Julie Wronski: So what I find in the paper is that among people who voted in the Democratic Primary, those higher in authoritarianism tended to vote for Hillary Clinton. All those lower in authoritarianism tended to vote for Bernie Sanders and with this consistent result, there’s a couple of questions.

Chris Martin: Most of us know how to identify authoritarian leaders. But in today’s interview, I talk about how to define authoritarianism among voters and the relevance of new findings that show a difference between the authoritarianism of Bernie Sanders and Hillary Clinton supporters. I’m talking to Julie Wronski, Assistant Professor of Political Science at the University of Mississippi and author of a new paper, *A Tale of Two Democrats: How Authoritarianism Divides the Democratic Party*. She and her co-authors show a striking difference between the average authoritarianism of Bernie Sanders voters and Hillary Clinton voters.

Chris Martin: Hi Julie.

Julie Wronski: Hi Chris.

Chris Martin: We’re here to talk about your new paper on authoritarianism and let’s start by talking about what it is. We’re talking about lower case authoritarianism here. How would you describe that?

Julie Wronski: Correct. So when we think about authoritarianism with that lower case A, what we’re really thinking about are individual personality traits and dispositions, how people in the electorate are thinking about the structures of government, how they’re thinking about the parties and the coalitions that form the structure of their society. So when we think about measuring authoritarianism or thinking about what authoritarianism is in those terms, what it really boils down to is a personal disposition and preference for having order and structure and conformity in society versus taking a more independent autonomous approach to life.

Chris Martin: So you’re saying that if there’s a hierarchical structure in that society, in any place, whether it’s a hierarchy between parents and children or a hierarchy between police officers and civilians, people who are relatively high on lower case authoritarianism would probably more likely say people who are lower in the hierarchy should be obedient?
Julie Wronski: Correct. So it’s also thinking about accepting the structure for what it is, if it’s hierarchical, what that hierarchy looks like and saying yes, we’re good with the way the structure is set up. We’re very happy with it. We’re conforming to it. We are accepting the norms that are set up in place and we’re willing to give into what those group norms are as opposed to say maybe being a little more deviant or a little more disobedient and say bucking those norms and protesting them.

Chris Martin: So why has authoritarianism traditionally been associated with republicans and conservatives?

Julie Wronski: So the main reason for this and one that a lot of the old school kind of take on this is that authoritarianism works by connecting people with issues and connecting people specifically with a lot of social issues and policies that have relationships to moral traditionalism. So we could think about these as the culture wars. To what extent are people supporting things like abortion or gay marriage or even things like racial rights?

So this link between authoritarianism and conservatism and the Republican Party really has stemmed from authoritarians who tend to hold on to these existing structures and norms and these existing structures and norms tend to be conservative and tend to be the policy positions of the right and the Republican Party.

Chris Martin: What motivated you to look at authoritarianism within each party?

Julie Wronski: So a lot of the motivation especially in our recent paper is in the context of 2016 and this narrative, especially within American politics, is that authoritarianism works in our society because it splits people across the parties where people high on these authoritarian dispositions tend to be more conservative, tend to be more Republican. People lower in authoritarianism tend to be more liberal, tend to be more democrat.

What this story basically sets up is that OK, you only are going to see this trait working when you only look at Republicans and in the pace of 2016, a lot of the narrative focused on that and specifically within the context of Donald Trump and multiple research articles and journalist outlets talked about how the rise of Trump really coincided with this activation of authoritarian traits within the electorate.

My motivation was to take a step back and say, “Well, is that really the fully story?” Within American society, we don’t just have one Republican Party. We have two parties. Is the story simply that republicans and democrats are not seeing eye to eye on this trait or is it possible that maybe there’s some variation within both parties?

That was the motivation for starting to look at democrats and to starting to ask the question of, “Well is it possible that maybe there are some high authoritarians who are in the Democratic Party and maybe there is variance in this trait that has some meaningful contributions to how we think about voting behavior among democrats?”
Chris Martin: 2016 was a very unusual year. If we went back to a previous decade, let’s say the 1960s, the 1950s, do you think there was any previous decade in which you would find a similar division between supporters of one primary candidate and another primary candidate on this dimension?

