Psychological Mechanisms Underlying the Populist Threat to Democracy

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Authoritarian populism is spreading through the United States, Western and Eastern Europe, threatening long existing democracies. This is a response to social change and to the economic consequences of the 2008 recession. Donald Trump is riding the crest of this social movement and undermining American democracy in profoundly disturbing ways. His relentless use of fear, anger, lies, and intimidation places him very much in the mode of Adolph Hitler.

While it is important to document the damage that Trump is doing, it is equally vital to understand the psychological basis of his support. Trump core followers exhibit a constellation of traits and are influenced by specific psychological factors. Not all of Trump’s supporters are authoritarian. Understanding the full range of Trump supporters and what human needs Trump support fills, brings critical insight into the political power of demagoguery.

Populism Threatens Democracy

There are many definitions of populism, extending from positive to negative. Political philosophy currently centers on the work of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe wherein populism is seen as the essence of politics and a liberating force, by mobilizing groups excluded from power. The popular agency perspective reflects the way past populist movements in America tend to be treated by historians. Populism is seen as functional democracy built on the foundation of popular participation in politics (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017).
Folkloric Style Populism

Barry Eichengreen (2018, p. 1) views populism as “a political movement with anti-elite, authoritarian, and nativist tendencies”. This view meshes well with the folkloric style of politics used by leaders and or political parties to engage the masses to their cause. In the folkloric style,

populism alludes to amateurish and unprofessional political behavior that aims to maximize media attention and popular support. By disrespecting the dress code and language manners, populist actors are able to present themselves not only as different and novel, but also as courageous leaders who stand with ‘the people’ in opposition to “the elite”. (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017, p. 4)

The folkloric style completely characterizes Donald Trump from his ridiculously long ties to his characteristically outrageous language (Blow, 2019; Davis & Rogers, 2018). Over the three years of his presidency Donald Trump has normalized extreme behavior and rhetoric previously condemned by society. By sheer repetition he has normalized lying, (Urban, 2019), sexism (Baird, 2019), irrationality (Smith, 2019), disjointed language (Wehner, 2019), and most of all, corruption/abuse of power (Gerson, 2020).

Michael Massing calls Trump’s populism both odd and ever-changing, as well as challenging to analyze and explain. “It’s a strange mix of economic nationalism and cultural nativism, deregulatory zeal and protectionist impulses, common-man fanfare and plutocratic pomp, patriotic support for the military and isolationist antipathy to interventionism, inflammatory demagoguery, raucous rallies, unapologetic vulgarity, and racist inflections” (Massing, 2018a, 2018b, para. 19). Trump adds his own chaotic style to folkloric populism. Massing argues that journalists and educated “elites” have been overwhelmed with the complexities of Trumpian populism.

Populism and the Elite

The elite is a term that is central to populist discontent. What the term functionally represents to populists is power. Those who have power are the elite, which by definition is what populists do not have. Populists fume over their powerless victimhood.

Most populists not only detest the political establishment, but they also critique the economic elite, the cultural elite, and the media elite. All of these are portrayed as one homogeneous corrupt group that works against the “general will” of the people. (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017, p. 12)
**Populist Rage**

Populism as it appears to function in the current American political situation is largely premised on social grievance that is not being addressed by those in power. Part of that sense of grievance may stem from anger at those in power for protecting minorities. Steven Hahn (2019, p. 27) sees populism as encapsulating the “rage often found among white and native-born voters across Europe and parts of the Western Hemisphere, who regard themselves as victimized by established political institutions, the corrupt practices of politicians, and the influx of migrants from afar.” Currently, populism in both the United States, Great Britain, and Europe is often based on nativism and ethnocracy (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017). The pervasive sense of victimhood among populists, fuels potential violence. Populist irrational rage represents a direct threat to liberal democracy (Galston, 2018; Hahn, 2019; Levin, 2019; Mounk, 2018).

**Populist Nativism and Immigrant Dehumanization**

Donald Trump is clearly waging his 2020 presidential re-election bid as an appeal to the populist nativism and ethnocracy currently rampant in the United States. The power of the non-native trope remains the same and survives beyond any actual facts. His constant anti-immigrant rantings are dehumanizing toward immigrants (Davis, 2018). When you take away people’s humanity, fascism is rampant. Philip Zimbardo (2007) wrote The Lucifer Effect. Understanding How Good People Turn Evil. A key dynamic for inducing evil is to dehumanize the other, the one who is not part of your identity group. Dehumanization occurs in the context of situational influences of power, conformity, and obedience. Situational influences explain much of human behavior. Different situations bring out different behaviors. Behavior has a context. Dehumanization occurs in the context of social situations which give the individual power over others. If one’s identity group is behaving badly, the need for social acceptance provides a powerful incentive for conformity. Obedience to those in power is a vital part of the process.

**Economic Grievance vs. Economic Inequality in Populism**

Economic grievance is a major source driving populism, but income inequality is not the same as the psychological dynamic of economic grievance (Eichengreen, 2018; Hinsliff, 2019; Solt, 2015). Historically, populism is more likely to arise during times of major income inequality (Antonio, 2019; Eichengreen, 2018). However, if a sense of economic grievance is not present, income inequality by itself does not
produce populism. Economic grievance includes expectations for the future not just the impact of present circumstances. Economic grievance is about loss or anticipated loss or fear of possible loss (Eichengreen, 2018). It is about a powerful sense of insecurity and about being left behind.

Economic grievance isn’t necessarily about money, it is mostly psychological (Schneider, 2019). Income inequality that is perceived as a loss of social status produces the most dissatisfaction and therefore fosters a formidable sense of grievance. “Populist grievances, if left unaddressed, can descend into something worse” (Eichengreen, 2018, p. 9). This is how we got Donald Trump as president of the United States of America, despite the facts that he has no political experience, is largely a failed businessman, lives on inherited wealth, is morally corrupt, lies constantly, doesn’t read much, doesn’t listen at high-level briefings, is ignorant of geopolitics and geography, is a racist, is homophobic, encourages violence among his followers, and is a demagogue who threatens American democracy (Stevens, 2020; Blake, 2019; Chibbaro Jr., 2019; R. Cohen, 2019; Goldberg, 2019; Leonhardt, 2019; Ravani, 2019; Sarkis, 2018; Wilson, 2018; Wolff, 2018).

**The Politics of Resentment**

Katherine Cramer (2016) studied political perspectives in working class and lower middle class rural white people with regard to the Wisconsin election of right-wing conservative, Scott Walker for governor. She found that economic dispossession had created both economic and cultural insecurity. A pervasive sense of being overlooked and culturally disdained by the power establishment was evident for most rural voters. This resulted in a high level of resentment which was effectively exploited by conservative and right-wing political operatives in the Republican party. Cramer (2016) summarized the politics of resentment in an interview.

So the politics of resentment, then, involves political actors generating support by tapping into intergroup divides fueled by perceptions of distributive injustice. There are two main parts to this: the existence of perspectives of resentment and the actions of political elites that exploit those perspectives. When a substantial portion of the population perceives that they are not getting their fair share, and that this is the result of people in power giving their share to those who are less deserving, we are on fertile ground for a politics of “us versus them.” (Shenck, 2017, para. 3)

**The Demand for Dignity and Respect**

Human beings are complex creatures indeed. So often human motivation is narrowed by political analysts to economic well-being and economic grievance. Humans, however, are highly motivated to meet certain psychological needs,
primary among them the need for dignity and respect. Human identity is predicated on social feedback. Identity is threatened by disrespect. Francis Fukuyama (2018) in describing threats to democracy around the world and in the United States, points out that political leaders in the populist mold reach out to marginalized groups to benefit from the politics of resentment. “In a wide variety of cases, a political leader has mobilized followers around the perception that the group’s dignity has been affronted, disparaged, or otherwise, disregarded” (Fukuyama, 2018, p. 7).

Democracies Are Messy

Autocracies are much more orderly than democracies. Mussolini made the trains run on time. The democratic process is often slow to meet the needs of a society because of the span of viewpoints represented in the government (Stavridis, 2018). Building consensus on anything takes time and effort. When people feel that the government doesn’t care about them and doesn’t meet their needs, citizens can turn away from the cumbersomeness of democracy and toward the power and authority of the autocrat who promises to bring order and fix everything. Order is the primary attraction for conservatives whose psychological make-up demands structure to maintain a sense of safety and security.

How to Kill Democracy

Donald Trump began his assault on democracy with his 2016 campaign in which he showed utter disdain for the democratic process by saying he would not accept the electoral victory of his opponent. The Republican party was complicit in this undermining of the key principle of a democratic election by supporting Trump, no matter what (Holmes, 2018). It has continued to do so. Only two Republican senators voted to have witnesses at Trump’s impeachment trial in the Senate (January, 2020), and only one Republican (Mitt Romney, Utah) voted to impeach president Trump.

To kill a democracy, journalism and journalists need to be destroyed. A free press is the foundation of democracy. “The President routinely describes reporting he dislikes as FAKE NEWS. The Administration calls the press ‘the opposition party’, ridicules news organizations it doesn’t like as business failures, and calls for journalists to be fired” (Stephens, 2017, para. 10). In addition to directly attacking journalists and journalism, Trump has dignified hundreds of online smear campaigners who disseminate conspiracy theories and other false information, and create memes favorable to the president (Rogers, 2019). By holding a “Social Media Summit” for conservative media supporters who thrive on subverting norms and bending the rules, just like Trump himself, the president was openly supporting the “alternative truths” that he relies on. Ostensibly the president was countering the censorship of
these very same online troublemakers because Facebook, Twitter, and other media sites have anti-hate language policies which these conservative social media people violated. Supporting hate-mongering from the White House along with alternative truth is yet another direct assault on democracy which updates the Hitler playbook to accomplish the same ends.

Mainstream Journalism Fights Back

On July 27, 2019 the president of the United States of America described Maryland’s 7th congressional district as unlivable, rat infested, dangerous, filthy, and the “worst in the USA”. It doesn’t really matter that in the real world the 7th congressional district includes world famous Johns Hopkins Hospital, the Social Security Administration, and Fort McHenry for which the star-spangled banner was written. Nor does it matter that the median income for residents of the 7th district is above the national average. Because the district is majority black, Donald Trump hurled every anti-black stereotype he could think of in deriding the 7th. The reason for this assault was that Congressman Elijah Cummings represents the 7th district and has been actively pursuing the president’s potentially illegal and even treasonous activities. Thankfully, a free press still exists in America and the editorial board of the Baltimore Sun fought back.

It’s not hard to see what’s going on here. The congressman has been a thorn in this president’s side, and Mr. Trump sees attacking African American members of Congress as good politics, as it both warms the cockles of the white supremacists who love him and causes so many of the thoughtful people who don’t to scream. ….

We would tell the most dishonest man to ever occupy the Oval Office, the mocker of war heroes, the gleeful grabber of women’s private parts, the serial bankrupter of businesses, the useful idiot of Vladimir Putin and the guy who insisted there are “good people” among murderous neo-Nazis that he’s still not fooling most Americans into believing he’s even slightly competent in his current post. Or that he possesses a scintilla of integrity. Better to have some vermin living in your neighborhood than to be one. (Baltimore Sun Editorial Board, 2019).

As a 40-year resident of the Baltimore metropolitan area, I can’t help but cheer for the Baltimore Sun. I personally witnessed so much positive growth in Baltimore city and so many caring people trying to make things better.

American Democracy Is not Democratically Structured

As the only democracy in the world that doesn’t abide by the will of the people in the popular vote but instead uses an archaic Electoral College system which ironically was designed to thwart populist presidential candidates (Beinart, 2016), we
are stuck with a president who was allowed to win despite almost three million more votes cast for the opposition candidate who got 48% of the vote compared to 45.9% for the winner (The New York Times, 2017). The complete failure of the electoral college system to stop an authoritarian takeover shows how ineffective it is at fulfilling its original purpose.

