boundaries of that deliberation in significant and often unobservable ways.

Hypotheses

Previous works on authoritarianism and threat lead to two specific hypotheses, which I test in this paper. First, since perception of threat is a crucial part of the theory of authoritarianism:

Hypothesis 1: *Expressed authoritarian sentiment will be greater in times of generally perceived threat than in settled times.*

⁷ This letter was assigned the following codes:

Codes	
Proauthoritarian	Antiauthoritarian
Projectivity	Destructiveness & Cynicism
Superstition & Stereotypy	

Second, for several theoretical reasons, an increase in one political stance is likely related, in some manner, to an increase in an opposing political stance. Therefore:

Hypothesis 2: *Expressed antiauthoritarian sentiment will be greater in times of generally perceived threat than in settled times.*

Data

To investigate these hypotheses, I use an unusual data source: a large sample of letters to the editor published in 17 U.S. daily newspapers during the one month immediately prior to, and the one month immediately following, the September 11 attacks.⁸

I obtained the letters from the Lexis-Nexis Academic Universe database, which contains historic, full-text articles from a large number of major media outlets. I selected the 17 papers (see Table 1) to gain a geographic distribution around the country as well as a mix of major urban centers, smaller cities, and rural areas. In general, the papers selected were the most widely read newspapers in their local markets (Standard Rate & Data Service, 2000). The two exceptions to this rule are *Long Island Newsday*, whose New York metropolitan area market makes it an unusual case; and the *Tampa Tribune*, which is eclipsed by cross-county rival the *St. Petersburg Times*. These papers were selected because an electronic source for letters to the editor published in their rivals was unavailable, and they had substantial enough readerships to justify seeing them as community institutions. Finally, since many newspapers do not reliably include letters to the editor in their Lexis-Nexis editions, I selected papers for which I could obtain letters for nearly all dates of interest.

After collecting the original sample, I wrote a computer program to separate individual letters out of the collected columns in which they were published. I then obtained letters that were not available on Lexis-Nexis from the newspapers' online archives. A few editions (17 of 1,037 paper-date pairs, or 1.6%) were unavailable both from the newspapers' websites and from Lexis-Nexis, but the resulting dataset contains virtually every (98.4%) letter to the editor published in the main editorial section.⁹ Table 2 shows the number of letters for each paper.

⁸ I also collected letters published in the one-month period one year prior to the post-September 11 period (September 13—October 12, 2000), but this group will not be used for this analysis, since the other two groups provide a more direct comparison based on other factors of the national mood in the time around September 11.

⁹ Letters published in auxiliary sections (Sports, Entertainment, etc.) were not included.

Table 1. Source Newspapers

Paper	Location	Regional Population	Recipients (Households)	2000 Market Penetration
Arkansas Democrat-Gazette	Little Rock, AR	560,700	90,031	42%
Atlanta Journal and Constitution	Atlanta, GA	3,807,900	372,510	26%
Austin American-Statesman	Austin, TX	1,110,300	167,553	39%
Boston Globe	Boston, MA	5,880,400	433,429	20%
Chattanooga Times/Free Press	Chattanooga, TN	451,900	68,239	39%
Dayton Daily News	Dayton, OH	949,000	134,784	37%
Denver Rocky Mountain News	Denver, CO	2,412,500	308,979	32%
Kansas City Star	Kansas City, MO	1,741,900	249,243	37%
Minnesota Star-Tribune	Minneapolis, MN	2,843,100	329,454	31%
Newsday	Long Island, NY	18,481,600	563,807	8%
San Diego Union-Tribune	San Diego, CA	2,860,500	372,267	38%
San Francisco Chronicle	San Francisco, CA	7,079,100	541,703	21%
St Louis Post-Dispatch	St Louis, MO	2,573,800	286,546	29%
State Journal-Register	Springfield, IL	199,400	49,354	61%
Tampa Tribune	Tampa, FL	2,299,900	198,942	21%
The Hartford Courant	Hartford, CT	1,115,700	186,434	44%
Wilmington Morning Star-News	Wilmington, NC	221,000	42,920	48%

Source: Standard Rate & Data Service (2000).