Julie Wronski: Sure. So this is actually one of the interesting things about why authoritarianism actually has divided people across the parties. If we do go back to say the 1950s or 1960s, what we actually see is two parties who aren’t actually very ideologically distinct from one another.

So if we’re going back to say the Eisenhower era or the LBJ era, we’re seeing a Democratic Party that has both northern liberals and Dixiecrats. So we have that variation, at least the policy level, within the party itself and we would have a similar case among republicans as well from that era.

A lot of the literature that even looks at say legislative politics and congressional politics, they realize that back in this era, both parties were kind of more alike when it came to ideological policies. So in that era, we would actually expect authoritarianism to work more powerfully dividing people within a party than it would say to divide people across parties. I would say the best example of this is if we would think back to say a civil rights era Democratic Party. We would expect something like authoritarianism to divide say the Dixiecrats from the rest of the Democratic Party.

It’s only in the past say 30 to 40 years that the Southern Dixiecrats have sorted into the Republican Party and that we now have this big polarization gap between republicans and democrats. That we actually see differences across the parties in authoritarianism.

Chris Martin: And do you feel like that divides whites and blacks and Asians and Hispanics altogether or do you feel like there’s a race effect here? I mean I know race was a factor in your paper.

Julie Wronski: Sure. Well, one of the things that has been really tricky with studying authoritarianism in the American context is again thinking about a trait that thinks about obedience and structure and applying that to society at large and asking whether this trait works the same for the dominant group in society, which would be whites, versus the non-dominant groups in society, which would be African-Americans, Latinos, Asians, the other groups you mentioned.

That has been somewhat of a debate within the political science and social psychology world, trying to figure out, “Well, can authoritarianism actually validly work when we’re asking people who don’t belong to the dominant group?”

So where we’re at is basically – the literatures respond to this by only looking at whites and saying, “Well, what we know about authoritarianism, splitting across the parties, is what we see among whites.”
One thing that my paper does slightly differently, especially because we’re looking at democrats is to say, “Well, let’s look at whites but also look at non-whites,” and we take the approach that for non-whites, they are members of the Democratic Party. They may have been voting for the Democratic Party for decades. This is a government social structure that they seem pretty comfortable with.

So we’re able to actually take race a little bit out of the question by saying that instead of focusing at society at large, we’re focusing on a political social group that non-whites might actually respect or might actually feel conformity towards.

**Chris Martin:** So you’re saying in the American case as opposed to the case of maybe several other countries, it’s just — it’s unique because there’s one ethnic group that’s loyal to the Democratic Party and loyalty within that group is to some degree based on authoritarianism.

**Julie Wronski:** I don’t know if I would go so far as to say that. I would say that for certain historical reasons, a lot of — and policy reasons, many minority groups have found a home in the Democratic Party more so than the Republican Party. As a result, when we’re starting to look at how authoritarianism works among these non-white ethnic groups, we would expect them to work better with the party that they belong to rather than the party they don’t belong to.

**Chris Martin:** So when it comes to religiosity and this is related to the issue of race here, I know that African-Americans tend on average to be a little more religiously conservative.

**Julie Wronski:** Correct.

**Chris Martin:** Do you think that’s partly a factor too? Because I know there’s some work in social psychology saying that some people — well, traditionally religious people tend to believe more in a fearful God than a merciful God. So there is more of a hierarchical relationship between God and humans in that theological universe.

So do you think that’s an authority relationship that is found at the personal level, if you’re socialized to be — to think of that authority relationship at the religious level?

**Julie Wronski:** Most definitely and I would say that these are all kind of correlated together. So a lot of these earlier work on authoritarianism tried to figure out, “Well, what are the life choices or what are the environmental factors that relate to authoritarianism?” and typically what has been found with authoritarianism is that they — people who score high in authoritarianism tend to be very much more religious and tend on average to have lower amounts of education.

So I’m not saying that these things are causally related to one another. But saying if someone happens to have these perceptions of obedience and submission to hierarchical authority, they also tend to have less education and they also tend to have more religiosity.

So if we think about the case of African-Americans, if we look at a lot of the data, especially say American national election studies, on average, African-Americans do tend to be more
authoritarian than whites and this is across multiple data sets since authoritarianism has been regularly measured.

