

Authoritarian Values, Political Hostility, and Autocratization: How Polarization Mobilizes Illiberal Citizens

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ABSTRACT

Political polarization is regarded as one of the main drivers of democratic backsliding during the current wave of autocratization. Previous research has shown that it paves the way for the breakdown of civilized, democratic debate and for the electoral success of authoritarian leaders. In this paper, we show that such an environment of political hostility further contributes to the process of autocratization by mobilizing authoritarian citizens. In particular, we use a multilevel model with comparative (22 countries), longitudinal data (2004-2018) from the European Social Survey to demonstrate that authoritarian individuals, who are mostly disaffected under ordinary times, become more engaged as political animosity grows. Our analysis extends to a sample of countries representative of the whole European continent, including the west, which is rarely included in studies of democratic backsliding. Our findings resonate with the literature about “pernicious polarization” and the incentives faced by political agents under the circumstances of political hostility. Broadly, it points to the possibility of a regressive process of “endogenous autocratization”.

Keywords: polarization, autocratization, authoritarian values

Introduction

Polarization and the authoritarian behaviour of political elites have been identified as the key avenues through which democracies nowadays derail and ultimately die (Bermeo 2016, Levitsky & Ziblatt 2018). Illiberal leaders exploit the division that such an environment generates in society and manage to eviscerate democratic norms and institutions without being held accountable (Svolik 2019, 2020). In Europe, Hungary and Poland are usually cited as quintessential examples of the almost

inevitable process of democratic backsliding that sets in once “severe” or “pernicious” polarization (McCoy et al. 2018, 2019) has become entrenched.

Crucially, studies at the intersection between polarization and autocratization assume that the incentives faced by the different political agents experience a dramatic change whenever polarization enters the stage: in particular, voters are faced with “a choice between democratic values and partisan interests”, whilst incumbents are presented with the “structural opportunity to subvert democracy [...] and get away with it” (Svolik 2020).

Similarly, we contend that as polarization and, more generally, political hostility intensifies, the political behaviour of authoritarian citizens also changes. Our most relevant finding is that *the more the political elite departs from fundamental democratic principles, i.e., the more it attacks the independence of the judiciary, resorts to hate speech to demonise its adversaries, and contributes to a suffocating environment of polarization, the more politically engaged authoritarian individuals become.*

Using European Social Survey (ESS) and Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) data we build a multilevel model that tests the attitudes of 43,312 individuals across 22 European countries and a large time span, and demonstrate that political hostility precisely mobilizes that sector of the population which is less willing to accept the basic tenets of liberal democracy. Therefore, some members of the political elite will under certain circumstances be presented with the incentive to further feed social tensions and divisions (Somer et al. 2021). We believe that this phenomenon of “endogenous autocratization” is partially responsible for the decline of democracy in several European countries.

The rest of the paper is structured as follows: the next section reviews the literature on the current wave of democratic backsliding also known as “autocratization”, as well as the concepts of polarization and authoritarian values. We then describe our data and methods and formulate our hypotheses. In the third section, the results of the model are presented and a final section discusses the implications of our findings and concludes.

Review of the literature

Polarization and autocratization

After some initial hesitation, the scholarly literature now accepts that the world is undergoing a “third wave of autocratization” (Lührmann & Lindberg 2019). Across the globe, authoritarian leaders are rising to power and once in government they succeed in gradually dismantling liberal checks and balances (Bermeo 2016, Mechkova et al. 2017, Tomini 2018, Haggard & Kaufman 2021). Hungary and Poland are frequently described as paradigmatic examples of this “backsliding” process, yet the risk of autocratization is severely understudied in the rest of the continent, especially in Western Europe.

Such neglect is startling, especially if one compares it to the rich literature on the “crisis” of democracy in advanced capitalist societies. According to these accounts, the great social and economic transformations that began in the 70s and which are still taking place today – digitalization, the relative decline of the working class, the expansion of education, the incorporation of women to the labour market, the change of gender roles, etc. – has left us with a more unstable and perhaps overwhelmed democratic system (Kitschelt 1999, Beramendi et al. 2015). Among the many symptoms of this “democratic exhaustion”, such as the cartelization (Katz & Mair 2018) and subsequent breakdown of traditional party systems and the appearance of a new cultural cleavage (Hooghe & Marks 2018, Ford & Jennings 2020); the rise of a populist, nativist and far-right movement (Mudde 2016, Golder 2016, Eatwell & Goodwin 2018, Bernhard & Kriesi 2019); the erosion of the social democratic support base (Rueda 2005, Abou-Chadi & Hix 2021); the proliferation of “anti-system” (Hopkin 2020), “anti-establishment” (Casal Bértoa & Rama 2021), and “challenger” (de Vries & Hobolt 2020) parties, etc., polarization and a general environment of political hostility stand out as the major immediate challenges to democracy.