Table 2. Letters by Paper and Time Period

Paper	8/10-9/10/01		9/13-10/13/01		Total	
	Total	Coded	Total	Coded	Total	Coded
Arkansas Democrat-Gazette	213	34	222	35	435	69
Atlanta Journal and Constitution	126	17	139	11	265	29
Austin American-Statesman	130	11	105	21	235	31
Boston Globe	221	34	280	36	501	70
Chattanooga Times/Free Press	200	21	283	43	483	65
Dayton Daily News	311	51	157	25	468	76
Denver Rocky Mountain News	280	39	329	47	609	86
Kansas City Star	384	48	369	35	753	83
Minnesota Star-Tribune	226	28	282	35	508	63
Newsday	165	18	354	49	519	67
San Diego Union-Tribune	183	22	125	15	308	37
San Francisco Chronicle	361	64	317	31	678	95
St Louis Post-Dispatch	230	30	334	44	564	74
State Journal-Register	207	24	242	31	449	55
Tampa Tribune	235	40	297	46	532	86
The Hartford Courant	276	48	271	34	547	82
Wilmington Morning Star-News	92	15	155	18	247	33
Total	3,840	544	4,261	556	8,101	1,100

Coding

I coded a sample of 1,100 letters: 544 published during the pre-September 11 period and 556 published after September 11. Within each time period, the sample was drawn randomly by the computer. The program presented each letter without any context (date, newspaper, author, etc.), although in many cases one or more of these elements was obvious from the text. Table 2 summarizes the letters that were coded. The letters were coded using a simple scheme, based on the F scale (Adorno et al., 1950, pp. 248–250):

Conventionalism: Rigid adherence to conventional, middle-class values.

Authoritarian Submission: Submissive, uncritical attitude toward idealized moral authorities of the ingroup.

Authoritarian Aggression: Tendency to be on the lookout for, and to condemn, reject, and punish people who violate conventional values.

Anti-intraception: Opposition to the subjective, the imaginative, the tender-minded.

Superstition and Stereotypy: The belief in mystical determinants of the individual's fate; the disposition to think in rigid categories.

Power and "Toughness": Preoccupation with the dominance-submission, strong-weak, leader-follower dimension; identification with power figures; overemphasis upon the conventionalized attributes of the ego; exaggerated assertion of strength and toughness.

Destructiveness and Cynicism: Generalized hostility, vilification of the human.

Projectivity: The disposition to believe that wild and dangerous things go on in the world; the projection outwards of unconscious emotional impulses.

Sex: Exaggerated concern with sexual "goings-on."

On each of these elements, a letter was coded 1, 0, or -1. A "1" indicates specific support for the corresponding theme of authoritarianism; a "-1" indicates a position specifically *against* the theme, although it need not address a specific instance of that theme; and a "0" indicates no discernible position on an element.

Out of the letters' codes, I calculated four aggregate measures for use in evaluating the general authoritarian and antiauthoritarian character of letters:

Authoritarian Sum: The sum of all nine scores; as a simple sum, anti-authoritarian scores on some elements cancel out authoritarian scores on other elements.

Proauthoritarian Sum: The sum of all positive scores, ignoring negative scores. This is a measure of the degree of authoritarianism present in a letter, regardless of any countervailing degree of antiauthoritarianism.

Antiauthoritarian Sum: The sum of the absolute values of all negative scores, ignoring positive scores. This is a measure of the degree of anti-authoritarianism present in a letter, regardless of any countervailing degree of pro-authoritarianism.

Authoritarian Intensity: The sum of the absolute scores of the nine elements. This is a measure of the prevalence of the issue of authoritarianism and anti-authoritarianism in a letter.

To incorporate the concerns raised in Altemeyer (1981), I also calculated the equivalent measures for RWA. For those calculations, scores for authoritarian submission, authoritarian aggression, and conventionalism were combined into sum, pro, anti, and intensity scores:

RWA Sum: The sum of the three RWA-relevant scores (authoritarian aggression, authoritarian submission, and conventionalism).

RWA Proauthoritarian Sum: The sum of all positive RWA-relevant scores.

RWA Antiauthoritarian Sum: The sum of the absolute values of all negative RWA-relevant scores.

RWA Intensity: The sum of the absolute scores of the three RWA-relevant elements.