It is “desirable,” Alexander Hamilton wrote in Federalist 68, “that the sense of the people should operate in the choice of” president. But is “equally desirable, that the immediate election should be made by men most capable of analyzing the qualities adapted to the station.” These “men”—the electors—would be “most likely to possess the information and discernment requisite to such complicated investigations.” And because of their discernment—because they possessed wisdom that the people as a whole might not—“the office of President will never fall to the lot of any man who is not in an eminent degree endowed with the requisite qualifications.” (Beinart, 2016, para. 9).

**Impediments to Democracy: The Electoral College**

“Five times in history, presidential candidates have won the popular vote but lost the Electoral College” (Roos, 2019, para 1). The Electoral College brought on partisan division as soon as it was proposed (Nalewicki, 2016). Beyond any philosophical concerns about populism, the pragmatic ploy was to give more political power to the Southern rural slave holding states, so that they would ratify the Constitution. The Electoral College was one of the many compromises that got the American Constitution passed (Roos, 2019). “The past 200 years have brought more than 700 proposed Constitutional amendments to either ‘reform or eliminate’ the Electoral College” (Nalewicki, 2016, para. 7). The Electoral College is in the Constitution, therefore, to remove it requires two-thirds majorities in both the House and Senate, followed by ratification of three-quarters of the states within 7 years. This is unlikely to happen as the low population states and the Republican party are in favor of the Electoral College over the popular vote (Cillizza, 2017).

There is a possible end-around to the Constitutional blockade. As of August 2019, 15 states and the District of Columbia have joined the National Popular Vote Interstate Compact (NPVIC) which would give all of their states’ Electoral College votes to the popular vote winner, but only when enough states join that a minimum of 270 Electoral College votes would be reached. This number is enough to elect the president. The states that have already joined are the blue states (majority Democratic), mostly on the West and Northeast coasts. (WA, OR, CA, NY, VT, MA, RI, CT, NJ, DE, MD) joined by CO, NM, IL, and HI. This represents 196 votes or 72.6% of the 270 votes needed (Ballotpedia, 2019).
Impediments to Democracy: The Senate

Some people in the United States have 3.6 times the voting power of others. This imbalance in democratic representation comes about because every state gets two senators. The Constitution gives the same two senators to Wyoming with a 2018 population of 577,737 and California with a 2018 population of 39,557,045 (U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts, n.d.). Small population states have enormous power in the Senate with most of that going to Republicans since small population states tend to be rural and conservative. Of the 20 lowest population states, 15 are typically Republican (http://www.theus50.com/fastfacts/population.php). The 20 lowest population states represent 10% of the total American population. These same states control 40% of the United States Senate (Peçanha, 2020).

Impediments to Democracy: Gerrymandering

“If there is one silver bullet that could fix American democracy, it’s getting rid of gerrymandering—the now commonplace practice of drawing electoral districts in a distorted way for partisan gain” (Klaas, 2017, para. 2). In 2014, 80% of the ten most gerrymandered districts were Republican. By creating partisan safe districts gerrymandering distorts representative democracy. “At some point or another over the last decade, Democrats have won the most votes but lost national elections for the presidency, the House and the Senate” (Cohn, 2019, para. 1). This means that the party getting fewer votes nevertheless claims control of the country.

Impediments to Democracy: Voter Suppression

When the Supreme Court destroyed the Voting Rights Act in 2010, counties with past histories of racial discrimination were let loose to disproportionately purge people of color from their voter lists. “Since Trump was elected 17 million people have been thrown off the voting rolls” (Rubin, 2019, para. 4).

Many other tactics have been used to limit the votes of racial minorities. Voting machine breakdowns are common in racial minority districts, along with insufficient voting machines (Levy, 2018).

Voter purges are only one means of suppressing nonwhite and poor voters. Insufficient polling places (contributing to long lines and great travel distances to voting places), reduction in early-voting times, voter-ID laws and a host of other tactics like those we saw in Georgia’s governor race in 2018 suggest purges are part of a larger, deliberate plan that—oh look!—just happens to adversely affect voters you’d expect to vote for Democrats. (Rubin, 2019, para. 6)
Impediments to Democracy: The Presidential Primary Schedule

For the Democratic party the primary schedule which places the two predominantly white states of Iowa and New Hampshire first in line defeats diversity. Political power is taken away from racial minorities who are the heart of the Democratic party. Charles Blow (2020) has a simple solution. Have the first primary occur on the same date for Iowa, New Hampshire, South Carolina and Nevada. All four geographic areas of the country would be represented and African Americans and Hispanic, Latino/Latina would have meaningful input.

Impediments to Democracy: Citizens United

The Supreme Court ruling that corporations are citizens and therefore can contribute virtually unlimited amounts of money to political campaigns is one of the greatest threats to democracy in the modern era. The ruling opened the floodgates of political influence by the ultra-wealthy. Former Supreme Court Justice Louis Brandeis wrote “We can have a democratic society, or we can concentrate great wealth in the hands of a few. We cannot have both” (Lonegan, 1941, p. 42).

In the 2008 election between Barack Obama and Mitt Romney, David and Charles Koch spent $100 million to support Republican candidates. After the Citizens United ruling in 2010, the Koch brothers donated $750 million to the 2016 campaign that Donald Trump and many other Republicans won (Mayer, 2017). Republican majorities in the House and Senate were sustained. For Republicans, it was the best Congress that money can buy.

Impediments to Democracy: Dark Money

Jane Mayer (2017) has exposed the degree to which ultra-rich billionaires control American democracy through the molding of the American rightwing. Training grounds are provided through various foundations, such as the Koch brothers’ Americans for Prosperity. Elaborate gatherings are hosted by these foundations. Mayer coined the term “Kochtopus” to describe the tentacles that the Koch brothers have extended in support of the free market economy, free of regulation. Koch industries is heavily invested in oil and the Kochs have invested in (given huge political donations to) Republican politicians who will fight fuel economy standards and anti-pollution measures. In the United States, the Koch brothers and their billionaire associates are interested in a specific agenda which they actively promote: “low taxation, less regulation (especially on polluters), reduced entitlement spending, lower social-welfare spending, and anything that will help cripple unions” (Tomasky, 2019, p. 181).
Political scientist and journalist, Rachel Maddow (2019) has examined the research and journalistic reports on the relationship between geopolitics and the oil and gas industries. The greed, power, and corruption of the fossil fuel industries has undermined democracy everywhere that oil and gas are found worldwide. The political power of oil and gas magnates is almost unimaginable.

Billionaires brought unprecedented support to Donald Trump during his 2016 presidential campaign. Trump was able to bring reclusive billionaire, Robert Mercer (Renaissance Technologies, Cambridge Analytica) on board after Steve Bannon seduced him to Trump’s camp during the 2016 election campaign (Green, 2017/2018). Mercer talked Trump into using Cambridge Analytica to tilt the election in his direction (Boag, 2018). Even though Mercer is more of a libertarian who wants to see government shrink to as tiny a mass as possible, he still backed Trump as a political investment. “Mercer has surrounded our President with his people, and his people have an outsized influence over the running of our country, simply because Robert Mercer paid for their seats” (Magerman, 2017, para. 11).

Robert Hackett (2016) writing in *Fortune* magazine delineated Trump’s major billionaire supporters. They include a casino tycoon, a real estate speculator (who made his fortune betting against the real estate market just before the 2008 collapse), a football team owner, a CEO of a gasoline corporation, a bank owner, a media magnate with his own broadcasting network, and various financial management and hedge fund company owners. This is the kind of financial foundation that moneyed power brokers provide for a politician who they believe will advance their agendas, which have to do with money and power, not democracy. “When the government becomes more like a corporation, with the richest 0.001% buying shares and demanding board seats, then we cease to be a representative democracy and become an oligarchy instead” (Magerman, 2017, para. 3).

The financial core of the Republican Party: the wealthiest 1%, most industries, manufacturing, corporate agriculture, the NRA and other groups captured by the 1% are all in it for the money and power. They will support anyone who will do their bidding; they finance often bigoted candidates that cater to Trump’s core of supporters. These politicians then pander to these people’s emotional values to the detriment of their economic and physical needs (Cristdahl, 2019, para. 11).

**Impediments to Democracy: Russian Internet Hacking**

Russia was successful in undermining the 2016 presidential election (Shane & Marzetti, 2018) and is set to do the same in 2020 (Barnes & Goldman, 2019). The Republican controlled U. S. Senate refuses to pass election security measures to try to safeguard the 2020 election (Barrett & Collier, 2019). The Russian government created 24-h troll farms that infiltrated the American internet system with bots that pretended to be Americans (MacFarquhar, 2018). If anything, the Russians have gotten even more sophisticated in hacking the internet.
Characteristics of Trump Supporters

Considerable research has been done in an attempt to understand why so many people were motivated to vote for Donald Trump in 2016. The outcome has been the identification of key factors that explain what makes a core Trump supporter, but also what characterizes a wider group of less deeply devoted supporters. The identifying characteristics of the core Trump supporter are: authoritarianism, foundational racial prejudice, and vehement prejudice against immigrants, liberals, feminists, and minorities. Profound hostility toward women is a key identifier. The wider group of Trump voters can best be understood by their devotion to a common system of traditional shared values, attitudes and worldviews. This latter conservative orientation characterizes most Trump voters, including the core group.

Not all Trump supporters are motivated by pure racial prejudice and deep hostility toward women. Not all Trump supporters are profoundly authoritarian. The dynamic underlying support for Donald Trump can be much more complex and far less venal for some people.

Line Cutters and Fairness

Arlie Russell Hochschild captures the emotions of white people who feel they have played by the rules but whose lives are not improving, and often getting worse. They feel that the system is rigged to help those who cut in line in front of those patiently waiting to get to the good life, to achieve the American Dream. “As they cut in it feels like you are being moved back” (Hochschild, 2016/2018, p. 137). This sense of being held back “leads people of the right to feel frustrated, angry, and betrayed by the government” (Hochschild, 2016/2018, p. 146).

Most of the people Hochschild interviewed didn’t feel that they were racially prejudiced. They believed that racism was using the “N” word or hating black people. By their definition of racism, they were clearly not prejudiced and were furious at northern liberals who called them racists. They certainly were not virulent racists openly antagonistic toward African-Americans (Hochschild, 2016/2018).

Fairness is tremendously important to human beings. Many white people feel that it is not fair that other groups are getting things that were denied to them: a good education, an apprenticeship or job through affirmative action that helps people of color and women. They feel that everyone else is getting help: immigrants, refugees, the (undeserving and lazy) poor. They are even expected to feel sorry for these people.

The Louisiana people Hochschild studied were conservatives and many were even Tea Partiers. They relied on traditional values of conformity, consistency and structure. Their moral foundation was based on following the rules. They felt a sense of moral outrage (Haidt, 2012) at line cutting. They were attracted to Trump...
as someone who understood them and would protect them from the whole affirmative action system that gave rise to line cutters.

**Shared Values Elected Trump**

In the 2016 election, Donald Trump received votes from people who had previously voted for Barack Obama. He got votes from people who had traditionally been Democrats. How could this happen. Ryne Sherman may have found the answer; “shared personal values were a key driver of support for Donald Trump” (Sherman, 2018, p. 33).