Pernicious polarization is the “process whereby the normal multiplicity of differences in a society increasingly align along a single dimension, cross-cutting differences become instead reinforcing, and people increasingly perceive and describe politics and society in terms of “Us” versus “Them”” (McCoy et al. 2018). Accounts of pernicious polarization differ from the twin concept of “affective polarization” in that the latter relies on survey questions to gauge cross-partisan antagonism (Gidron et al. 2019, Iyengar et al. 2019, Wagner 2021), whereas the former refers more broadly to the context in which political differences transcend the public sphere and become a matter of personal enmity. In our view, pernicious polarization is one symptom of a more general environment of political hostility. Politics becomes “hostile” when incumbents question and attack the independence of the judiciary system; when they demonise their political rivals and turn them into enemies, criminalising and delegitimising them through hate speech; and when this animosity trickles down to the social level and interpersonal relationships get poisoned with the venom of polarization. Once political hostility sets in, everyday politics turns into a civil strife in which calm, democratic debate is hijacked by an agonistic rhetoric pointing to ubiquitous existential threats.

Authoritarian values and social backlash

There is a heated debate about whether or not Europeans have in the last years grown authoritarian or at least disenchanted with the democratic model. In the article that ushered the discussion, Foa and Mounk claimed to have found evidence that “[c]itizens in a number of supposedly consolidated democracies [...] have not only become more critical of their political leaders [...] but] have also become more cynical about the value of democracy as a political system, less hopeful that anything they do might influence public policy, and *more willing to express support for*

authoritarian alternatives” (2016: 7, italics mine). According to them, citizens are growing “disconnected” from the idea of liberal government and democracy is therefore “deconsolidating” (Foa & Mounk 2017).

Their account triggered a fair amount of criticism, however, after other scholars arrived at different results running more refined analyses of the same data. Voeten (2017), for instance, concluded that “there is simply no evidence [...] that the public in consolidated democracies is turning away from democracy”, while Alexander and Welzel (2017) called the deconsolidation theory a “myth”. Similarly, Wuttke et al. (2020) asserted that “[t]he most consistent finding throughout the entire sample of advanced European democracies indicates strong and continuing support for the democratic system of government” and, using ESS data, Zilinsky (2020) reported growing levels of satisfaction with democracy across Europe.

The deconsolidation theory has also received pushback from “culturalist” researchers, who find it methodologically unsound. Kirsch and Welzel (2018), for instance, stress that direct questions of support for democracy are inadequate, because they fail to capture the authoritarian inclinations of many respondents. If one instead analyses the presence of “emancipative values”, they contend, the picture is far less bleak. Thus, even if consolidated democracies are experiencing a “cultural backlash”, the populist revolt is ultimately bound to dilute, since it originates in a conservative, nativist sector of the population that has been continuously shrinking in the last decades (Alexander & Welzel 2017, Norris & Inglehart 2019, Welzel 2021).

Though we are more sceptical about the immediate prospects of democratic institutions than culturalist authors, we share their focus on values rather than direct measurements of support for democracy. In particular, we follow the literature on the “authoritarian personality” (Adorno et al. 1950) and right-wing authoritarianism or RWA (Altemeyer 1981). We believe that an environment of political hostility has an impact on the political behaviour of authoritarian citizens, *i.e.*, on those individuals scoring high in three particular personality traits: submission, aggression, and conventionalism (Bizumic & Duckitt 2018). We thus take on Wuttke et al.’s (2020) suggestion that “future research should examine whether the values, norms and attitudes of self-proclaimed democrats are compatible with” liberal democracy, and investigate to what extent authoritarian citizens – who tend to be more politically disaffected than their non-authoritarian counterparts – become more engaged as the public arena comes to resemble more closely the kind of combative, aggressive politics they endorse.

Research design

Hypotheses

H1: Overall in Europe, authoritarian values and political disaffection are positively correlated. Authoritarian citizens tend to be more disaffected than non-authoritarian ones.

H2: The relationship between authoritarian values and political disaffection varies significantly across countries. In some countries there is a strong association and in others it is weak.

H3: The level of political hostility moderates the relationship between authoritarian values and political disaffection. In particular, the greater the level of political hostility the weaker the relationship between authoritarianism and disaffection will be.