This process should be understood more as “expert coding” (Krippendorff, 1980) than as classical content-analytic coding, since it requires an understanding of the concepts of authoritarianism and a judgment about the existence of a latent trait (Neuendorf, 2002, pp. 23–25; 99). Nevertheless, as recommended in Evans (1996), a second coder was trained in the technique and coded a randomly selected subset of roughly 25% ($N = 273$) of the sample. Cohen’s κ scores (Cohen, 1960) ranged from 57% for authoritarian submission to 86% for sex, with a mean of 71%. Inter coder correlations for composite scales ranged from 79% for authoritarian intensity to 83% for authoritarian sum. Table 3 shows the agreement scores.

Table 3. Interrater agreement

Variable	Statistic	Value
<i>Individual Ratings:</i>		
Authoritarian Aggression	Cohen’s κ	0.680
Anti-Intracception	Cohen’s κ	0.721
Conventionalism	Cohen’s κ	0.664
Cynicism	Cohen’s κ	0.768
Projectivity	Cohen’s κ	0.715
Power and “Toughness”	Cohen’s κ	0.777
Sex	Cohen’s κ	0.855
Superstition and Stereotypy	Cohen’s κ	0.653
Authoritarian Submission	Cohen’s κ	0.572
Mean		0.712
<i>Composite Scales:</i>		
Authoritarian Sum	Correlation	0.832
Proauthoritarian Sum	Correlation	0.810
Antiauthoritarian Sum	Correlation	0.821
Authoritarian Intensity	Correlation	0.788
RWA Sum	Correlation	0.734
RWA Proauthoritarian Sum	Correlation	0.695
RWA Antiauthoritarian Sum	Correlation	0.762
RWA Intensity	Correlation	0.721
Mean		0.770

$N = 273$.

Although there are no generally accepted guidelines for sufficient inter rater reliability, these scores are high enough to insure that the findings are not simply the result of individual coder bias.

Authoritarian and Antiauthoritarian Letters

As examples of the rhetorical strategy and ideological breadth of the letters, as well as of the coding process, I offer several examples.

Paper: *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette*

Date: Sept. 27, 2001

We are all Americans, people in this country. The idiot who wrote in saying that George W. Bush started this war should be horsewhipped. His letter was an insult to all the victims, rescue workers and just plain loyal Americans. As for the so-called university crowd, I remember a time when they would be tried for treason. Bush said it best: If you're not for us, you're for the terrorists.

Codes

Proauthoritarian	Antiauthoritarian
Aggression	
Anti-Intrapection	
Superstition and Stereotypy	
Power and Toughness	

The authoritarian character of this letter is clear. Aggression and preoccupation with power and toughness are central to the message ("horsewhipped" and "tried for treason"). Furthermore, the anti-intrapection theme is also strong, with its rejection of the "university crowd." The "uncritical conformity with the prevailing group ways" (Adorno et al., 1950, pp. 107, 249) in the letter ("If you're not for us, you're for the terrorists." See also Oesterreich (2005), this issue) qualifies it for superstition and stereotypy as well.

Paper: *State Journal-Register*; **Date:** Aug. 14, 2001

... To describe Chris Britt's cartoons as "communist propaganda" smacks of pure ignorance on [the prior letter-writer]'s part. Instead I would gather that like many people brainwashed in today's society [the prior letter-writer] automatically labels anything he disagrees with as being communist or anti-American. . . .

I wonder which is more dangerous to American society—a cartoonist whose job it is to poke fun at politics and make us think about social

issues, or a person who would take away the cartoonist's right to say what he wants. No, it is not Chris Britt who should live in Beijing. It is [the prior letter-writer] who should go back in time and live in Germany in 1938. It is to that country and that time where closed-minded individuals like [the prior letter-writer] belong. Remember: Never underestimate the danger of ignorant people in large groups.

Codes

Proauthoritarian	Antiauthoritarian
	Authoritarian Submission
	Aggression
	Anti-Intracception
	Superstition and Stereotypy

In order to be antiauthoritarian, a letter must explicitly argue *against* authoritarian themes. This letter reacts to a previous letter calling for a cartoonist's deportation. It argues against submission (criticizing "many people brainwashed in today's society"), aggression ("... right to say what he wants"), anti-intracception (by repeatedly denigrating "ignorance"), and superstition and stereotypy (by accusing the prior letter writer of being "closed minded").