Values are deeply embedded in human evolutionary history. Hominids lived in small groups where sharing the same values was likely to increase group cohesiveness, cooperation and survival (Christakis, 2019). Cultural evolution would allow values to be passed on intergenerationally (Creanza, Kolodny, & Feldman, 2017). Psychological traits such as values can be inherited to a large extent. In a twin study of how values are passed on from parents to children Kandler, Gottschling, and Spinath (2016) found a strong role for heredity; “Parent–child similarity in value priorities is primarily due to their shared genetic makeup instead of environmental parent–child transmission” (p. 278). It is also the case that strong environmental factors can overcome the genetic predisposition toward similarity in personal values and engender different values in children. However, the typical pattern is for parents to provide an environment that epigenetically triggers the potentially inheritable values.

It has become a principle of social psychology that sharing the same values fosters attraction between people. Sherman (2018) found a specific set of values that were predictive of support for Trump: low levels of Altruism (helping others, especially the less well-off), high Power dynamics (taking charge, competing, winning), Commerce (wanting to become wealthy), and Tradition (need for conformity, consistency and structure). Sherman found that political attitudes did not predict support for Trump as well as personal values, but both were strong predictors. Personal values can propel a person who is neither strongly racist nor sexist to vote for Trump.

**Attitudes**

“In all, eight attitudes predict Trump support: conservative identification; support for domineering leaders; fundamentalism; prejudice against immigrants, African Americans, Muslims, and women; and pessimism about the economy” (Smith & Hanley, 2018, p. 206). Many Trump followers are Christian fundamentalists despite the despicable behavior of Trump as a person. Religious fundamentalists bypass Trump’s personal history because he is bringing about the world that they strive for: anti-abortion policies, conservative judges, religious exemptions for discrimination,
anti-science, gun ownership, wealth accumulation (prosperity gospel) and overall protection for their way of life.

“In this specific election, negative attitudes toward ethnic minorities and immigrants swayed independents and some Democrats to opt for candidate Trump, thereby considerably strengthening his electoral-support base” (Hooghe & Dassonneville, 2018, p. 532). Racism and anti-immigration attitudes were more powerful than party affiliation in support of Trump (Wright & Esses, 2018).

Worldview and Strict Father Morality

George Lakoff (2016) has examined the nature of liberal-conservative differences. Conservatives and liberals operate within entirely disparate moral systems. They have contrasting worldviews. Lakoff described the core of these differences as based on Strict Father Morality as opposed to Nurturant Parent Morality.

Liberals are associated with a morality system based on nurturant parenting. Children experience empathy from their parents and see the world as a safe, loving, kind, and protected place.

Conservativism is founded on the Strict Father moral model. The worldview underlying this model is that the world is a dangerous place and survival requires stringent measures. The Strict Father model has the father as the source of family support and protection, but also authority. This is a seen as a moral imperative in a just world. Strict rules must be followed by children who are rewarded or punished accordingly, with corporal punishment the most common form. “Children must respect and obey their parents, partly for their own safety and partly because by doing so they build character, that is, self-discipline and self-reliance” (Lakoff, 2016, p. 66). Parental authority is uppermost in the family, with nurturance and love being an expression of that authority. “Tough love” is not uncommon.

A major derivative of Strict Father morality is that the poor deserve their poverty and the rich deserve their wealth. “The rich are just better people than the poor: they have earned their money through hard work; the poor just haven’t worked hard enough and so deserve to be poor” (Lakoff, 2016, p. 435).

Evangelicals: Martin Luther, and Donald Trump

Evangelicals are highly likely to adhere to Strict Father morality and the social hierarchy that it is part of. Michael Massing (2018) reveals the character and writings of Martin Luther to explain how Protestants can easily fall into absolutism and complete rigid certitude. Although Trump reflects none of the religious character of evangelicals, he perfectly reflects the social hierarchy of evangelicals.

Trump personifies the essence of the Strict Father model based on the authoritarian power of dominance hierarchy, demanding obedience and loyalty. The vision of
Trump as the ultimate “Strongman” fits comfortably within the Strict Father model. “The decisive reason that white, male, older and less educated voters were disproportionately pro-Trump is that they shared his prejudices and wanted domineering, aggressive leaders more often than other voters did” (Smith & Hanley, 2018, p. 198).

**Racial Prejudice Elected Trump**

There is agreement across research studies analyzing the Trump 2016 election that racism was the driving force behind Trump’s victory (Bobo, 2017; Hooghe & Dassonneville, 2018; Reny, Collingwood, & Valenzuela, 2019). “Trump did not do especially well with non-college-educated whites, compared to other Republicans. He did especially well with white people who express sexist views about women and who deny racism exists” (Williamson & Gelfand, 2019). Republican political operative, Stuart Stevens (2020) has traced the history of the modern Republican party and found that racism has been the underlying credo since the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s. Not just Trump, but the entire Republican party establishment utilized racism in the 2016 election, and will do so again in 2020. While individual Democrats may be racist, “in modern America, only one political party is devoted to stoking white resentment for political gain” (Boot, 2020, para. 6).

**Vehement Prejudice Against Immigrants, Feminists, Liberals, and Minorities**

“What typified Trump partisans was the vehemence of their prejudices—for a domineering leader who would ‘crush evil’ and ‘get rid of rotten apples’ and against feminists, liberals, immigrants, and minorities” (Smith, 2019, p. 195). Core Trump supporters are driven by deep anger in their degree of prejudice. They are easily urged toward violence (Feinberg, Branton, & Martinez-Ebers, 2019). Trump’s core fan-base is flat out authoritarian (Dean & Altemeyer, 2019).

**Psychological Explanations of Trump Supporters**

Many people were shocked by the election of Donald Trump. Ever since, researchers have been exploring the reasons that might explain the Trump voter. This research strongly overlaps the study of both conservatism and authoritarianism. Even though right-wing authoritarianism and religious fundamentalism are associated with Republican voters in general (Altemeyer, 1996; Bouchard, 2009; Hedges,
2008; Ludeke, Johnson, & Bouchard Jr., 2013), Trump voters have been differentiated from other conservatives in important ways.

Financial Distress, External Locus of Control (eLOC), and Authoritarianism

Galen Buckwalter is a research psychologist in the areas of cognition and neuroscience, and CEO of the consulting firm psyML. The firm researches peoples’ online behaviors and their psychological functioning while online. Buckwalter and his research team examined the question of what makes white Trump supporters different psychologically. Buckwalter (2016) and his colleagues conclude that it is their unsuccessful adaptation to financial stress which pitches people into a pattern of authoritarian Trump support. Buckwalter defines financial stress as not being able to pay all of the monthly bills. Many people in this kind of financial trouble may well appear to be part of a financially secure middle class and therefore are not recognized as suffering from serious financial stress. Buckwalter (2016) maintains that financial insecurity fosters a response similar to post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), which he calls acute financial stress (AFS). Research done by psyML indicates that over 23% of Americans older than 17 experience AFS and that this traumatic stress “results in cognitive, emotional and behavioral/relational disorders” (Buckwalter, 2016, para. 8). The essence of unsuccessful adaptation to financial stress is operating with an External Locus of Control (eLOC) where a person feels a lack of control over the environment in which they exist. All financial troubles are blamed on sources outside of the person: the government, the bank, immigrants, racial minorities, etc. The person feels controlled by outside forces. The psychological fragility created by the eLOC pattern is problematic. “The path from vulnerabilities to an authoritarian mindset is exacerbated not only by financial stress but stress of other varieties, including the stress associated with the perceived loss of entitlements and status” (Buckwalter, 2018, para. 13). Chronic stress damages the body as well as the mind, increasing the sense of being unprotected. Authoritarian leaders offer the illusion of protection through identification with power. People want to feel powerful again, even if only by association.

Motivated Social Cognition

An ideology is endorsed if it meets an individual’s psychological needs, a process that the person may not even be aware of. Social judgments are not purely rational, in fact, motivation and emotion play a large role in our cognitions. Motivated social cognition touches on the vulnerability of people to believe what they want to believe (Shermer, 2011).
The theory of motivated social cognition has been used to understand political conservatism, right-wing authoritarianism (RWA) and social dominance orientation (SDO) by a group of researchers (Jost, Glaser, Kruglanski, & Sulloway, 2003) who carried out a meta-analysis of the traits that past theories and research have associated with conservative orientations. They found that the highest predictors of political conservatism are death anxiety (terror management), system instability, dogmatism-intolerance of ambiguity, low openness to experience, low uncertainty tolerance, motivational needs for order, structure, and closure, difficulty dealing with integrative complexity, fear of loss and fear of threat, and more fragile self-esteem. “We regard political conservatism as an ideological belief system that is significantly (but not completely) related to motivational concerns having to do with the psychological management of uncertainty and fear” (Jost et al., 2003, p. 369).

Terror Management

Sheldon Solomon’s theory of terror management (TMT) concerns the unique human problem that we know of our own death and therefore need to find meaning in life. Solomon believes that this existential dilemma of our imminent death terrifies many people. All cultures have ways of managing this existential terror by providing various avenues to finding meaning in life. Religious beliefs in some form of immortality pervades many cultures. “Our cultures also offer hope of symbolic immortality, the sense that we are part of something greater than ourselves that will continue long after we die” (Solomon, Greenberg, & Pyszcznski, 2015, p. 8).

The key feature of terror management is that only those who live up to the social values and standards of the their cultural and/or religious identities have some degree of protection from insignificance.

In Terror Management Theory, world views are adopted that protect self-esteem, worthiness, and sustainability. This allows the belief that people play an important role in a meaningful world. Prejudices and superiority over others are survival instincts that insulate these people from the deep fear of living an insignificant life and the need to reinforce cultural significance in the face of their death (Cristdahl, 2019, para. 5).

Bouchard (2009) maintains that there is a Traditional Moral Values Triad, consisting of authoritarianism, conservatism, and religiousness. Adherence to any, or all of these systems provides effective terror management strategies.

Traditional Moral Values Triad: Obedience

The Triad of Traditional Moral Values (authoritarianism, conservatism, and religiousness) is highly inter-correlated. Koenig and Bouchard Jr. (2006) hypothesize that a single underlying trait of a tendency to obey traditional-style authorities, explains this strong correlation.
The Traditional Moral Values Triad … can be interpreted as representing a single factor of Traditionalism. At the heart of this conception of Traditionalism is an individual’s orientation towards socially established authorities, with highly traditional individuals responding positively and with obedience to such authorities and their symbols. Traditionalism is thus conceived as a dispositional feature at the foundation of attitudes towards a range of established authorities, whether political, religious, social or familial. (Ludeke et al., 2013, p. 375)

Traditionalism and the obedience factor embedded within, were found to be strongly related to right-wing authoritarianism, along with political conservatism and religiosity (Ludeke et al., 2013). Jonathan Haidt’s (2012) evolutionary theory of morality converges on traditionalism and obedience as core social factors.

Obedience to Authority/Traditionalism: Nature via Nurture

There is substantial evidence of a genetic/epigenetic basis for obedience to authority/traditionalism (Hatemi et al., 2014; Hatemi & McDermott, 2011). But as genetic epidemiologist, Tim Spector points out “It’s nature via nurture; it’s a clear interaction” (Johnson, 2019, para. 8). Since children with the genetic predisposition for obedience are likely to be raised by parents who provide an environment where obedience is encouraged the epigenetic interaction is likely to produce a strong propensity for obedience.

Right-Wing Authoritarianism Protects Against the Fear of Death

Both existential meaning and existential buffering against the terror of death can be obtained by full immersion within a powerful identity and belief system. Right-wing authoritarianism offers just such an identity and belief structure. Right-wing authoritarianism can effectively provide existential meaning and existential buffering against the terror of death (Routledge & Vess, 2019; Womick, Ward, Heintzelman, Woody, & King, 2019). Ernest Becker (1973) concluded that whenever a crisis arises, arousing fear of death, people are easily swayed by a leader who conveys a measure of psychological security, convincing them that they are a valuable part of a great enterprise. ‘‘It was a great feeling,’’ recalled former Hitler Youth member Henry Metelmann. ‘‘You felt you belonged to a great nation … I was going to help and build a strong Germany.’’ (Solomon et al., 2015, p. 223). The politics of terror management are simple. Align with the powerful, be part of something grand, surround yourself with right-wing authoritarianism (Solomon, 2008).
**Mortality Salience**

Not only do we experience terror when directly threatened but also in the absence of threat, just by being reminded about danger. Mortality salience is about how focused on death a person is. By making death salient people can be motivated to protect their worldviews and their self-esteem. Mortality salience makes people bond more strongly with those who share their values and cultural worldview. People who are different and/or violate cultural values are perceived negatively.