H4: There is a positive relationship between a lower disaffection of authoritarian citizens and the process of autocratization. The more engaged authoritarians are the more prone to democratic backsliding a country will be.

Data sample and sources

We build a comprehensive database merging individual survey responses from 8 waves of the European Social Survey (2004-2018) with a wide range of country-level variables from different sources. The integrated file contains 43,312 individual interviews from 22 European democracies (Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Switzerland, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Germany, Denmark, Spain, Finland, France, United Kingdom, Hungary, Ireland, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Sweden, Slovenia, and Slovakia).¹ Our sample is much more far-reaching than most studies on autocratization in Europe, which tend to focus on the central and eastern region. We broaden our scope because we are looking for a common explanation of authoritarian mobilization across the continent and upon finding it, we hope to be in a position to evaluate the relative risk of autocratization in mature democracies, too.

Our country-level variables capture an array of macroeconomic and institutional factors. The former include (i) per capita GDP with year 2008 as a baseline (World Bank), (ii) unemployment rate (World Bank), and (iii) the Gini coefficient for wealth inequality (World Bank). The latter, (iv) an index of electoral disproportionality, defined as “the degree of disproportionality produced between the shares of votes and the shares of seats gained by each competing party” (Casal Bértoa 2021), (v) an index of perceived corruption combining “the information of 20 different surveys and more than

¹ Nowadays, the democratic status of both Hungary and Poland is indeed dubious.

80 different survey questions” extracted from the Quality of Government (QoG) dataset (Teorell et al. 2021), and (v) an index of political hostility based on V-Dem’s expert evaluations about a) attacks on judicial independence, b) political hate speech, and c) political polarization (Coppedge et al. 2021).²

Method

We build a multilevel model to test out hypotheses. The use of multilevel models – also called hierarchical linear models – is recommended whenever we are dealing with databases that have a nested structure, *i.e.*, when the individual observations of the sample are clustered at a higher-level group and are therefore not independent. Failing to take into account the hierarchical nature of the data results in “estimates of the standard errors of conventional statistical tests [which] are much too small, and [...] in many spuriously ‘significant’ results” (Hox & van der Schoot 2002: 4).³

Dependent variable

Our outcome variable measures authoritarian values, which is an index composed of four different questions aiming to gauge *intolerance* (xenophobia and homophobia), *obedience*, and the preference for a *strong government*. We thus try to replicate the categories that make up the RWA scale – aggression, submission, and conventionalism (Altemeyer 1981) – in order to appropriately capture those values which are seen as incompatible with a liberal and democratic form of politics. We construct our index from the following questions included in the ESS:

· Intolerance:

(i) “Would you say that your country’s cultural life is generally undermined or enriched by people coming to live here from other countries?”

(ii) “Please tell me to what extent you agree or disagree with the statement ‘gay men and lesbians should be allowed to live their own life as they wish’”

· Obedience:

(iii) “Please listen to the description and tell me how much each person is or is not like you: ‘He believes that people should do what they’re told. He thinks people should follow rules at all times, even when no-one is watching’”

² The exact wording of the items is as follows: *Attacks on the judiciary*: “How often did the government attack the judiciary’s integrity in public?”. *Political hate speech*: “How often do major political parties use hate speech as part of their rhetoric?”. *Political polarization*: “Is society polarized into antagonistic, political camps?”.

³ A full specification of the model is given in the Annex.

- Preference for a strong government:

(iv) “Please listen to the description and tell me how much each person is or is not like you: ‘It is important to him that government ensures safety against all threats. He wants the state to be strong so it can defend its citizens’”

Independent variables

The hypotheses we formulate rely on two explanatory variables: one at the individual and the other at the country level. Our individual level variable is an index of *political disaffection*. Following Torcal and Montero, we see disaffection as “a certain estrangement or detachment from politics and the public sphere, as well as a critical evaluation of their core political institutions, their representatives, and the democratic political process” (2006: 5) and thus as conceptually different from both political discontent and a lack of democratic support. There is no conventional operationalization of the concept of disaffection, but rather different items are used depending on the project’s context and goals (cfr. Bakker et al. 2020), so we keep ours as encompassing as possible. In particular, our index tries to capture a mix of *political mistrust* and *lack of interest in politics* through the following questions:

(i) “Please tell me on a score of 0-10 how much you personally trust your country’s parliament, politicians and political parties?”

(ii) “How interested would you say you are in politics? Very interested, quite interested, hardly interested or not at all interested?”