Both this letter and the one to which it refers share a common element in letters-to-the-editor discourse: hyperbole. Presumably, the original letter writer did not *actually* expect Britt to be sent to Beijing, nor did this letter writer expect the other to be sent to Nazi Germany. The relative inefficacy of letter writers—the fact that their deliberation is in its own space, separated from "elite" journalism and discourse—contributes to this tendency to make grand comparisons and large conclusions.¹⁰

Hybridity and Ambiguity

Many of the letters—12.3% (41, or 7.5%, before September 11, 95, or 17.1%, after)—contained at least one element of proauthoritarianism *and* one element of antiauthoritarianism.

For example, consider this letter, published in the Wilmington, North Carolina, *Morning Star-News* on September 26, headlined "Do we care?":

During the war in Europe, in every town we entered in Germany walls were covered with slogans, in letters two feet high. Most frequent was

¹⁰ Internet discussion groups (known as "usenet") reduce the cost of hyperbole even further, leading to what has become known as "Godwin's Law":

"As a Usenet discussion grows longer, the probability of a comparison involving Nazis or Hitler approaches one." There is a tradition in many groups that, once this occurs, that thread is over, and whoever mentioned the Nazis has automatically lost whatever argument was in progress. (<http://www.tuxedo.org/~esr/jargon/html/entry/Godwin's-Law.html>)

Was hast Du heute für Deutschland getan? (What have you done today for Germany?) I believe it appropriate for us in America. What have you done for America today—or in the past?

Have you committed any random acts of kindness?

Do you remember, and practice, everything you learned in kindergarten?

Do you set a good example for children around you? Do you salute the flag?

Do you display it?

Do you know the memorial “eternal flame” in front of City Hall died out more than 20 years ago and has become a receptacle for trash?

Do you care?

Do you know the U.S.O. Building on 2nd and Orange will not, has not, done anything to serve today’s young Americans, far from home, in local military installations—yet we expect them to risk their lives to protect ours? Does anyone care?

Codes

Proauthoritarian	Antiauthoritarian
Conventionalism	Destructiveness & Cynicism
Authoritarian Submission	
Superstition and Stereotypy	
Projectivity	

This letter calls explicitly for a return to community mindedness and does so in the language of Nazi Germany: the very regime after which theories of authoritarianism were modeled. Its argument against destructiveness and cynicism is embodied in the earlier imperatives (“commit . . . acts of kindness,” “set a good example for children”). Its conventionalism, though, sits in the connection established between community service and patriotism, which also explains the letter’s superstition and stereotypy and its conventionalism. Finally, the admonition that “young Americans, far from home . . . risk their lives to protect ours” constitutes projectivity.

A letter in the *Austin American-Statesman* on September 14 illustrates the mixed response to aggression:

We should not repeat the hatred of a perceived enemy as we did with Americans of other ancestry after World War II. An American is an American. . . .

There is no room for a middle ground in this situation. . . .

We should not lash out at those whom we presume to be responsible, we should eliminate all those who are responsible. We should be patient; justice will be served.

Codes

Proauthoritarian	Antiauthoritarian
Authoritarian Submission	Destructiveness & Cynicism
Authoritarian Aggression	
Power and Toughness	
Projectivity	

The letter argues against destructiveness and cynicism by warning against “the hatred of a perceived enemy.” But it advocates submission (“there is no middle ground”) and aggression (“we should eliminate all those who are responsible”). Its faith in power and toughness (“justice will be served”) is brought up by its general projectivity: the world has become a more dangerous place.

This letter illustrates very well the dialectic between antiauthoritarian restraint and power and toughness; the reason for the calmness and methodical behavior the author calls for is the eventual victory of American interests.

Similarly, consider the following letter from the *Chattanooga Times/Free Press* on September 23, which illustrates this same dialectical ambivalence between generosity and hostility:

Show America why we’re Volunteer State

Let’s help our American brothers and sisters in New York and Washington in ways that will show why we are called The Volunteer State—not just for something that happened in the past, not because we support UT, but because of the way we still answer the call for help and the call to action.

Let’s also support our president and military in ways that will show all enemies and potential enemies that if they touch any member of our American family they will have to fight all of us.