Terrorist attacks in 2015 increased support for Trump (Cohen, Solomon, & Kaplin, 2017). Crisis activates fear of death. Trump came across as offering security and a safe haven. His fear-mongering worked well to motivate people to seek safety. He also made people feel like they were part of a crusade against Islam. “People identify with leaders who provide the possibility of being a valued part of a righteous and powerful tribe or nation on the right side of a cosmic battle between ‘good’ and ‘evil’” (Cohen et al., 2017, p. 4).

Anthropologist Ernest Becker (1973) linked fear of death in times of threat, with attachment to a powerful and charismatic leader. Fearful people are attracted to someone who is supremely confident and acts boldly. Personal self-worth and meaning in life can be boosted by psychological attachment to a dominant and leader who fiercely disparages opponents. Right-wing authoritarianism can provide existential meaning and existential buffering against the terror of death. “Regardless of one’s political preferences, this psychological state of affairs has ominous implications for democracy, where public policy and electoral outcomes should ideally result from rational deliberations rather than unreflective defensive reactions to mortal terror” (Cohen et al., 2017, p. 355).

**Open Versus Closed Personality**

Voters are much more influenced by their personality and identity structure than by their own financial well-being. Christopher Johnson, Howard Lavine, and Christopher Federico (2017) examined human personality and identity in depth. They concluded that personality divides into two dimensions, open and closed. Citizens high in openness value independence, self-direction, and novelty, while those low in openness value social cohesion, certainty, and security. Closed personality types will vote against their own economic interest in order to maintain social cohesion, security, and certainty. Closed personality types are the most likely to fall under Trump’s sway, especially when faced with threat.
Compensatory Control

Aaron Kay is the primary theorist behind the idea of compensatory control. Humans have a cognitive-emotional need to feel a degree of control over their lives. This need for personal control requires a concomitant belief in a controlled, nonrandom world. Humans then protect this belief “by imbuing their social, physical, and metaphysical environments with order and structure when their sense of personal control is threatened” (Kay, Whitson, Gaucher, & Galinsky, 2009, abstract).

A key aspect of the compensatory control dynamic is how the individual perceives the degree of control in their lives. Perceived control has been defined “as the person’s belief that he or she is capable of obtaining desired outcomes, avoiding undesired outcomes, and achieving goals” (Landau, Kay, & Whitson, 2015, p. 695). When an individual perceives a diminution of control various strategies can be employed. Establishing order leads to a better sense of control for many people. Many humans need to feel that they are surrounded by an ordered society to which they belong and from which they benefit (Rutjens & Kay, 2017). Republicans offer order even at the diminution of freedom.

A major strategy within compensatory control is to believe that a powerful entity will operate on behalf of those with diminished control over their lives. This strategy was triggered by Donald Trump’s many empty promises to use his “huge” power on behalf of his followers. The more powerless people feel, the more likely they will compensate by believing in Trump as a savior.

A common strategy in support of compensatory control is to interpret the social and physical environment as being basically simple, clear, consistent, stable and coherent. Complexity, ambiguity, instability, and chaos represent both cognitive and emotional threats to the need for control (Landau et al., 2015).

This desire for simplicity, clarity, consistency, and coherence can easily lead to an alternative reality which allows the person to feel in control. It also makes them vulnerable to the political messaging of most Republicans, especially Trump, who steer away from the complex, ambiguous, inconsistent, and incoherent aspects of the modern, rapidly changing, technological, ecological and social world.

System Justification: The Conservative Advantage

From a system justification perspective, we propose that people are motivated to defend the social systems on which they depend, and this confers a psychological advantage to conservative ideology. Providing ideological support for the status quo serves epistemic motives to reduce uncertainty, existential motives to reduce threat, and relational motives to share reality with members of mainstream society. (Jost et al., 2017, abstract).

Many people have a strong tendency “to see the way things are as the way they should be” (Kay et al., 2009, title). This is highly problematic for dealing with issues of dramatic social and economic inequality. The psychological inertia of the status quo keeps many people from finding better ways to meet society’s needs.
“Republican identifiers have grown more likely to self-identify as conservatives. Democrats, however, have been slow to embrace the liberal label” (Neiheisel, 2016, p. 418). People tend to be more conservative than liberal, especially when feeling threatened. This helps to explain why so many poorer people do not vote for their own economic advantage. Some poorer people share the same system justification belief systems, especially about pro-capitalism and anti-socialism, as wealthy people. Conservative ideologies may well provide better for people’s motivational needs (subjectively, if not objectively). Conservative ideology provides simple answers for difficult questions fulfilling people’s epistemic needs for understanding. Existentially, conservatives use a combination of divine imagery and power to make people feel protected. Relational needs are easily met under conservative ideology because social conformity is foundational to conservative ideology. “In other words, system justification theory helps to explain the psychological appeal of conservative ideology” (Jost et al., 2017, p. e19).

**Emotion, Motivation, Cognition and Politics**

The story of political behavior is based on emotion to an extraordinary extent. Unfortunately, both laypeople and professionals often hesitate to embrace a story which takes away the rational foundation of human behavior.

**The Emotion Problem**

Emotion has rarely been given central concern in studies of human and animal motivation. The main direction of Psychology during the twentieth century was an emphasis on learning and behavior. The infamous rat anchored animal study in psychology for much of this time. In 1942 Leo Crespi bucked this trend by focusing on emotion in the rat. He found that when a rat is trained on a low reward and then switched to a high reward it runs faster than rats trained on the high reward from the beginning. Crespi named this phenomenon the “elation effect” (Crespi, 1942, 1944; Rabin, 1975). When a rat is trained on a high reward and then shifted to a low reward it runs much more slowly than rats trained on the low reward. Crespi designated this the “depression effect”. Mainstream Psychology was so shocked at the notion of emotion in rats that the nomenclature was changed from elation to “positive contrast effect” and depression to “negative contrast effect” by David Zeaman (1949) and universally adopted. The issue of emotion in rats was finally settled when rats given amobarbital sodium (an emotion neutralizer) failed to show an elation effect (compared to un-drugged controls), despite a dramatic increase in reward (Rabin, 1975). The study was largely ignored and only relatively recently has the power of emotion in the lives of animals (and humans) been widely documented.
(Bekoff, 2008; Brader & Marcus, 2013; de Waal, 2019; Panksepp, 1998) and largely accepted in mainstream Psychology.

The power of emotion to influence decision-making is now well documented (Lerner & Tiedens, 2006; Lowenstein & Lerner, 2003; Pfister & Böhm, 2008) but rarely does the anatomical and physiological embeddedness of emotion get sufficient attention. On the whole, people want to believe that they are rational creatures. Accepting the power of emotion over our decision-making destroys our sense of rational control.

Ironically, Crespi’s work lends insight to the motivation of just those people who supported Donald Trump against their own economic interests. Crespi’s depression effect speaks to the way many of the “left behind” people hurt by the changing global economy feel. The rewards are less than they have come to expect and are therefore especially frustrating. It is the decline from a higher reward system to a lower one which triggers depression and often anger. These powerful emotions override rational solutions to the situation.

**Motivated Reasoning**

Motivation and emotion are closely linked together operationally. Motives provide the reasons for doing things. They are the movers toward action. Action requires arousal and emotion often provides that arousal. Motivation and emotion activate behavior (Buck, 1988).

Ziva Kunda (1990) reviewed the relevant research and concluded that motivated reasoning is largely biased by emotion. Rather than evidence-based critical thinking, which is neutral, motivated reasoning produces a desired conclusion or justification that meets cognitive and emotional needs while still avoiding cognitive dissonance. These self-serving biases are not due to cognitive processes alone but are anchored in emotion and motivation. “People are more likely to arrive at those conclusions that they want to arrive at” (Kunda, 1990, p. 495).

**Emotion Rules Politics**

Drew Westen and his colleagues were the first to study how the brain reacts to political information, providing an understanding of the neurological basis of motivated reasoning. Rational judgment is greatly limited if emotion is triggered. “Motivated reasoning can be viewed as a form of implicit affect regulation in which the brain converges on solutions that minimize negative and maximize positive affect states” (Westen, Blagov, Harenski, Kilts, & Hamann, 2006, p. 1947). During the process of political decision-making and political judgment the brain shuts down information pathways that challenge political beliefs and enhances pathways that bring information corroborating those beliefs.
Motivated reasoning was associated with activations of the ventromedial prefrontal cortex, anterior cingulate cortex, posterior cingulate cortex, insular cortex, and lateral orbital cortex. The combination of reduced negative affect (absence of activity in the insula and lateral orbital cortex) and increased positive affect or reward (ventral striatum activation) once subjects had ample time to reach biased conclusions suggests why motivated judgments may be so difficult to change (i.e., they are doubly reinforcing). (Westen et al., 2006, p. 1956)

The neurological pattern set off by motivated reasoning activates two different reward systems, negative reinforcement where a bad thing is removed (negative emotion) and positive reinforcement where a good thing happens (positive emotion). The dual reinforcement system makes it especially difficult to change emotional reasoning. Westen went on to write a game-changing book: *The political brain: The role of emotion in deciding the fate of the nation* (2008). A revised edition is expected in December 2020.

From a psychological perspective, Jonathan Haidt (2012) argues that emotion rules the human brain. He argues that people are basically intuitive not rational. Reason is put in service to defend the “underlying moral intuitions” humans rely on. The successful exchange of political ideas requires understanding the emotional basis underlying those perspectives.

**Morality, Emotion and Politics**

From a psychological perspective, Jonathan Haidt (2012) argues that emotion rules the human brain. People are basically intuitive not rational. Reason is put in service to defend the “underlying moral intuitions” humans rely on. Political persuasion requires connecting to a person’s emotionally-based belief system.

The problem isn’t that people don’t reason. They do reason. But their arguments aim to support their conclusions, not yours. Reason doesn’t work like a judge or teacher, impartially weighing evidence or guiding us to wisdom. It works more like a lawyer or press secretary, justifying our acts and judgments to others. (Saletan, 2012, para. 5)

Haidt (2012) expounds on the power of foundational morality factors in determining a person’s worldview. Along with his colleagues, Haidt identified five moral foundations and later added a sixth: care, fairness, loyalty, authority, sanctity (purity) and liberty. It is these moral foundations that people will defend intuitively, giving immense power to emotion over reason.

Haidt (2012) contends that the two major political parties in the United States are based on very different patterns of morality anchors. The Republican party and social conservatives in general are strongly connected to all six moral foundations. They see Care as taking care of your own, Fairness as getting back what you put in, Loyalty as critical to maintaining Authority, and Authority as maintaining order in society and in the family, Sanctity and purity as godly, and Liberty as upholding individualism against group oppression. Republicans and social conservatives see welfare and feminism as threats to personal responsibility and family stability.
According to Haidt, Democrats and liberals are much more concerned with the morality of care and fairness. Care is viewed as extending to humankind, not just one’s own group. Fairness is based on equality. Oppression must be actively countered to achieve fairness. Unfortunately for Democrats and liberals in general, Republicans and social conservatives are in a stronger position because they actively connect to all six moral foundations, speaking to people’s emotions in powerful ways.