The resulting index measures individuals’ level of political disaffection on a 1-4 scale. A preliminary check shows that political disaffection is highly (and negatively) correlated with political participation, measured in terms of whether an individual voted in the last general election or not ($\rho = -0.274^{***}$), as well as with satisfaction with the way democracy works in one’s country ($\rho = -0.383^{***}$), which is a question known to be determined by individual evaluations of political performance (Linde and Ekman 2003).⁴

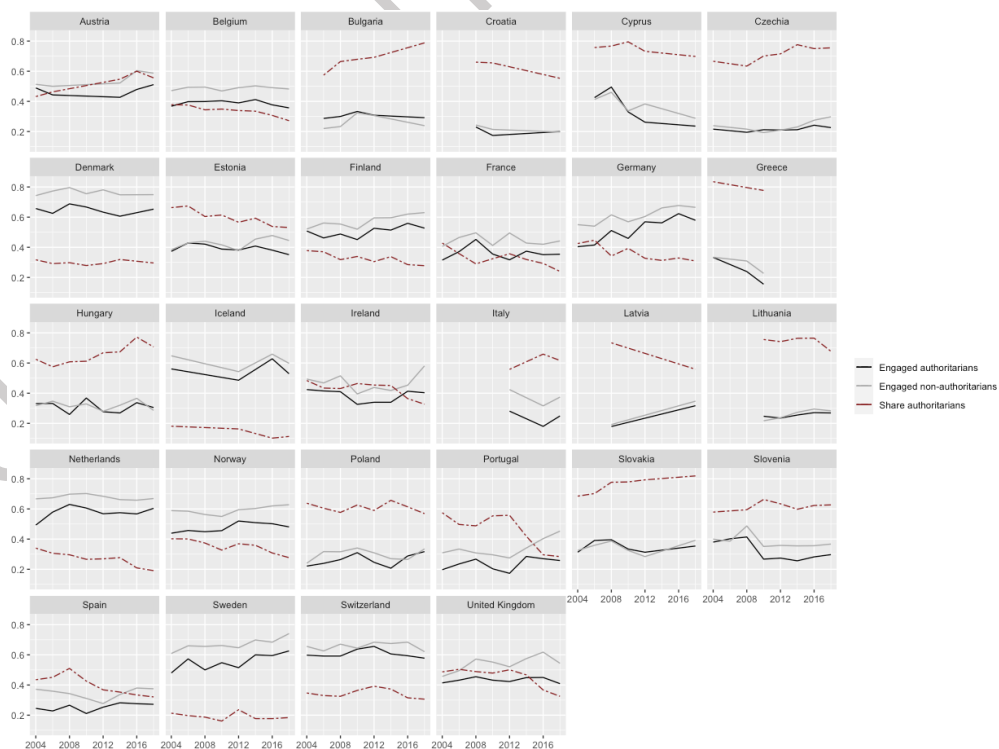
⁴ Precisely for this reason, we have decided to exclude the question on satisfaction with democracy from our disaffection index. Still, as a robustness check, we run a bivariate correlation with an index that does include it and both indexes turn out to be strongly associated ($\rho = 0.853^{***}$).

Our country level predictor is meant to measure the level of *political hostility*. Building on accounts of “pernicious polarization” (McCoy et al. 2018, 2019) but looking beyond *just* polarization, what we create is an index of symptoms pointing to the deterioration of a civilized, democratic discussion. Thus, our political hostility index bears no necessary connexion to “affective polarization” – *i.e.*, of cross-partisan antagonism (Gidron et al. 2019, Iyengar et al. 2019, Wagner 2021) – but the latter can probably operate as a proximate cause of the former.

Results

Descriptive evidence to contrast our hypotheses can be found in Fig. 1. The graphs show three different trends across 24 European countries: the share of authoritarian citizens, the share of engaged non-authoritarians, and the share of engaged authoritarians.⁵ A first approximation seems to corroborate the optimistic outlook derived from modernization theory: in most European countries the share of authoritarian citizens has been declining for the last 15 years. Overall, Europeans are becoming more tolerant towards immigrants and LGBT individuals, they endorse more self-expressive ideals and are not calling for a strong government to step in. The drop is particularly noticeable in the Iberian Peninsula, but even across Nordic countries low levels of authoritarianism have further declined in the last years.

Fig. 1 – Trends in authoritarianism and disaffection in Europe, 2004-2018



Source: Own elaboration based on ESS data.

⁵ “Engaged” and “non-authoritarian” refer to those individuals scoring in the lower half of, respectively, the disaffection index and the authoritarian index.