Codes

Proauthoritarian	Antiauthoritarian
Authoritarian Submission	Destructiveness & Cynicism
Authoritarian Aggression	
Power and Toughness	
Projectivity	

Once more, this letter argues against cynicism by calling for readers to “answer the call for help.” Its submission, though, follows directly: “support our president and military,” and aggression follows thereafter: “they will have to fight all of us.” Projectivity is implied in the letter’s response to the increased danger in the world.

Methods

Because of the strictly comparative nature of the data, I conceptualize this investigation as an epidemiological comparison between a group of exposed

subjects and a control group. The unit of analysis here, though, is the *letter*, not the person who wrote it. Letters published after September 13, 2001, are considered “exposed” to the September 11, 2001, attacks, and letters published on or before September 10, 2001, are the control (unexposed) group. Most of the analyses, therefore, are simply bivariate (χ^2) considerations of the difference between the two groups of letters.

It is, however, reasonable to think that other characteristics of letters may influence their authoritarian and antiauthoritarian positions. Thus, after analyzing the exposure-vs.-control data, I run a series of hierarchical linear regression models (HLMs; Pinheiro & Bates, 2000; Raudenbush & Bryk, 2002) to take into account two variables at the newspaper level:

Region, the U.S. Census region in which the letter was published, with New York State separated into its own region because of the possible locality of effects to New York City (Schlenger et al., 2002).¹¹ The states from which letters were drawn are in the following regions:

- 1 Northeast (CT, MA)
- 2 Midwest (OH, MO, MN, IL)
- 3 South (AR, GA, TX, TN, FL, NC)
- 4 West (CO, CA)
- 5 New York State

Population, the population of the main market for the newspaper in which the letter was published. This measure is intended as a proxy for the urban character of the community.

These models predict continuous outcomes (the composite scores), so are estimated as random-effects linear models with letters nested within newspapers. Because the letters were collected from published records, there is no reliable method for inferring characteristics such as age, race, sex, education, income, emotional state, or marital status of the letter writers.

In order to determine whether authoritarian content changed as the time since the attacks grew, I also ran HLMs testing for the effect of the date of publication on pro- and antiauthoritarian sentiments for letters published in the exposure group. However, since none of these models showed any significant effect, I do not present further analyses of them in this paper.

¹¹ The same models run with New York incorporated into the northeast region showed no substantial difference in results.

Table 4. Mean Authoritarian/Antiauthoritarian Measures

Measure	Control	Exposure	Δ	χ^2	p
Authoritarian Sum	0.033	0.326	+0.293	81.23	<.001
Proauthoritarian Sum	0.597	1.257	+0.660	64.66	<.001
Antiauthoritarian Sum	0.564	0.932	+0.368	26.09	.001
Authoritarian Intensity	1.162	2.189	+1.027	101.98	<.001
RWA Sum	0.000	0.236	+0.236	55.01	<.001
RWA Proauthoritarian Sum	0.217	0.516	+0.299	51.07	<.001
RWA Antiauthoritarian Sum	0.217	0.281	+0.064	3.72	.2933
RWA Intensity	0.434	0.797	+0.363	51.65	<.001

$N = 1,100$

Results

The results show a strong and consistent increase in authoritarianism, anti-authoritarianism, and authoritarian intensity using both the Adorno et al. (1950) and the RWA Altemeyer (1981) criteria.

Bivariate Analysis

The mean values of seven of the eight measures increased significantly after the September 11 attacks (Table 4). The exception is the RWA measure of anti-authoritarianism, which increased only slightly, and statistically insignificantly. The largest overall change is in the authoritarian intensity: the salience of questions of authoritarianism and antiauthoritarianism grew in the wake of the attacks. The increase in proauthoritarianism is substantial and significant, while the increase in antiauthoritarianism is smaller but still significant. There is a very substantial, significant difference in the degree of pro- and antiauthoritarianism present in letters published before and after the September 11 attacks, as shown by the large change in mean authoritarian intensity.

The changes in the more restricted RWA measures are all in the same direction as those in the broader measures,¹² although the increase in anti-authoritarianism measured on the RWA scale is much smaller and insignificant.