**Deep Story**

Arlie Hochschild (2016/2018) studied Tea Party and other conservative Republican white working-class people in Louisiana. She asked them why they hate the government so much. The answer was more about the “deep story” than the facts. The deep story is the one that resonates deep down, the one that rings true. The deep story is the emotional truth. Conservative white working-class people that Hochschild interviewed very often “felt” that the government wasn’t fair and didn’t care about them. The fact that only Mississippi relies more on federal aid than Louisiana isn’t important. It’s just a fact. The feeling is that government works for the poor and the rich. Welfare, food stamps, subsidized housing, and Medicare go to the lazy, morally questionable, unmeritorious poor while hard working, good, diligent Christian people have to struggle alone. The deep story about who benefits from government programs produces conservative political beliefs.

**Belief-Dependent Realism**

Belief is a deeply human trait. Michael Shermer (2011, p. 5) refers to belief-dependent realism which he uses to describe the process by which “beliefs come first, explanations for beliefs follow.” He maintains that our deepest beliefs are invulnerable to educational information in schools (K-12) and colleges. After over 30 years of research on the human belief system Shermer explains why people believe. Our beliefs are formed for over time “for a variety of subjective, personal, emotional, and psychological reasons in the context of environments created by family, friends, colleagues, culture, and society at large; after forming our beliefs we then defend, justify, and rationalize them” (Shermer, 2011, p. 5).

There is considerable cross-over between Hochschild’s deep story and Shermer’s belief-dependent realism. Educators have struggled against students’ belief systems which often act as an impediment to actual learning of information based on research and verification. John Jost (2017) emphasizes that we do not fall into our beliefs merely by exposure. We actively seek out beliefs that will meet our psychological needs. It is difficult to challenge beliefs with science-based information if that knowledge does not meet our needs.
Individuals are not merely passive vessels of whatever beliefs and opinions they have been exposed to; rather, they are attracted to belief systems that resonate with their own psychological needs and interests, including epistemic, existential, and relational needs to attain certainty, security, and social belongingness (Jost et al., 2017, abstract).

**Critical Thinking**

Levitin (2014, 2016) and Shermer (2011) agree that critical thinking is the most difficult challenge for humans because objective cognition is undermined by belief systems. Levitin argues that a massive failure in critical thinking is undermining our democracy as we become seduced by emotional appeals to our existing belief systems and urged to ignore salient realities (such as global warming, water pollution, corporate cronyism, inordinate corporate influence on government, problems in government regulation, and ever onward).

The American school system has systematically declined in producing students capable of critical thinking. The reason is that critical thinking is context dependent and knowledge based. With the shift toward math and reading in elementary school the study areas most likely to invoke critical thinking are de-emphasized. History, science, and the arts produce the knowledge base that critical thinking can develop from (Hendrick, 2016; Holstein, 2018; Wexler, 2018). Delaying knowledge-based subjects until middle or high school undermines critical thinking skills in the growing brain. “If we want to maximize the chances of producing responsible voters, critical thinking needs to be woven through every aspect of the curriculum, beginning in the early grades” (Wexler, 2018, para. 10).

Democracy is based on an educated, knowledgeable populace. The American school system is failing to educate vast numbers of graduates. There are “alarming gaps in Americans’ knowledge and understanding of political issues, scientific phenomena, historical events, literary allusions, and almost everything else one needs to know to make sense of the world” (Ravitch, 2010, p. 223). Rick Shenckman (2008) makes the link between education and voters: Just How Stupid Are We? Facing the Truth About the American Voter. It is not hyperbole to state that American democracy is currently under threat from ignorance and the emotional override of rational thinking.

**Confirmation Bias**

According to Shermer (2011) confirmation bias is the primary cognitive bias from which all others flow. People actively seek out evidence that supports their beliefs. They watch certain TV channels, read certain magazines, follow certain bloggers and internet sites, all of which confirm what they already believe. At the same time
confirmation bias leads people to “ignore or reinterpret disconfirming evidence” (Shermer, 2011, p. 259). This is why it is so hard to change people’s minds by presenting highly accurate data. If these data threaten people’s beliefs it doesn’t matter about the reality that data represent.

**Cognitive Dissonance and Political Polarization**

We will fight hard to protect our identity. This is where cognitive dissonance comes in. Humans are happiest when all their cognitions and beliefs match up with their experiences in the outside world and their own behaviors (Festinger, 1957). Cognitive dissonance occurs when our existing belief or attitude is challenged by contradictory information. This situation threatens to unbalance our cognitions resulting in cognitive dissonance. We can reduce dissonance either by changing a behavior or by changing an attitude to achieve a new balance.

Cognitive consonance is highly motivating, and people will work hard to keep their cognitive world in balance. The opposite of consonance is dissonance. People will work hard to avoid cognitive dissonance because it is so psychologically disturbing, disconcerting and destabilizing. Cognitive dissonance can be damaging to one’s sense of self and identity.

One strategy for reducing or even avoiding dissonance is to never view a television channel that is associated with political beliefs that are the opposite of your beliefs (MSNBC vs. Fox News). This is closely related to confirmation bias. A way to maintain cognitive consistency is to actively seek out information that is consistent with your political beliefs. This influences the newspapers and magazines you read, the blogs you follow, and even the friends you choose in to connect with, in person and on media sources such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat, and YouTube. The overall outcome is an increase in political polarization.

Some people are so distressed by the prospect of cognitive dissonance that they become negatively motivated to avoid making decisions that might prove dissonant in the future (Zimbardo, 1969). This is why some people will never sign petitions. No matter what the issue underlying the petition, they say, “I don’t do that”. Negative motivation is far more common than expected and is a great frustration to community organizers and activists.

People differ greatly in how much dissonance they can tolerate. One of the great purposes behind a college education is to build a higher tolerance for dissonance. This allows students to engage in open exposure to news ideas and perspectives. The mark of a truly educated person can be ascertained by the degree of dissonance tolerance they have achieved.
**Emotionally Driven Perceptions**

In explaining why so many white working-class people vote against their own economic interests, Catherine Rampell (2016, para. 18) points out that “Americans (A) generally associate government spending with undeserving, nonworking, nonwhite people; and (B) are really bad at recognizing when they personally benefit from government programs.” Rural white people are typically highly motivated to stop the perceived torrent of government support for those they deem “undeserving”. Since they are often unaware of the government support that they receive (such as farm subsidies, health insurance subsidies, Medicare, and tax money from wealthier states directed to poorer states), they oppose many government programs even though they would actually benefit from them.

Most working-class white people believe in hard work and dedication as the way to achieve the American dream of economic well-being. It is easy to feel that the tax and spend government doesn’t play fair since despite all the dedication and hard work, few people are achieving economic security.

The real problem is that the working-class and the middle class have progressively lost economic traction over the past 40 years and more (Schmitt, Gould, & Bivens, 2018). As bad as the overall economic picture is, racial minorities have made economic gains even though they remain dramatically below white pay levels. Even though whites do much better in relative pay they have still lost the most compared to how they were doing 40 years ago. Susan Faludi (1999) writes about the American man being “stiffed” and betrayed by destabilizing cultural shifts of massive social and economic changes. It’s about feelings and personal perceptions, not about actual statistical data. Identity is threatened by so much economic and social dislocation and makes people feel vulnerable. Trump makes many people feel stronger, safer, more respected, more important, and engaged. The facts about Trump are often irrelevant, it is how Trump makes people feel that matters.

**Fear and Anger**

Emotion can work in very subtle ways in politics but there is nothing indirect or elusive about the influence of fear and anger on political dynamics. Arash Javanbakht (2019) has used his training as a neurologist and trauma physician to analyze “the politics of fear”. Fear can be exploited to push people into tribalism.

Tribalism is the biological loophole that many politicians have banked on for a long time: tapping into our fears and tribal instincts. Some examples are Nazism, the Ku Klux Klan, religious wars and the Dark Ages. The typical pattern is to give the other humans a different label than us, and say they are going to harm us or our resources, and to turn the other group into a concept. (Javanbakht, 2019, We learn fear, para. 5)
The extreme partisan divide in American politics has facilitated the political use of tribalism. This is particularly notable in the Republican party whose tribalism often centers around support for and identifying with Trump (Blake, 2018).

Politicians and the media very often use fear to circumvent our logic. I always say the U.S. media are disaster pornographers—they work too much on triggering their audiences’ emotions. They are kind of political reality shows, surprising to many from outside the U.S. (Javanbakht, 2019, Fear is illogical, para. 2)

Logic is slow. Emotion is fast. Both politicians and the media get more attention by focusing on emotion.

Fear can be a factor in politics in an unexpected manner. Geographic areas in the United States and Great Britain that contained high numbers of neurotic people voted more strongly for Donald Trump and for Brexit (Obschonka et al., 2018). Neurosis was identified from online surveys given to over 3 million people in the United States and over 417,000 people in Great Britain. Lead author, Martin Obschonka, indicated that the results of both votes was based on irrational motivation and therefore neither election was predicted by polls based on rational voting.

“The Trump and Brexit campaigns both promoted themes of fear and lost pride, which are related to neurotic personality traits that include persistent feelings of fear, anxiety, depression, envy or jealousy” (Society for Personality and Social Psychology, 2018, para. 5).

Trump generates fear as a constant. It is his signature style (Woodward, 2018). However, he also is highly proficient at generating anger. Perhaps too much attention has been paid to the consequences of engendering fear and not enough to provoking anger.

Many political observers have assumed that fear—of changing demographics and declining economic conditions—are motivating support for Trump, especially among those with less favorable views of certain groups. But our research suggests that the role of racial prejudice or sexism may be catalyzed more by anger. (Wayne, Valentino, & Oceno, 2016, How anger—not fear, para. 5)

Trump incites anger and encourages violence in his followers (Wright, 2018). “The best predictor of future violence is past violence. And the best-known cause of both is unregulated anger” (Matthews, 2019, para. 5).

That anger has a unique effect on cognition and decision making has been known since Aristotle’s writings 2000 years ago. Anger is so powerful “because it influences the situational construals most basic to judgment and decision making—perceptions of control, responsibility, and certainty—and because it lingers after the triggering events” (Lerner & Tiedens, 2006, p. 116). Jennifer Lerner and Larissa Tiedens conducted a major review of how anger impacts on judgment and decision making. They found that angry people are “eager to make decisions and are unlikely to stop and ponder or carefully analyze. This too derives primarily from the sense of certainty associated with anger” (2006, p. 132).

A major factor behind the emotional energy that fuels motivated reasoning is anger. Anger triggers bias. Elizabeth Suhay and Cendiz Erisen (2018) concluded that “anger likely plays a major role in motivating individuals to engage in the
biased assimilation of political information—an evaluative bias in favor of information that bolsters one’s views and against information that undercuts them” (abstract).

**Authoritarian Voters and Trump**

A significant number of research studies conducted during and after the 2016 presidential campaign have confirmed strong authoritarian traits among many Trump supporters. Matthew MacWilliams (2016a, 2016b) found that one single trait was the most powerful in predicting Trump support: Authoritarianism. Right-wing authoritarianism (RWA) has been considered both a personality trait (Altemeyer, 1996, 2006) and an ideological belief (Duckitt, 2001). Social dominance orientation (SDO) is an ideological belief that some groups are better than others and deserve to have more power and influence (Pratto, Sidanius, & Levin, 2006).

Greater endorsement of RWA (the aspect of authoritarianism specific to obedience and respect of authorities and punishment of those who violate social conventions) and SDO (the aspect of authoritarianism specific to preferring hierarchical intergroup relations) uniquely predicted more positive evaluations of Trump and a greater desire to vote for him (Choma & Hanoch, 2017, p. 5).