So with that said, I would definitely agree religion and education are factors. But they’re all maybe related to the underlying either psychological experience or the underlying personal socialization experience. As you said yourself, the churchgoing experience and the fearful God experience. They might be all tied in together.

**Chris Martin:** When you’re talking about this older literature, are you talking about work from Europe in the 1940s and 1950s?

**Julie Wronski:** So I’m actually talking about work by Bob Altemeyer from the 1980s and he uses a different version of authoritarianism that I do. But he really set out to figure out what causes this trait to emerge and he looked at college students and he looked at people at different age points. A lot of his work from the 1980s is kind of what set the stage for us to understand that OK, things like education and religion matter. Then other work, particularly the work by Karen Stenner in the mid-2000s, really expounded upon this and further teased apart sort of these underlying correlates that we would expect to see when we find someone who was high in authoritarianism.

**Chris Martin:** This is a good point to talk about, measuring authoritarianism. Tell me about how you measured it and what we know about this measurement.

**Julie Wronski:** Sure. So the way I measure authoritarianism, which is very consistent with how most political scientists and political scientists studying American politics do it, is we ask people about raising their children. We ask people to start thinking about traits that they think are important for a child to have. Maybe it’s their own child or maybe it’s children in society in general.

In these survey items, as we ask people to think about traits that are important for children to have, usually the way this is set up, say in a survey like the ANES, we would give respondents a dichotomous choice. We would present two traits and ask someone to pick which one of those two traits would be the most important for a child to have.

So these pairs of traits would include things like good manners versus independence, obedience versus self-reliance and being considerate versus well-behaved. So we would ask them four pairs of traits. People would respond with which trait they think is more important for a child to have and from there, we create an additive scale that measures the extent to which people are preferring these more obedient, well-mannered, structured traits in children versus preferring the more self-reliant, independent, free-thinking traits. That’s what I’ve used in my paper and in many of the studies that looked at the 2016 election and looking at support for Donald Trump also used this measure.

**Chris Martin:** Would it be fair to say that among political scientists, that’s now the norm?
Julie Wronski: I would definitely say among American politics scholars, that is the norm. I think within – at least in some of the European and Australian, New Zealand scholars, there is still a little bit of reliance on Altemeyer’s old right-brained authoritarianism scale.

But among the American politic scholars, I think we are mostly on the same page of using these child-rearing traits.

Chris Martin: I know that in social psychology at the moment, people like Jarett Crawford are trying to disentangle right-wing authoritarianism from social dominance orientations.

Julie Wronski: Correct.

Chris Martin: So they typically use the older right-wing authoritarian scale and some of the interesting work there is that right-wing authoritarians, when you separate things that way, they’re more interested in suppressing people who are weird or deviant and disobey norms whereas people who are high in social dominance orientation tend to be upset when people who are lower in the hierarchy rise in the hierarchy. That’s an interesting contrast. But I know that does not use the child-rearing measure.

Julie Wronski: Correct. So the right-wing authoritarianism measure gets three constructs. It gets submission, aggression and a conventionalism and with the child-rearing, while it correlates highly with the RWA scale as a whole, these child-rearing questions are really getting at the submission aspects of authoritarianism.

So to what extent are you going to submit to the norms of the authority? To what extent are you going to submit to what your society is telling you to do? So it makes sense that we would see the issues with backlash against deviance because fundamentally that’s what authoritarianism is. It’s about conforming and submitting to what the group or what your society is telling you to do and when you realize that there’s some – when threatening this norm or threatening the stability of the structure, then you’re going to start lashing out whereas SDO is thinking about the structure and basically saying, “Well, where should people be in terms of equality versus hierarchy?” and just a general preference for saying, “Yes, our society should have a hierarchical structure versus it shouldn’t,” and then the downstream political ramifications of that preference.

Chris Martin: And there’s a moderate correlation between those two and that partly explains why they tend to politically form a coalition of conservatives.

Julie Wronski: Yes. Well, and especially if you think about a coalition of conservatives wanting to both preserve traditional norms of a society and when those norms of society are hierarchically-based. What I would – well, and what I would argue with authoritarianism, the structure of the group might not necessarily matter or the content of the group might not necessarily matter.