The reasons for the difference between the full and RWA scales can be found by examining the individual measures (data are presented in Table A1). The three measures included in the RWA scale increased quite substantially; at the same

¹² Note that the increases (Δ) are not relative to the boundaries of the scale.

time, five of the remaining six on the full scale either decreased (three measures) or increased relatively little (two). Only projectivity—which showed the single largest increase of all the measures—outpaced the RWA measures in the magnitude of its increase during the exposure period.

Regression Analysis

The results of the regression analysis (Table 5) provide additional support for the claim that the principal explanation for variation in pro- and anti-authoritarianism is exposure to the attacks of September 11.

Table 5 shows coefficients, significances, and intraclass correlations (ICC, or ρ) for the hierarchical linear models predicting authoritarianism and anti-authoritarianism in the letters to the editor. Each column represents one distinct model with a specific dependent variable: the same variables described above for the bivariate analysis. The rows represent independent variables. The ICC (ρ) can be interpreted as the proportion of the unexplained variance in the model that is attributable to the second-level grouping (in this case, the newspaper) as opposed to the first-level unit of analysis (in this case, the letter; Raudenbush & Bryk, 2002, p. 24).

In every case, the strongest predictor of pro- and anti-authoritarian sentiment is exposure to the September 11 attacks—letters in the “exposure” period are significantly more pro-authoritarian, significantly more anti-authoritarian, and significantly more likely to address questions of authoritarianism than are those published in the “control” period. Perhaps reflecting the relatively conservative culture of the south (Luebke, 1998), letters appearing in southern newspapers were significantly more pro-authoritarian and significantly more likely to address questions of authoritarianism than those published in the northeast (the reference region), even after controlling for exposure to September 11.

The south is joined by the midwest and the west (for the Adorno et al. measures) and by only the west (for the RWA measures) in its increased authoritarian intensity. This is particularly interesting since the northeast and New York—sites of three of the four attacks and three of the four points of departure for the hijacked aircraft—displayed significantly *lower* amounts of discussion over questions of authoritarianism. Finally, the west showed significantly greater levels of anti-authoritarianism on the RWA scale than did the rest of the country.

There is no significant difference in any measure of pro- or anti-authoritarianism based on the population of the area in which letters were published. Large, urban areas, that is, are no more or less likely to be the home to a pro- or anti-authoritarian letter. Also, the ICCs are extremely low—ranging from 0 to 0.8%—suggesting that little of the remaining difference in pro- and anti-authoritarianism in the letters is due to unexamined differences in the newspapers in which they were published.

Table 5. Hierarchical Linear Model Regression Results

Exposure group	F (Adorno et al., 1950)				RWA (Altemeyer, 1981)			
	Authoritarian Sum	Proauth Sum	Antiauth Sum	Authoritarian Valence	Authoritarian Sum	Proauth Sum	Antiauth Sum	Authoritar Valence
<i>Region:</i>								
Midwest	.004	.188	.184	.368*	-.092	.022	.110	.133
South	.482	.589**	.113	.695**	.185	.260*	.070	.327**
West	.117	.283	.172	.452*	-.026	.121	.151*	.264*
New York	.178	.080	-.079	.094	.348	.112	-.197	-.090
Population	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000
Intercept	-.098	.278	.381	.684	.055	.117	.072	.188
ICC (p)	.004	.008	.000	.000	.000	.004	.000	.006

N = 1,100 letters nested in 17 newspapers. ****p* < .001; ***p* < .01; **p* < .05.

Discussion

As expected, the degree of authoritarian sentiment expressed in the nation's letters to the editor columns rose substantially in the wake of a generally perceived major threat. The overall authoritarian sentiment rose significantly after the September 11 attacks.

However, perhaps more interesting than the rise in authoritarianism is the rise in general questions of authoritarianism versus antiauthoritarianism. Separated from antiauthoritarianism, authoritarian sentiment rose very significantly after the attacks; however, antiauthoritarianism *also* rose, albeit less dramatically. And the authoritarian intensity—the salience of authoritarianism regardless of direction—rose most dramatically of the four measures.

Authoritarianism and antiauthoritarianism, it seems, are tied to one another in some way. There are two competing theories as to why antiauthoritarianism might rise along with authoritarianism in the wake of a major threat. One possibility is that antiauthoritarianism *reacts* to rising authoritarianism, as in Figure 1. However, the fact that many individual letters contained pro- and antiauthoritarian elements suggests that antiauthoritarianism was not a simple reaction to authoritarianism.