**Authoritarian Seduction Amid Flawed Humans**

Sinclair Lewis (1935) wrote a novel which captured the ease with which upstanding citizens can come to embrace authoritarianism in America. Cass Sunstein (2018) has shown that not only can it happen here, it actually is beginning to happen here. Freedom can be chaotic and difficult to navigate. “Human beings often lack important information, have limited attention, face self-control problems and suffer from behavioral biases” (Sunstein, 2019, p. 15). People tend to live in the present, failing to take in the future consequences of their choices. Sunstein (2019) speaks of the “present bias” which leaves people susceptible to decision making based on short-term pleasure and the avoidance of short-term pain. Taken all together, many people have come under the sway of Donald Trump’s message to “Make America Great Again” because it makes them feel good.

**Authoritarianism Among Republicans in General**

The Republican party has shifted dramatically toward authoritarianism in its unconditional support of Donald Trump as president, no matter what violations of the Constitution he perpetrates (Klass, 2020). The lure of power by association has
seduced Republican senators into ignoring the arguments for the impeachment of President Trump, making it clear that they are not interested in the damning facts but only in their only power. This is the essence of authoritarianism. Cameron Mackey and Heidi Dempsey (2018) examined the candidate preferences of students at an Alabama college during the 2015 presidential primary. They wanted to see how students in the Deep South responded to the various candidates, both Democratic and Republican. Personality characteristics were tested using standard measures of disgust sensitivity (DS), right-wing authoritarianism (RWA), religious fundamentalism (RF), belief in a just world (BJW) and religious questioning (QUEST). All of the measures except QUEST were linked with conservatism. QUEST is an indicator of social liberalism in a religious context (Batson, 1976). None of the tests differentiated between Trump voters and those who voted for other Republicans running in the primary. “This suggests that those who voted for Trump do not differ in ideology and personality from the traditional Republican voters” (Mackey & Dempsey, 2018, p. 15). They did find that “consistent with previous research, those who support Republican candidates in general are higher on RWA and RF and lower on QUEST” (p. 15). Even though right-wing authoritarianism and religious fundamentalism are associated with Republican voters in general (Altemeyer, 1996; Bouchard, 2009; Hedges, 2008; Ludeke et al., 2013), Trump voters have been differentiated from other conservatives in important ways.

**How Trump Supporters Differ from Republican Supporters Overall**

Trump supporters do share many traits in common with Republicans in general. They are against egalitarianism, are obedient to and respectful of authority, and believe in acting in accordance with social norms and the status quo. “What distinguished Trump supporters from other Republican supporters in the primary was a predilection for authoritarian aggression and group-based dominance” (Womick, Rothmund, Azevedo, King, & Jost, 2019, abstract). While Mackey and Dempsey (2018) found no difference between Trump supporters and Republicans overall, they failed to test for social dominance orientation (SDO) and aggression. Sadly, a key factor distinguishing many Trump supporters from Republicans in general, is adherence to social hierarchy and violence.

**Authoritarian Trump Supporters and Violence**

Samira Saramo (2017) speaks of the “meta-violence” of Trumpism. “The rise of Donald Trump and the popular movement that surrounds him has relied on emotional evocations of violence—fear, threats, aggression, hatred, and division” (p. 1).
Threats and bullying have become normalized. The number of hate crimes committed in the United States in the year after Trump’s election surged dramatically (Ravani, 2019; Sun Editorial, 2018).

The increase in the number of active hate groups in America since the election of Donald Trump is staggering. Authoritarian white supremacy is rising rapidly everywhere in the country according to the Intelligence Report of the Southern Poverty Law Center (2019). The increase in violence across the country is significant. Prominent liberals have been targeted by bombs sent to their homes (Lach, 2018; Rashbaum, 2018). A portion of that violence is directly aimed at supporting Donald Trump against critics.

**Epigenetics of Authoritarianism**

In studying authoritarianism, Bob Altemeyer (1996, 2006) has focused on specific traits which he believes to be part of an individual’s personality. The key factors in RWA are fear, aggressiveness, obedience to authority figures, and adherence to a specific culturally based social structure. Support for his theory of RWA as a part of human personality comes from research showing close relationships between RWA scores for parents and their children (Dhont, Roets, & Van Hiel, 2013). The epigenetics of how the social environment triggers genetic potential has been well established (Boardman, 2011; Champagne, 2010), supporting Altemeyer’s personality construct in a developmental interactionist paradigm.

The capacity for openness has a well-established genetic contribution which affects the transmission of dopamine in the prefrontal cortex of the brain (DeYoung et al., 2011). A feature of the authoritarian personality noted by Altemeyer (2006) is the need for a hierarchical social structure, which is associated with a closed personality type (Johnson et al., 2017). The epigenetics of dopamine transmission in the prefrontal cortex may well be a factor in authoritarianism.

**Extremists and Over-Confidence**

True believers on either the extreme right or the extreme left show a strong tendency to consider their beliefs to be absolutely correct. This over-confidence in their cognitive abilities makes them unlikely to revise their beliefs in light of new information. “Our results show that radicalism is associated with reductions in metacognitive sensitivity, i.e., the reliability with which subjects distinguish between their correct and incorrect beliefs” (Rollwage, Dolan, & Fleming, 2018, p. 4018). When the Dunning-Kruger effect, where some people are not aware of their lack of ability and therefore have an over-inflated belief in themselves (Kruger & Dunning, 1999), is combined with the metacognitive inability to recognize false beliefs, an
authoritarian foundation is facilitated. This can also apply to religious fundamentalism (Hedges, 2008).

**Low Information Voters**

Many Americans have scant political knowledge (Shenckman, 2008). “A lack of political knowledge and a de-emphasis on cognitive processing create an opening for emotions to predominate in the decision-making process” (Fording & Schram, 2017, p. 675). The fear and hatred generated by Trump seduced considerably more low information voters than knowledgeable voters. Trump is an extreme practitioner of the paranoid style of politics which utilizes conspiracy theories and fear. “Anti-intellectualism can slide into know-nothingism…. A manipulated populism replaces democracy” (Fording & Schram, 2017, p. 685).

**Political Knowledge and the Dunning-Kruger Effect**

Voters are largely ignorant of political information (Brennan, 2016). What information most people have is politically partisan. The larger problem is that many voters are “ignorant of their ignorance,” what Kruger and Dunning (1999) famously called the “double burden of incompetence.” Based on his research on political partisanship and the Dunning-Kruger effect, Ian Anson (2018, p. 1185) notes that Republicans use partisan cues to judge peers’ political knowledge to a greater extent than do Democrats. Such a thesis speaks to the burgeoning literature on ‘asymmetric polarization’, which finds that Republicans have become more committed ideologues than Democrats in recent years (Grossmann & Hopkins, 2016).

Given that the Republican Party is almost wholly behind Trump, the direct route to authoritarianism in American is being driven by the lock-step support of ideologues driven to win at all costs. All the warnings of history are lost on those who do not know history and those that ignore it in their quest for continuing power.

**Intelligence Factors**

Conservatives score lower than liberals on SAT tests of vocabulary and analogy (Stankov, 2009). The average conservative is not very well educated. According to Lazar Stankov this is partially explained by statistics indicating that Red states tend to have poorer educational systems and are frequently low in economic resources. There may be a tendency toward lower intelligence associated with far-right authoritarians. “The present meta-analysis reveals relationships of small-to-moderate
strength between (lower) cognitive ability and right-wing ideology and prejudice” (Onraet et al., 2015, p. 618).

Liberals typically have higher verbal intelligence than conservatives (Carl, 2014, 2015). When it comes to more extreme conservatism, “support for Trump was better predicted by lower verbal ability than education or income” (Ganzach, Hanoch, & Choma, 2018, p. 924). The fact that socioeconomic factors were less relevant than intellectual ones in determining support for Donald Trump is of great consequence (Ganzach, 2018). It explains how many well-off people were still lured by Trump.

**Numeracy and Authoritarianism**

A relationship between numerical ability and political orientation has recently been established. “Those who performed worse on objective numeracy tasks were higher in right-wing ideology or identified as socially conservative” (Choma, Sumantry, & Yaniv, 2019, p. 420). Additionally, support for the over-confidence link to authoritarians as well as the Dunning-Kruger effect of believing one knows more than one does, was evident: “those who strongly (vs. weakly) endorsed right-wing ideologies believed they are good with numbers yet performed worse on numeracy tasks” (Choma et al., 2019, p. 412).

**Education and Authoritarianism**

The white working-class has been identified as more authoritarian than other groups by Seymour Lipset (1959). More recent examinations of this premise have refined the relationship between class and authoritarianism. “The more the operationalization of class is based upon differences in education, the stronger the observed relation between class and authoritarianism. In fact, it is mainly the poorly educated who are authoritarian” (Houtman, 2003, p. 86). The uniformity with which lesser educated voters supported Trump is revealing (Brennan, 2016).

**Anti-intellectualism**

The is a long history of anti-intellectualism in American culture. Hostility toward intellectuals has been used by politicians from George Wallace, Richard Nixon, Ronald Reagan, and Spiro Agnew to Mitt Romney, all Republicans but for Lyndon Johnson who was no fan of intellectuals (Roller, 2012).

Donald Trump has taken anti-intellectualism to a new level. This is not surprising for a man who hardly reads and doesn’t listen to advisors when being briefed (Levin, 2018). There are profound political implications for this culture of anti-intellectualism
in the United States (Motta, 2017). People who do not trust information from the “intellectual elites” were more likely to vote for Trump. Anti-intellectuals disagree with scientific consensus on global warming because they don’t trust “experts”. Low verbal intelligence is linked to anti-intellectualism, making it likely that people in this category have difficulty following scientific explanations.

Anti-intellectualism discourages citizens from siding with experts on matters of scientific consensus and can more broadly help explain why voters support candidates who criticize and denigrate scientists and experts. In most cases, these effects were substantively large and statistically significant; even when assessing the effect of anti-intellectualism alongside a number of other powerful determinants of voter behavior in 2016. (Motta, 2017, p. 32)

**Racial Resentment and the Trump Voter**

Smith and Hanley (2018) argue that racial resentment and prejudice in authoritarians is based on aggressiveness not submission to authority. The desire is for a dominating leader who will penalize the “undeserving”. It is therefore necessary for authoritarian leaders to be both intolerant and also punitive. Authoritarians take great satisfaction in watching moral outsiders being aggressively forced to submit to the will of the leader.

Authoritarianism is not the wish to follow any and every authority but, rather, the wish to support a strong and determined authority who will ‘crush evil and take us back to our true path’ (Smith & Hanley, 2018, p. 196).

**Male Status and Support for Trump**

“American men today earn about 20% more than their female counterparts and hold 96% of Fortune 500 CEO positions. They constitute more than 80% of the House and the Senate, and have an unrivaled 44-0 streak in winning the presidency” (Cassino, 2016, para. 1). Nevertheless, men who feel that they are losing their place in society view Trump as an advocate for dominant male status (Cassino, 2016). The Atlantic magazine conducted a poll in October, 2016, asking for degrees of agreement or disagreement with the statement: “These days society seems to punish men just for acting like men”. Republicans or conservatives were more likely than Democrats or liberals to support the notion that men are being discriminated against just for being men (Khazan, 2016).

A major problem for achieving gender equality is that many men have a zero-sum perspective on discrimination where a decrease in anti-women bias automatically triggers an increase in anti-male bias. In a zero-sum world, if one group advances another group falls back. “The historically dominant social group (older men in this case) perceive any status gained by a socially subordinate group (women) as coming at the dominant group’s expense” (Kehn & Ruthig, 2013, abstract). These
findings support social dominance orientation (SDO) theory (Pratto et al., 2006), “involving individuals’ tendency to view people in terms of social hierarchies with the socially dominant group promoting hierarchy maintenance” (Kehn & Ruthig, 2013, p. 294). The same dynamic holds true for racial discrimination (Norton & Sommers, 2011). If African Americans achieve a better quality of life, believers in social dominance feel that their own status is threatened.