What’s important about authoritarianism is the obedience and the submission. This is an interesting point where we see how authoritarianism works in places like Eastern Europe. So what’s interesting is those higher in authoritarianism in places like the former Soviet Union and
its breakaway countries is that people higher in authoritarianism actually are more preferable for
communist economic structures because for them, what is the traditional social norm of the
group is the old structures of the USSR; whereas people who are lower in authoritarianism in
these Eastern European countries were more comfortable with say capitalist policies.

But in a place like the US or Western Europe, the opposite is true. Those who are higher in
authoritarianism tend to pick up the economic preferences of the right. They tend to pick up the
economic preferences of the group that they belong to or the group that they know is structuring
their norms.

So with authoritarianism, it’s really about the group you’re submitting to, not necessarily
because that group has a hierarchy whereas SDO really is about the group having a hierarchy.

Chris Martin: So that speaks to the fact that you really need to know a country’s political
history before you start working on this issue.

Julie Wronski: Exactly. Yeah. You need to understand what are the norms and what should
people be obedient towards. But it also – coming back to my work, it also brings up the
possibility to see authoritarianism work among Democratic Party or among parties on the left, to
the extent that the Democratic Party does have a different set of norms and a different set of
preferences.

If people are still equally committed to that group, they should be defending those norms and
practices.

Chris Martin: Well, looking at primaries, do you think we’re going to see this result again with
two democratic candidates? That hasn’t happened recently in the past. But more importantly
going forward, are we going to see it again in the future?

Julie Wronski: So what I find in the paper is that among people who voted in the democratic
primary, those higher in authoritarianism tended to vote for Hillary Clinton. All those lower in
authoritarianism tended to vote for Bernie Sanders and with this consistent result, there’s a
couple of questions.

So first, what caused this? Is this something idiosyncratic about these two candidates? If you
think about authoritarianism as obedience to the norms and the system as it has been, well,
Hillary Clinton really embodies the brand of the Democratic Party and the history of the
Democratic Party over the past 30 years.

She is the establishment. She is the norm whereas Bernie Sanders comes in and he’s still –
independent in congress. He comes in – he’s a democratic socialist and he really is just quickly
adopting the – democratic label as needed for this primary campaign.

So we just have two candidates who really, for their own personal reasons, kind of tap into on
one hand the establishment traditionalism on one hand versus this unorthodox newcomer. Very
far left, talking about economic inequality position and the question is, number one, “Would the Democratic Party have two candidates that are different again?”

If that’s the case, that would be a prime way to start looking at how authoritarianism works on the left. Is it possible that we found these results because Bernie Sanders and Hillary Clinton are so unique or did we find this result because there really is something going on with democrats where there might be some underlying intraparty divisions between establishment norms versus an unorthodox, more progressive agenda?

Both myself and my co-authors, we’re hoping that our papers spur a lot of these questions and conversations and we really hope that future research goes down this path. I know that we’re interested in seeing how 2020 will start shaking out in terms of who the democrats start fielding and we also know that in 2018, we’ve had a few congressional primaries that picked establishment candidates versus non-traditional democratic candidates. So it’s an open question. But I think it’s a very interesting question.

**Chris Martin:** Yeah. I think when you look back, there’s definitely this wing of the political left that’s substantially lower on authoritarianism than the rest. In the 2000 election, you can see them voting for Nader and in the early 2010s, you can see them in the Occupy Wall Street movement. Some of those people may not have voted democratic. They may have either stood out the election or voted for the Green Party and I think you saw them moving to Bernie Sanders in 2016 and they may again move away and vote Green Party.

**Julie Wronski:** It’s also in past elections. The Democratic Party hasn’t really put out that difference of candidates on this dimension. So if you go back to 2008, if you think about Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton, they’re both seen as somewhat establishment. They’re following the traditional path in terms of the policies and the way they talk about governing.

They’re all pretty much your standard democrat establishment. There’s nothing that’s really distinct in the same way that Bernie Sanders was a very distinct choice than Hillary Clinton.