The clear exception to this trend is Central and Eastern Europe (CEE). In Bulgaria, Czechia, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia, Slovenia, but also Austria, authoritarian values are on the rise.⁶ Given these results, it is probably no surprise that democratic backsliding in Europe has been particularly strong in the CEE region. Still, what is more relevant for our argument is that in those countries where authoritarianism has grown, authoritarian citizens have also become more politically engaged. In fact, in some countries the traditional disaffection gap between authoritarians and non-authoritarians has narrowed so much as to virtually disappear. And thus, authoritarian citizens are more engaged than non-authoritarians in Hungary and Poland and the situation is very similar in Austria, Croatia, Bulgaria, Cyprus, Czechia, Latvia, Lithuania, Slovakia, and Slovenia.

Finally, though it could seem like the mobilization of authoritarian citizens is a phenomenon restricted to the CEE region, engagement among authoritarian citizens appears to have grown at a higher rate in such consolidated democracies like Denmark, Germany, the Netherlands, Spain during the financial crisis, and Sweden, as well. The implications of this trend are briefly discussed in the next section.

Next, we run our multilevel model to evaluate the exact effect of different variables on the individual authoritarianism score. Model 0 is a null model, which means that no predictors are included in it. The results from the null model allow us to calculate the intra-class correlation coefficient (ICC) to determine how much of the total variance in authoritarianism scores is due to the nested structure of the data, i.e., how much variance is produced by the fact that individuals belong to a larger organizational unit, such as their country. There is a common agreement that any percentage over 5% amounts to a significant clustering of the data and justifies the use of multilevel models. In our case, the ICC is 18.4%, which means that country differences are responsible for almost 20% of the variance in individual authoritarianism scores.

The results from Model 1a confirm *H1*, since being politically disaffected is positively and significantly correlated with holding authoritarian values (0.078***), even when controlling for other individual variables, such as satisfaction with the economy, age, education, income, ideology, geographical background, and gender. We can calculate the R² score for these individual variables simply by looking at how much the residual drops from Model 0 to Model 1a: in our case, the individual variables explain 12.5% of the variance in authoritarianism scores.

⁶ Admittedly, the image in Poland is rather stable, but there are good reasons to include it in this second group of countries.

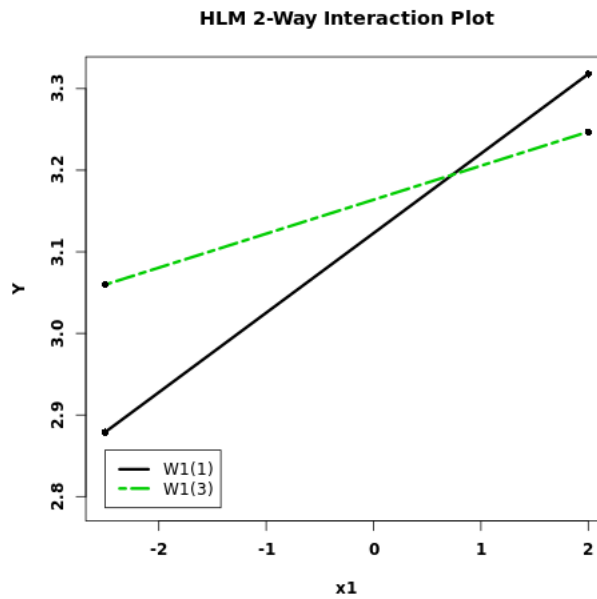
Dependent variable: <i>authoritarian</i>		Model 0	Model 1a	Model 1b	Model 2	Model 3
		Estimate (S. E.)	Estimate (S. E.)	Estimate (S. E.)	Estimate (S. E.)	Estimate (S. E.)
Individual-level variables						
Intercept		3.139*** (0.052)	3.120*** (0.053)	3.117*** (0.053)	3.144*** (0.026)	3.144*** (0.026)
<i>disaffected</i>		0.078*** (0.005)	0.078*** (0.005)	0.067*** (0.010)	0.066*** (0.011)	0.068*** (0.009)
<i>satisfaction</i>		-0.011*** (0.001)	-0.011*** (0.001)	-0.011*** (0.001)	-0.011*** (0.001)	-0.011*** (0.001)
<i>economy</i>		0.065*** (0.002)	0.065*** (0.002)	0.065*** (0.002)	0.066*** (0.002)	0.066*** (0.002)
<i>age</i>		-0.077*** (0.002)	-0.077*** (0.002)	-0.077*** (0.002)	-0.077*** (0.002)	-0.077*** (0.002)
<i>education</i>		-0.017*** (0.001)	-0.017*** (0.001)	-0.016*** (0.001)	-0.017*** (0.001)	-0.017*** (0.001)
<i>income</i>		0.045*** (0.001)	0.045*** (0.001)	0.045*** (0.001)	0.045*** (0.001)	0.045*** (0.001)
<i>ideology</i>		-0.072*** (0.005)	-0.072*** (0.005)	-0.072*** (0.005)	-0.072*** (0.005)	-0.072*** (0.005)
<i>gender</i>		-0.025*** (0.002)	-0.025*** (0.002)	-0.025*** (0.002)	-0.025*** (0.002)	-0.025*** (0.002)
<i>rural-urban</i>						
Country-level variables						
GDP (2008=100)					-0.692 (0.350)	-0.691 (0.351)
<i>unemployment</i>					-0.011 (0.011)	-0.011 (0.011)
<i>inequality</i>					0.013 (0.010)	0.013 (0.010)
<i>electoral disproportionality</i>					-0.003 (0.007)	-0.003 (0.007)
<i>corruption</i>					0.013*** (0.002)	0.013*** (0.002)
<i>political hostility</i>					0.215 (0.360)	0.209 (0.361)
Cross-level interaction						
<i>disaffected*political hostility</i>						-0.285** (0.090)
Residuals						
Intra-level residual		0.332*** (0.001)	0.291*** (0.002)	0.290*** (0.002)	0.290*** (0.002)	0.290*** (0.002)
Random intercept variance		0.075*** (0.020)	0.065** (0.019)	0.064** (0.019)	0.013** (0.004)	0.013** (0.004)
Random slope variance [disaffected]				0.002* (0.001)	0.002* (0.001)	0.001* (0.000)
-2 Log Likelihood						
		586469.348	70065.187	70014.637	69438.136	69429.654
ICC						
		0.184				0.046
R²						
			0.125		0.799	0.393
N = 43,312 individuals in 22 countries						
*** = $p < .001$, ** = $p < .005$, * = $p < .05$						