Andre Kehn and Joelle Ruthig (2013) found a significant difference in zero-sum thinking between older men and younger men, with only older men believing in a zero-sum gender hierarchy. However, Dan Cassino (2016) found that younger men now also engage in zero-sum thinking and 41% of Republican men of all ages believe that they are being discriminated against (an idea which Donald Trump frequently expounds upon). The percentage of men believing that they are discriminated against is much lower for Democrats (10%).

Feeling discriminated against is all about perception, which may or may not align with reality. Kobrynowicz and Branscombe (1997) found that perceived discrimination was higher in men who experienced low self-esteem but who also had a high degree of personal assertiveness. Personality factors interact with the perception of discrimination.

**Hostility Toward Women**

The feminist movement has been perceived as an ongoing threat by many conservatives, and most certainly by authoritarians. Trump supporters in the 2016 election were much more likely to express hostile sexism, and the greater the degree of hostile sexism the stronger the support for Trump (Ratliff, Redford, Conway, & Smith, 2019). Mischa Haider (2018) argues that the political persecution of transgender people by Trump and other Republicans is not really about transphobia at all.

Women’s liberation is what autocrats are attempting to quell with anti-trans measures. Strongmen have made their hostility and contempt for women clear, whether it is through promotion of rape as was done by the Filipino leader Rodrigo Duterte, or pushing a US supreme court nominee credibly accused of sexual assault while insulting his accusers, in the case of Donald Trump.

Substantial evidence exists showing that gender equality and greater participation of women in the democratic process leads to more inclusive and socially oriented forms of government. Autocrats rely heavily on the “might is right” model and perpetuation of socially constructed violent models of misogyny in order to exert power, and women’s equality and liberation challenges basic tenets of totalitarianism. It is not a coincidence that with increasing pushes towards gender equality and justice across the globe, patriarchal forces are striking back violently and propelling anti-women leaders such as Brazil’s Jair Bolsonaro towards power. (Haider, 2018, para. 3, 4)

Many educated Republican women are starting to notice. The 2018 Congressional election saw a dramatic shift to Democrats in voting for the House of Representatives (Jordan & Balz, 2018).
Mass Murder and Anger/Hatred Toward Women

President Trump has unleashed the worst impulses harbored by angry men who have long simmered in their resentment of women’s ascendance, slow and painful as that ascendance has been. Trump’s flagrant sexism and open disparagement of women, while role-modeling toxic masculinity, has helped to turn resentment into action for vulnerable men.

There is a robust symbiosis between misogyny and white supremacy; the two ideologies are powerfully intertwined. While not all misogynists are racists, and not every white supremacist is a misogynist, a deep-seated loathing of women acts as a connective tissue between many white supremacists, especially those in the alt right, and their lesser-known brothers in hate like incels (involuntary celibates), MRAs (Men’s Rights Activists) and PUAs (Pick Up Artists). …. ADL considers misogyny a dangerous and underestimated component of extremism, and this report marks the start of an ongoing effort to investigate the ways in which people in the white supremacist, incel and MRA orbits feed and inform one another’s poisonous hatred of women. (Anti-Defamation League Report, 2018, p. 5).

Mother Jones magazine is known for tenacious reporting and excellent research. The staff have created a detailed database pertaining to the ever-increasing number of mass shootings. The data reveal

- a stark pattern of misogyny and domestic violence among many attackers …. There is also a strong overlap between toxic masculinity and public mass shootings, according to our latest investigation …. Two of the shooters bore the hallmarks of so-called “incels”—a subculture of virulent misogynists who self-identify as “involuntarily celibate” and voice their rage and revenge fantasies against women online. (Follman, 2019, para. 1, 2, 3)

In the 2016 primary elections, hostility towards women was a significant predictor of support for Trump (Wayne et al., 2016). The more that an individual was hostile toward women the more likely that person was to vote for Trump (over far more qualified Republicans).

Anti-gay

In general, conservatives have a much greater disgust sensitivity than liberals (Inbar, Pizarro, Iyer, & Haidt, 2012; Xu, Karinen, Chapman, Peterson, & Plaks, 2020). The degree of disgust sensitivity shown by conservatives predicts the degree of dislike exhibited toward gay people (Inbar, Pizarro, Knobe, & Bloom, 2009; Terrizzi Jr., Shooka, & Ventis, 2010). Authoritarians have an especially high degree of disgust sensitivity. Body odor disgust sensitivity (BODS) was measured by Liuza et al. (2018) who found that “authoritarianism fully explained the positive association between BODS and support for Donald Trump” (abstract). The higher the degree of sensitivity to body odor the greater the likelihood of voting for Trump. The researchers specifically pointed out that “high levels of disgust sensitivity for body odours
predicts authoritarian attitudes that imply resistance to social change and motivates
separation of groups and individuals” (Liuzza et al., 2018, Discussion, para. 2). This
philosophy of separation targets gay men and lesbians in particular. Scoring high on
tests of authoritarianism predicts a high degree of prejudice towards gay men and
lesbians (Crawford, Brandt, Inbar, & Mallinas, 2016).

**Anti-Semitism, Nativism, and Authoritarianism**

There is a profound link between anti-Semitism and authoritarianism, both histori-
cal and contemporary. “Individuals with extreme anti-Semitic attitudes differ sig-
nificantly from those without anti-Semitic attitudes with regard to the extent of
authoritarianism, readiness for violence, approval of the repetition of National
Socialism, and political orientation” (Frindte, Wettig, & Wammetsberger, 2005,
abstract). This research was done in Germany where the Nazi (National Socialism)
attraction still simmers despite vigorous efforts on the part of the government to
repress it.

James Ron and Howard Lavine (2019) have examined nativist authoritarianism
in the United States. “Our survey research … indicates that the biggest threat to the
rights of the Jewish people comes from homegrown American nativists. These peo-
dle dislike all manner of groups they view as foreign to this country …” (para. 2).
Similar findings were reported in a comparison of American and Czech nationals
regarding anti-Semitism and nativist authoritarianism (Dunbar & Simonova, 2003).
A high score on Altemeyer’s authoritarianism scale predicted both anti-Semitism
and anti-Black racism in the United States and anti-Semitism and anti-Roma
(Gypsy) racism in the Czech Republic.

**Anti-immigrant Nativism**

A major factor driving Trump support in the 2016 election was anti-immigrant
nativism (Young, 2017). The Trump slogan, “Make America Great Again”, is all
about going back to an earlier time when America was more white. The slogan is
deeply anti-immigrant in the modern era when the majority of immigrants to the
United States are people of color. Immigrants are viewed by nativists as “an existen-
tial threat to culture and national identity” (Stenner & Haidt, 2018, p. 176). Because
of the strong relationship between authoritarianism and nativism (Dunbar &
Simonova, 2003; Ron & Lavine, 2019) being strongly anti-immigrant is a likely
indicator of authoritarianism.
Belief in Anti-White Discrimination

Many white people feel that discrimination against them is increasing as a direct result of discrimination against people of color decreasing (zero-sum thinking). “These changes in Whites’ conceptions of racism are extreme enough that Whites have now come to view anti-White bias as a bigger societal problem than anti-Black bias” (Norton & Sommers, 2011, p. 215). This zero-sum approach to available resources by whites is not supported by the research data (Payne, 2019). Whites still receive disproportionate benefits from the system.

Perception is more powerful than statistics: “polls show that a substantial number of white voters believe they face discrimination. They appear to be concerned that employers and schools may give preference to nonwhite candidates” (Badger & Cohn, 2019, para. 20). Republicans in general feel more threatened by anti-white discrimination. Trump supporters are more likely to feel that they have personally experienced anti-white discrimination.

The specter of America becoming majority non-white heightens the concern over anti-white discrimination. “A large if not majority share of white voters, and a majority of Republicans, say this change will threaten American customs and values—a prospect that they say makes them anxious, even angry” (Badger & Cohn, 2019, para. 3). People who are strong Trump supporters are more likely to believe in the existence of anti-white discrimination.

Democracy Can Prevail

Maintaining democracy has always been a struggle. Many books have been written over the centuries about threats to democracy and strategies for saving democracy. Senator and 2020 presidential candidate, Bernie Sanders (2018) sees similarities in the growth of authoritarianism worldwide. “We need to understand that the struggle for democracy is bound up with the struggle against kleptocracy and corruption. That is true here in the United States as well as abroad” (Sanders, 2018, para. 27). Authoritarianism is a response to failed economic policies which have concentrated wealth and power for the few and left little for the many. Bernie Sanders believes that personal engagement can save democracy. “In a time of exploding wealth and technology, we have the potential to create a decent life for all people. Our job is to build on our common humanity and do everything that we can to oppose all of the forces, whether unaccountable government power or unaccountable corporate power, who try to divide us up and set us against each other” (para. 44).

In response to the 2016 election of Donald Trump, Timothy Snyder has written a book on surviving and resisting tyranny. “Americans today are no wiser than the Europeans who saw democracy yield to fascism, Nazism, or communism in the twentieth century” (Snyder, 2017, p. 13). One strategy for fighting tyranny is
supporting key institutions in a free society: newspapers, labor unions, public radio, public television, public education, etc. Snyder urges us to believe in truth. Today, there are real heroes worldwide, in the fight against fascism and the desire to maintain democracy. Samantha Power (2019), ambassador to the United Nations under Barack Obama, has created the term “upstanders” to designate those who fight against authoritarian genocide. In contrast to bystanders, upstanders do not watch passively as horrible wrongs are done. Today, there are real heroes worldwide, upstanders in the fight against authoritarianism, fascism, and totalitarianism. These upstanders are actively trying to make democracy work.

**Austrian Grandmothers**

Austria’s government has become much more right of center since 2000. Push back is coming against the right wing fascist party and the very conservative government in Austria by grandmothers who, as children, lived through the aftermath of WWII (Eddy, 2019). “Grannies Against the Right” protest march every Thursday. “Precisely because of their age, their presence serves as a reminder of past horrors born of intolerance and of the democratic gains that the Grannies want to preserve” (Eddy, 2019, p. A4). They are working on an international resistance system against the right wing and extremists from Europe and even beyond Europe. Grannies Against the Right was founded by a single woman, Monika Salzer, 71, who created the group on Facebook late in 2017.

**Hong Kong Protesters**

Hong Kong residents (especially young people and students), have been fighting the crack-down on democracy with months of street protests starting in June 2019 and continuing into 2020 (Associated Press, 2020; Beech, 2020). Despite violent police reactions, protesters continue to flock to the streets. Their courage is a lesson to the world. They very well may not succeed this time, especially since the Trump government has done nothing to directly support them, but they refuse to give up.

While the Hong Kong protests have been fed by many grievances, including income gaps and shortages of affordable housing, the hot molten lava of this volcano is that many Hong Kongers self-identify as free men and women and they viscerally reject the ruling bargain the Communist Party has imposed on mainland China and would like to impose on Hong Kong: To get rich is glorious, but to speak your mind is dangerous. (Friedman, 2019, para. 3)
David Magerman

David Magerman is an American computer scientist, philanthropist, and current managing partner in Differential Ventures of Philadelphia. He was formerly with Renaissance Technologies until he was fired for speaking out against the criminal activities of Robert Mercer’s Cambridge Analytica company which illegally helped to elect Trump (Baram, 2018). Magerman gave up a powerful and lucrative position with Renaissance Technologies (which he had helped build) to stand up against anti-democratic political practices being undertaken by the company. By speaking out, Magerman helped to make visible the dark influence of Robert Mercer, a strong force for anti-democracy in America today (Baram, 2018).