**Chris Martin:** Right. If I recall correctly, I think Hillary’s and Obama’s positions in 2008 were about 97 percent identical.

**Julie Wronski:** I think so and I know at least – and then from the voter’s perspective in terms of say ideological placement of the candidates, they’re fairly similar as well.

**Chris Martin:** So why do you think this paper is relevant to people outside political science, either in other social sciences or just in the public?

**Julie Wronski:** So I will start with why it would be relevant to say other academics other than political scientists. So I know especially within social psychology, there’s a lot of interest and even – I think probably going back to the 1960s or 1970s, thinking about, “Well, how can authoritarianism work on the left?” There’s a reason why Altemeyer’s scale is called “Right-Wing Authoritarianism”.
So for people who are thinking about how does authoritarianism and this kind of obedient conformity traits work on the left, this might provide an avenue to start thinking about that. This paper might suggest that OK, there are ways that authoritarians can exert their own preferences and their own dispositional traits on the left and it’s important when we see this say on the left side party, especially when there’s internal divisions in party.

So for all of the scholars who have always been curious about trying to identify left-wing authoritarianism, this might provide an avenue to start thinking about how to strategically tap into that or starting to think about how authoritarianism could work on the left. Where authoritarianism might not necessarily be completely about traditional social conservative issue preferences. It could simply be a conformity to establishment norms that have been on the left side of the aisle.

Then for a non-political science say practitioner or journalist, journalism audience, I think this paper is extremely important for anyone who is thinking about the future of the Democratic Party and as the Democratic Party has to start thinking about which candidates to field in 2020. I think this paper is an important lesson of how 2016 worked and how when you have two different candidates that divide people across fundamental psychological traits, you don’t actually general a consensus behind your party’s candidates.

So I think this is an important lesson for people who are thinking about the Democratic Party and their choice of candidates and saying that you really need to think about authoritarianism and you really need to think about the ways in which members of your own party can be fundamentally divided between the candidates you choose to field.

So if democrats are thinking about success in 2020, they need to think about a candidate that might unite their members over the authoritarian dimension rather than divide their members over the authoritarian dimension.

**Chris Martin:** So before we wrap up, you mentioned Karen Stenner and Robert Altemeyer as scholars from earlier decades. As far as people doing research on authoritarianism right now, are there any scholars whose work you would recommend?

**Julie Wronski:** So I know that Marc Hetherington, he had a book come out in 2009 with Jonathan Weiler about authoritarian – American authoritarian polarization. It’s an excellent book and I know he and Weiler are coming out with a new book next month called *Prius or Pickup*, which again uses the four child-rearing questions and then uses those to explain the psychology behind American polarization and politics more currently. So that would be an excellent place for people to think about authoritarianism, especially in a non-academic practical way.

I also know that people like Stanley Feldman and Christopher Federico are also doing some excellent work thinking about authoritarianism in the context of the 21st century and how authoritarianism is structured vote choice and I believe they’re trying to move away from just looking at whites-only to looking at how does authoritarianism work across all ethnic and racial groups in America. I know that they have some work in papers and possibly a book manuscript in the works for some time in the future.
Chris Martin: Well, thank you for joining us on the show today. It has been great having you and good luck with this research.

Julie Wronski: Great. Thank you so much Chris. Thank you for having me.

[Music]

Chris Martin: You can follow Julie on Twitter at @julie_wronski. Her last name is spelled W-R-O-N-S-K-I. Her new paper again is titled A Tale of Two Democrats: How Authoritarianism Divides the Democratic Party. She shares first authorship with Alexa Bankert at the University of Georgia. The other authors on the paper are Karyn Amira from the College of Charleston, April A. Johnson from Kennesaw State University and Lindsey C. Levitan from Shepherd University. You can find links to the paper and to some of the books that Julie mentioned in the show notes for today’s episode.

My next guest is Charlotta Stern, a sociologist who has questioned the conventional wisdom about gender in both sociology and gender studies. Charlotta was one of the first people to join Heterodox Academy. She’s currently a research fellow at the Swedish Institute for Social Research.

If you enjoyed this podcast, please leave us a review on iTunes. It helps other people find out about the show. Thanks for listening.

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