In Model 1b the slopes for the disaffection regression lines are allowed to randomly vary across countries in order to test whether the correlation between authoritarianism and disaffection stays constant throughout Europe. Note that our hypothesis is exactly the contrary, namely that the association between the two variables will be strong in some countries and weak in others. According to the results, the residual for the random slope variance is indeed statistically significant, which means that the relationship between authoritarianism and disaffection varies across countries, and so *H2* is also confirmed. Crucially, this is an indication that there may be contextual factors at the country level responsible for the varying slopes, so the last step is to look for the common, structural denominator accounting for such variability.

Before that, Model 2 introduces variables with fixed effects at the country level. Interestingly, none of the macroeconomic variables are significantly correlated with holding authoritarian values, and only one of the political variables – the perceived level of corruption – has a significant even if weak correlation (0.013***). Since we are working with longitudinal data with 8 different waves from the ESS (2004-2018), we have run a parallel model in which we also control for the time variable, but its inclusion does not seem to improve the results. Our explanatory variable at the country level – political hostility – does not show a significant effect either, but its big, positive coefficient gives further credence to the expectation that authoritarian leaders will proliferate wherever there is an authoritarian culture. After controlling for structural factors, 79.9% the variance in the countries' means in authoritarian values is explained, which suggests that our model does a good job at identifying cross-country differences in mean authoritarian scores.

Finally, as stated in *H3*, we expect there to be a country level variable partially responsible for the differing correlations between authoritarianism and disaffection across countries. In particular, we hypothesized that the more hostile the political environment in a given country – i.e., the more the elite attacks the judiciary and its political rivals and the more polarized society is – the weaker the relationship between authoritarian values and disaffection will be. Model 3 includes an interaction term between authoritarian values and political hostility, which turns out to be statistically significant and negative, meaning that the more authoritarian the elite the weaker the relationship between our Level 1 variables. *H3* is thus confirmed: political hostility moderates the association between disaffection and authoritarianism. In addition to that, the interaction term explains 37.4% of the variance between slopes, which is quite a large share.

Fig. 2 – Regression slope for disaffection and authoritarianism under a scenario of low political hostility (W1(1)) and a scenario of high political hostility (W1(3))



Source: Own elaboration.