Madeleine Albright

Former Secretary of State, Madeline Albright (2018), lived through fascism. She recognizes the threat and is raising the alarm in defense of democracy:

First even among the most ardent and extreme people I met over five years of research in Louisiana, I found specific issues on which there was potential for coalition—for example, safeguarding children on the Internet, reducing prison populations for non-violent offenders, protecting against commercialization of the human genome, pushing for good jobs and re-building our rail system, roads, bridges—America’s infrastructure. In fact, most of my Louisiana Trump supporters wanted to mend its social infrastructure too. Of all, we need to defend a free press. We need to understand the importance of a judicial branch, and we need to call out the president when he doesn’t obey the law. It’s important for people to run for office and for those of us who don’t run to support them and explain the importance of voting. We need to talk to people we disagree with and listen to opinions we don’t agree with. We need to respect people’s opinions. And, listen to millennials. (Lutz, 2017, para, 12).

Jane Goodall

Any world with Jane Goodall in it has hope. Her book Reason for Hope (Goodall, 2000) is an extraordinary revelation of human resilience. The example she sets makes her the logical choice for the Nobel Peace Prize. Jane Goodall has not spent her life studying and then saving the chimpanzees, she has also devoted herself to helping the villagers of Africa survive and adapt to a changing world. Jane Goodall became a citizen of Tanzania and continues to advocate for everything that is diametrically opposed to authoritarianism in this world.
Many other examples of fighting for democracy exist. The result of the 2016 election was to energize women to get involved in politics and even to run for office (Hayes, 2018). A record number of female Democrats were elected. The voter turnout in the 2018 mid-term elections was record-setting (Krogstad, Noe-Bustamente, & Flores, 2019).

The partisan split dividing America is not a new phenomenon. “The battles between the blue staters and the red staters are close in spirit to the feuding between Hamiltonians and Jeffersonians in our country’s first days” (Tomasky, 2019, p. 189). Political polarization may be nothing new, but democracy cannot function when one group experiences an existential crisis when the other group has won. Polarization needs to be manageable (Tomasky, 2019). Journalist Ezra Klein (2020) accepts that extreme partisanship is going to be around for quite a while and suggests ways to manage government despite political polarization.

Recently, books have emerged on healing the partisan split (Gerzon, 2016; Lee, 2018). There are many grassroot groups reaching out to bridge the partisan divide. The Bridge Alliance (https://www.bridgealliance.us/all_members) co-founded by Debilyn Molineaux and David Nevins, connects grassroot groups all over the country. The Bridge Alliance exists to “upgrade our democratic republic”. Members have to agree to the Four Principles:

1. Alliance members believe that our country is stronger when our leaders work together constructively to meet the challenges we face.
2. Alliance members advocate a stronger voice for citizens in the political and social process.
3. Alliance members believe that respectful, civil discourse is necessary for genuine problem-solving to address our great challenges.
4. Alliance members learn from each other and align efforts in mutual support to raise the collective visibility and impact of all member organizations. The Bridge Alliance currently has 100 members across the country, including such diverse groups as LivingRoom Conversations, The Coffee Party USA, Democracy Works, Digital Citizen, Kitchen Table Democracy, Everyday Democracy, and the 92nd St. Y.

A dramatic example of profound change that can happen when going outside of one’s own social circle is the turn-around on abortion by evangelical minister, Rob Schenck (2019). For 30 years Schenck led a crusade against Roe v Wade. But in the last decade his experience of human diversity has altered. “I have witnessed firsthand and now appreciate the full significance of the terrible poverty, social
marginalization and baldfaced racism that persists in many of the states whose legislators are now essentially banning abortion” (Schenck, 2019, para. 4).

Law professor, John A. Powell (director of the Haas Institute for a Fair and Inclusive Society at the University of California at Berkeley) focuses on the practice of Othering which divides people into us and them. “The opposite of Othering is not “saming”, it is belonging. And belonging does not insist that we are all the same. It means we recognise and celebrate our differences, in a society where ‘we the people’ includes all the people” (Powell, 2017, para. 20). Powell speaks of bridging as the dynamic that is needed to counter Othering.

Arlie Hochschild has remained connected to many of the people she studied. She found that considerable common ground exists between her liberal orientation and their conservative worldview.

Even among the most ardent and extreme people I met over five years of research in Louisiana, I found specific issues on which there was potential for coalition—for example, safeguarding children on the Internet, reducing prison populations for non-violent offenders, protecting against commercialization of the human genome, pushing for good jobs and re-building our rail system, roads, bridges—America’s infrastructure. In fact, most of my Louisiana Trump supporters wanted to mend its social infrastructure too. (Hochschild, 2018, para. 6)

Alice Rivlin, former director of the Congressional Budget Office and vice chair of the Federal Reserve, died while writing (Rivlin, 2020) Divided we fall: Why consensus matters. “This book is a practical guide for Americans across the political spectrum who are agonizing over partisan warfare, incivility, and policy gridlock and looking for ways they can help to get our democratic policy process back on a constructive track before it is too late” (Brookings Institution Press, 2020, para. 4).

Before dying, Rivlin (with help from her son and daughter-in-law) finished an article titled, “My final thoughts on how to heal divisions in America.”

The rise of “red state” versus “blue state” hyperpartisanship has now metastasized into increased racism, nationalism, xenophobia, and homophobia that are far too often expressed through violent attacks. A truly great country worthy of a modern exceptionalism would rise to the challenge to heal the wounds of hate and division by giving all Americans opportunities to participate in a growing economy that offers them shared prosperity. (Rivlin, Rivlin, & Rivlin, 2019, para. 2)

Rivlin offers the perspective of an economist on the devastating consequences of the extreme income inequality in America. “Stark differences in current economic security and future prospects bring fear, distrust, and resentment” (Rivlin et al., 2019, para. 3). She demonstrates how attention to both vertical and horizontal income inequality can stimulate the healing process. Vertical inequality in cities is visible, horizontal (geographic) inequality is less salient. Horizontal inequality appears in the vast parts of the non-coastal United States suffering from the continuing decline in agriculture and the loss of an industrial base.

The best approach in a country where the federal government is debilitated by partisan strife, is joining together to solve problems at the regional level. Some larger and smaller non-coastal cities are leading the way, with local leaders connecting with groups that include business, labor, educators, law enforcement, and
community representatives. Regional economic plans reflect the input of these diverse groups that work together to make better paying jobs possible. “Regional economic strategies generally involve investment in education, innovation, infrastructure, and healthy communities” (Rivlin et al., 2019, para. 9).

**Democracy Will Prevail**

Michael Tomasky (2019) examines American democracy from its inception, details its flaws, and offers ideas for its salvation. He has a 14-point agenda to reduce polarization and save democracy. His points include fixes to the political system (end gerrymandering, introduce ranked-choice voting, revive moderate Republicanism, etc.), changing college to include a year of national service, greatly expanding civics education, and demanding that corporate and business leaders make a commitment to social responsibility.

**The Democracy Fix**

To make Tomasky’s agenda possible it will be necessary to bring like-minded people to power. In *The Democracy Fix*, Caroline Fredrickson (2019) details how right-wing conservatives laid the framework for endless power, despite being a statistical minority in the United States. She then lays out a plan for undoing the rigged system, establishing democratic systems of representation and governance, and giving “power back to the people.” Progressives don’t have the money, media power and institutions that right-wing conservatives rely on. A singular strength of progressives is the number of artists and entertainers who support democracy and can produce effective means to engage the interest of diverse groups in empowering ways. Fredrickson shows where to fight and how to fight to achieve a more democratic society. Despite authoritarian threats “democracies can renew themselves. American politics was coming apart in the era of the Weathermen and Watergate, but returned to health in the 1980’s” (The Economist, 2019, p. 9). Former Commander of NATO, Retired Admiral James Stavridis (2018) argues that democracy will prevail despite the authoritarian populism overtaking the world at this point in time.

The disorienting speed of change has provided an opening for authoritarian leaders, who tout their ability to respond rapidly to shifting events. Faster communication, the ability of computers to solve problems that once took weeks or months to crack and the shrinking news cycle are changing the environment in which government does business. That can give the advantage to one strong voice over the kinds of deliberative committees and blue-ribbon panels that are a mainstay of Western government decision making. (Stavridis, 2018, p. 33)

Adaptation to the rapid cycle of change is already beginning to happen. The declarations of the demagogue typically do not solve real problems that continue to haunt humanity. Climate change has become climate crisis while right-wing conservatives
and the American president continue to deny the existence of the problem (Leonard, 2019). Devastating floods, frequent and widespread wildfires, and extended droughts have a way of getting people’s attention. Complex, long-term solutions are starting to look better than the demagogic quick fixes that fail just as quickly.

The devastating COVID-19 pandemic has made bitterly clear the price that is paid in sickness and death by having an incompetent demagogue as leader of the United States. By May 27, 2020, just 4 months into the epidemic, the death toll in the U.S. reached 100,000 (Fisher, 2020). “There’s really no other way to say this: When it comes to his response to the spread of COVID-19 in the United States, the combination of President Donald Trump’s arrogance and sheer incompetence is killing people” (Garcia, 2020, para 1). Trump’s denials of the seriousness of the virus made his failures glaringly visible on the full range of media platforms (Lipton et al., 2020, para. 1). Trump’s anti-science stance not only damaged the government’s medical response to the virus, but also added a bizarre advocacy of suspect treatments such as ingesting bleach (Hyde, 2020). The world has reacted with shock at Trump’s behavior and pity for the U.S. (Borger et al., 2020).

**Resilience of Democracies**

Democracy has many disadvantages compared to authoritarianism (Mussolini did make the trains run on time). With both China and Russia are mired in extreme totalitarianism, populist movements flaring up in both Eastern and Western Europe, and Trump undermining the very tenets of democracy in America, things do look grim at the moment. However, democracies have proven resilient. At the beginning of the twentieth century there were 24 democracies in the world. Now there are over 100. Even extreme authoritarian president Recep Erdogan in Turkey has recently (June 23, 2019) suffered a setback as democracy prevailed in the election of the mayor of Istanbul, where an opposition candidate succeeded over Erdogan’s hand-picked candidate (Gall, 2019).

Another boon for democracy is the growing role of women in governance. Powerful female champions of democracy and civil rights have emerged around the world, from Michelle Bachelet of Chile to Jacinda Ardern of New Zealand and Ellen Johnson Sirleaf of Liberia, the first elected female head of state in Africa. Female representation has increased in national parliaments, from 15% in 2002 to 19.8% in 2012, the most recent year available.

The rise to power of those representing 50% of the world’s population can only be good for the legitimacy and durability of democracy. Moreover, countries with higher levels of gender equality are less likely to engage in internal or external conflict, according to the World Bank. Women’s participation in conflict prevention and resolution often helps ensure success; agreements that include women and civil-society groups are 64% less likely to fail than those that do not, according to a U.N.-sponsored study. (Stavridis, 2018, p. 37)

I’m a liberal and an optimist. I believe that democracy will prevail because people like Diet Eman display the extraordinary courage that our species is capable of. Her obituary in the New York Times (September 12, 2019), celebrates a life of 99 years
that included risking her life to save Dutch Jews during the Nazi occupation of The Netherlands in WWII (Roberts, 2019). I grew up with the history of my own Mother’s courage in fighting totalitarianism (Rabin, 2009). I can’t help believing that the human response to oppression is ultimately stronger than the forces of authoritarianism.

American democracy was once a beacon onto the world but the oppression of people of color, LGBT people, women, and many others typified American society. The hope is that we will come out of this authoritarian nightmare a more equal, more fair, more cohesive democracy, and that the fight against tyranny will propel us forward to a better society.

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