Alternatively, as suggested by neo-structuralist approaches to political culture (e.g., Alexander & Smith, 1993), the authoritarianism/antiauthoritarianism duality could be one of the “intertwining sets of binary relations” (Alexander & Smith, 1993, p. 157) that form the backbone of political culture. That is, instead of antiauthoritarianism being a reaction to authoritarianism (or, conceivably, the reverse), the two could be opposite expressions of a single element of political culture, as in Figure 2.

There is no way to test these two explanations using these data. Since letters are selected for their relevance to prior items in a given newspaper, those published will likely be biased toward reactive claims, so analyzing the letters themselves raises substantial methodological concerns.

Within the exposure group, the date of publication is not a significant predictor of any measure of pro- or antiauthoritarianism. That finding *suggests* that the intriguing possibility of a single authoritarianism/antiauthoritarianism axis might be correct. But dates of publication are a very coarse measure, since letters may be held for an indeterminate amount of time between receipt and

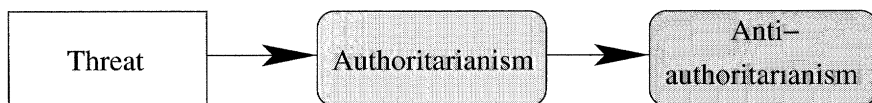


Figure 1. Linear conception of authoritarianism/antiauthoritarianism link.

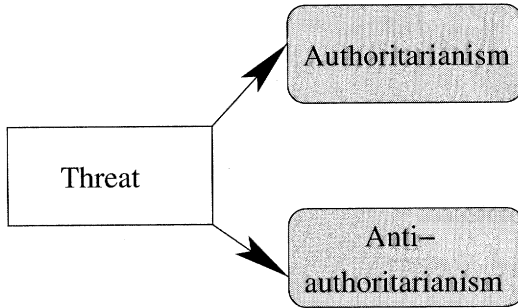


Figure 2. Bidirectional conception of authoritarianism/antiauthoritarianism link.

publication. Furthermore, letter writers are presumably reacting to a host of stimuli, many of which cannot be found in prior letters.

The fact that many of the letters had both pro- and antiauthoritarian elements suggests that at least part of the effect is structural; letters cannot be reacting to their own authoritarianism if the reaction is within the same text. Besides offering support to the neo-structural view of cultural repertoires—that cultural elements appear in opposing pairs—this finding supports the idea that community altruism and authoritarian exclusion may, themselves, be dialectically related.¹³ It also suggests that the cultural creativity associated with unsettled times may encourage reconfiguring pro- and antiauthoritarianism; threatened publics may *generate* new ways of reacting to events rather than only *invoking* existing ones.

Inferring psychological motivations for letter *writers* based on their published letters is theoretically problematic. It is possible that individual writers' attitudes became more pro- and antiauthoritarian in the wake of the attacks. Das, de Wit, and Stroebe (2003) and Huddy et al. (2002a) provide two possible psychological mechanisms for understanding the connection between threat and increases in both pro- and antiauthoritarianism. Huddy et al. (2002a) note that different individuals may experience the threat differently: some as *personal* threat (e.g., fears for safety) and others as *national* threat (concerns about implications for the country). These differing interpretations may explain differences in individual political reactions. Substituting emotional reactions for interpretations, a similar mechanism is suggested by Marcus (2002); Marcus et al. (2000). Also, Das et al. (2003) show that patients' experience of threat and sense of vulnerability predispose them to accept persuasive messages from medical personnel. Transferring that finding to the political realm, individuals may be more susceptible to prescriptive messages from authority figures when they are received under the condition of heightened perceived threat.

¹³ This is, of course, not a new insight—see, e.g., Coser (1984).

It is equally plausible, though, that individuals felt more comfortable *expressing* pro- and antiauthoritarian views in the changed civic context of the post-attack United States (see Eliasoph, 1998), or that they considered it more pressing to do so. Even measuring the emotional character of letters¹⁴ is problematic, since the debate format and the tendency toward hyperbole of letters to the editor makes it impossible to determine the extent to which the emotional tone is a function of the writer's disposition as opposed to a rhetorical strategy.