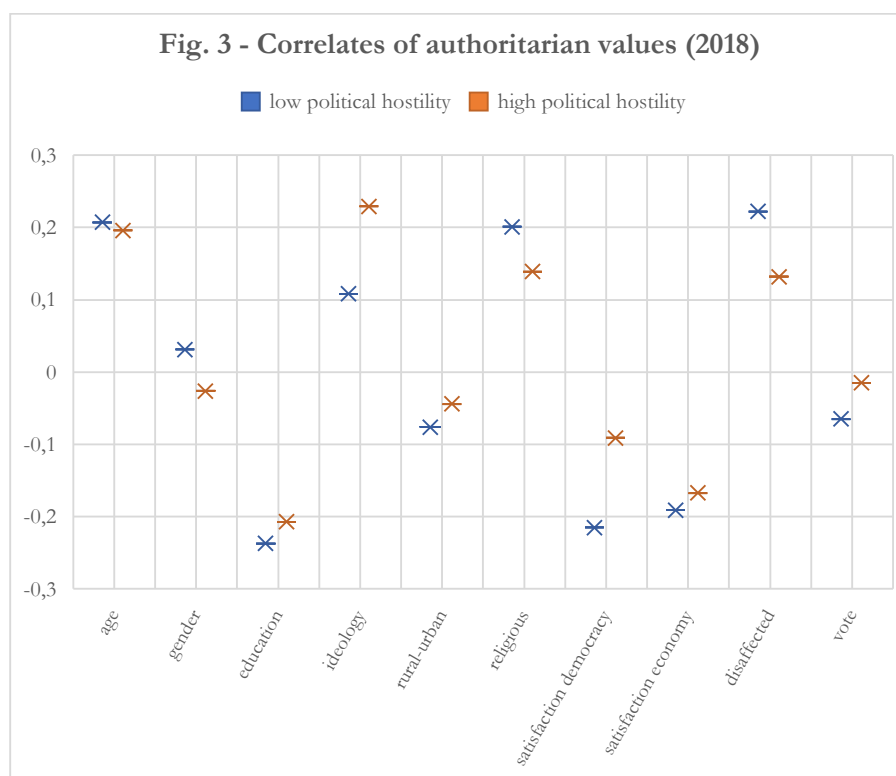
Just like in multivariate regressions, there is a risk of adding too many variables to the model in search for the highest reduction in explained variance. Therefore, in order to correctly interpret the model's goodness of fit, we have to look at the -2 Log Likelihood score, which is an estimate of the model's deviance. In our case, every new iteration significantly reduces the -2 Log Likelihood score and the introduction of the interaction term in Model 3 generates the best-fitting model of all five. More evidence of our model's fitness is given by the ICC, which drops to just 4.6% (a 75% reduction) after including individual and country level variables and the interaction effect.

Discussion

Our main argument is that authoritarian voters become more engaged as the political environment gets more and more hostile. The statistical model has proved our contention essentially right, but it is quite a stretch to conclude from here that such greater mobilization must constitute an immediate threat to democracy. Therefore, in this section we provide further evidence pointing to a correlation between authoritarian engagement at the *social* level and autocratization at the *institutional*.

A necessary condition for authoritarian engagement to precipitate democratic backsliding is that authoritarian citizens not only be less disaffected than in ordinary times, but that they also tend to participate more in politics. Indeed, politization is a first step towards participation and, even though we know that disaffection is negatively correlated with participation, a drop in the former

variable does not automatically translate into a rise in the latter. To see if authoritarian voters have in fact become more participative in those countries where political hostility has risen, we run a set of bivariate correlations under two different scenarios: one in which political hostility is low and another where it is high. In order to keep our results as timely as possible we only include the data from the latest ESS round, which was conducted in 2018.



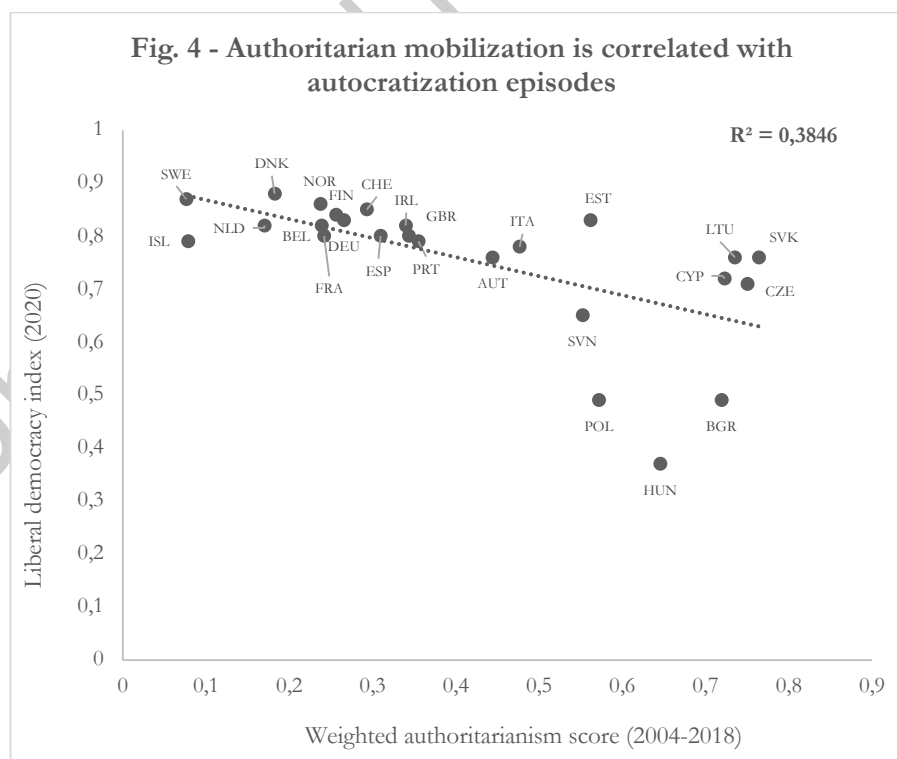
Source: Own elaboration based on ESS and V-Dem data.

At first glance, authoritarian citizens in both low and high political hostility countries share many sociodemographic traits: they tend to be old, conservative, rural men with a low education level. This is the same profile that Norris and Inglehart (2019) attribute to the sector of the population driving the illiberal “cultural backlash” in countries like the United States, Hungary and Poland. According to our results, political hostility, if anything, attenuates the salience of such traits,⁷ which might imply that as political hostility rises authoritarian citizens are drawn from more heterogeneous social backgrounds.

⁷ Although the exacerbation of a masculine gender and of a right-wing ideology leave us with a rather mixed picture.

When it comes to political attitudes, however, authoritarian individuals under the high political hostility scenario clearly differ from their counterparts in low political hostility countries. In fact, the correlation coefficient for the vote variable under high political hostility is close to zero and statistically insignificant, which means that authoritarian citizens in such countries are just as likely to participate in politics as the rest of the population. This is a crucial finding, since authoritarian vote is known to be to a great extent absorbed by far-right parties (Billiet & de Witte 1995, Todosijevic & Enyedi 2008, Cohen & Smith 2016) and many of their leaders to be potential autocrats (Lührmann et al. 2021).

Therefore, there are powerful reasons to believe that the greater authoritarian engagement produced by the environment of political hostility will *by itself* constitute one of the causes of institutional autocratization. At this point, we can only offer indicative evidence of this hypothesis and allow future studies to explore it in greater depth. In Figure 4, a scatterplot is shown that correlates a weighted score of mean authoritarian values by country during the 2004-2018 period with their liberal democracy index (V-Dem) in the year 2020. The weighted authoritarianism score incorporates both the total share of authoritarian citizens in the country population and their level of engagement relative to non-authoritarian citizens. So, countries scoring high on the weighted authoritarianism index will not only have a big proportion of authoritarian citizens, but they will also be as engaged or even more than non-authoritarian citizens.



Source: Own elaboration based on ESS and V-Dem data.

The results of the correlation are quite telling: the weighted authoritarianism score for the 2004-2018 period is a very good predictor of a country's liberal democracy level in the present. Authoritarian societies, *i.e.*, those where authoritarian values prevail in a large share of the population *and* where authoritarianism does not lead into greater disaffection, are indeed at much greater risk of backsliding into non-democratic regimes. Some Eastern European countries – Hungary, Poland, and Bulgaria – are already at such a stage, but this worrying trend is extending further west as well, especially into Austria.

In sum, in this paper we have showed that an environment of political hostility – *i.e.*, one in which incumbents and other political agents adopt an authoritarian behaviour and contribute to a degenerating spiral of pernicious polarization – reduces the sentiment of disaffection among authoritarian citizens: they trust more in their institutions, they have a greater interest in politics, they tend to vote more, and they are more satisfied with the system works. This might in turn produce the incentive for both challenger and mainstream parties to resort to illiberal, polarizing strategies in order to attract an otherwise disengaged electoral constituency. We have only tentatively explored the implications of this finding for the stability and durability of liberal democratic institutions, but our results are rather gloomy: a higher mobilization of authoritarian citizens is indeed correlated with processes of democratic backsliding. It is left for future research to identify the exact causal mechanism through which authoritarian values translate into an increased risk of democratic erosion, as well as to look for possible firewalls to stop what seems as an example of “endogenous autocratization”.

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