Conclusion

Faced with an unexpected, immediate, national threat, American political culture responded by increasing its attention to authoritarianism. The specific form this attention took—proauthoritarian, antiauthoritarian, or “hybrid”—was varied, as positions for and against authoritarian elements became part of the discussion. There are several possible causes for the variation in approaches to authoritarianism; emotion (Marcus, 2002), cognition (DiMaggio, 1997), and discourse (Wilson, 2003) are three promising candidates.

To what extent do the “silver lining” arguments of Putnam and others reflect changes in political culture after the September 11, 2001, attacks? Plainly, American discourse did not simply become more tolerant in the wake of the attacks. Rather, these unsettled times became a moment for cultural production, as Americans negotiated the twin attractions of pro- and antiauthoritarianism. Political discourse became significantly more aggressive in punishing perceived enemies and more concerned with power and toughness. At the same time, though, discourse became appreciably *less* cynical. And in the face of generally increasing *intolerance*, there was also a significant rise in tolerance.

Since Putnam and others measured public *opinion*, not public *discourse*, there is no fundamental conflict between the two sets of findings. It is possible that Americans became generally more tolerant in their private beliefs, but that intolerant beliefs became more prevalent in public discourse. It is also possible that social desirability bias induced survey respondents to give unrealistically tolerant answers to questions.

The cultural effects of September 11 are far from straightforward. American political culture's greater mistrust for outsiders may be part and parcel of its growing sense of community in the wake of a national threat. Clearly, though, the attacks and their aftermath had profound implications for the presence of authoritarianism and antiauthoritarianism in American political discourse. Given the frequency of “hybrid” letters, further research should examine the relationship between these two poles.

This research underscores and advances our knowledge in several ways. First, it confirms existing theories that link authoritarian attitudes with the experience

¹⁴ As one reviewer of this paper suggested.

of a threat. Unlike prior studies showing such a link, though, the threat in this case is national, immediate, and unpredictable, and therefore more like the kind of threat anticipated in TAP and other theories of authoritarianism.

Second, the findings provide substantive empirical evidence for a discursive tie between pro- and antiauthoritarianism. The data are inadequate for assessing the content and directionality of that tie; those remain important questions for future research.

The mechanism explaining these effects remains an important question for future research. It is possible, as TAP claimed, that authoritarianism is a direct result of the experience of threat. Alternatively, it is possible that emotions, personality traits (e.g., the tendency to respond with anger as opposed to anxiety), and cultural factors mediate the threat-authoritarianism link.

Finally, the article illustrates the utility of published letters to the editor as data for exploring the boundaries of political discourse. By using a large sample of letters from a wide distribution of newspapers, we can “sample” discourse that is generated by, and available to, ordinary citizens who choose to participate in a particular kind of mediated public sphere. Understanding exactly who is likely to participate in that forum and how they intervene in the discussion is also fertile ground for future inquiry.

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Correspondence may be addressed to Andrew J. Perrin (Department of Sociology, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, CB#3210, Hamilton Hall, Chapel Hill, NC 27599-3210). E-mail: andrew_perrin@unc.edu

APPENDIX

Table A1 presents control/exposure differences in the nine individual elements of the authoritarianism scale. This allows for examining differences in parts of expressed authoritarian and antiauthoritarian sentiment. Most of the elements are, in themselves, statistically significantly increased in the exposure period. The exceptions are three of the six elements in the full scale but not in the RWA scale, each of which decreased at some degree of statistical significance: destructiveness and cynicism; anti-intraception; and sex.

Table A1. Pro-/Antiauthoritarian Changes: Component Codes

Code	Control	Exposure	Δ	χ^2	p
<i>Included in RWA and full scales:</i>					
Conventionalism	.040	.110	+.070	18.093	<.001
Authoritarian Submission	-.085	.032	+.117	46.51	<.001
Authoritarian Aggression	.044	.094	+.050	40.79	<.001
<i>Included in full scale only:</i>					
Anti-intracception	-.070	-.104	-.034	8.907	.012
Superstition and Stereotypy	.006	.007	+.001	40.45	<.001
Power and "Toughness"	.000	.094	+.094	96.26	<.001
Destructiveness and Cynicism	.026	-.088	-.114	19.2	<.001
Projectivity	.061	.178	+.117	39.36	<.001
Sex	.011	.004	-.007	7.77	.021
$N = 1,100$					

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