Fear, Anger, and Authoritarianism: Emotional Pathways in Democratic and Hybrid Regimes

[1]Aiden Lee, [2]Brandon Lee, [3]Ian Chu

[1]Dulwich College Seoul, Seoul, South Korea
[2]Crescenta Valley High School, Glendale, CA, USA
[3]La Canada High School, La Canada Flintridge, CA, USA

Abstract

This paper synthesizes research across political psychology, communication, and comparative politics to explore how fear-based messaging can influence support for authoritarian policies among democracies and hybrid regimes. It investigates the relationship between the two variables through the theoretical lenses of authoritarian predispositions and affective intelligence, distinguishing fear from anger, and showing how threat appraisals, identity relevance, salience, and elite framing can condition outcomes. By analyzing case studies from the post-9/11 United States, European terror episodes, the COVID-19 Era, the Central-Eastern European radical-right discourse, and the politics of Azerbaijan, the paper argues that fear cues can increase people's willingness to trade civil liberties for protection when they believe threats are real and proximate, and when authorities frame issues through a lens of national security. However, the paper also distinguishes how different types of fear can produce different outcomes: a fear of external "others" sways public opinion towards authoritarian outcomes, while those with a fear of the government tend to resist authority and champion civil liberties. The study concludes by pinpointing gaps in cross-cultural, causal, and long-term research, and by recommending safeguards such as transparent risk communication, limited emergency powers, and literacy against fear-mongering and disinformation to strengthen democratic norms and resilience.

Keywords: *fear-based messaging, Authoritarian predispositions, Affective Intelligence Theory, threat appraisal, identity salience, elite framing, political psychology, comparative politics, Authoritarianism*

Introduction

Fear is a powerful force in politics. From classical philosophy to modern political science, scholars have observed that threats and fears can profoundly influence public opinion and the stability of governments. Historically, rulers have often exploited fear as the ultimate tool to manipulate citizens into obedience because, as Niccolo Machiavelli best put it in his political treatise, *The Prince*, “It is better to be feared than loved, if you cannot have both” [1]. Indeed, inciting fear of instability, external enemies, or the alien “other” have long been observed as common and efficient ploys in the authoritarian handbook, as people anxious about security eagerly trade away their freedoms for protection. Similarly, anger, a closely related emotion that also originates from the amygdala, likewise plays a crucial role in politics by channeling public grievances into demands for punishment or change. Whether by inciting fear of immigrants, stoking anger at elites, or causing panic over security threats, we often see politicians exploiting these two powerful emotions to galvanize support in contemporary times to erode civil liberties. In addition, the reemergence of right-wing populism, the public reaction to terrorist attacks, and the controversies of the COVID-19 pandemic all demonstrate how emotional responses to threats can shift public opinion toward authoritarian or extreme positions, sometimes at the expense of liberal democratic norms and civil rights.

Nevertheless, fear and anger do not always produce the same outcomes. While fear can sometimes lead citizens to rally behind a protective authority, it can also foster caution against submitting to the state. Anger, in contrast, tends to be “activating”—it can drive people to endorse aggressive policies or fuel mobilization against perceived enemies, whether imagined or real. Recognizing these distinctions is crucial in an era where the rise of political polarization and authoritarianism is challenging the foundations of many democracies. Indeed, from fears of terrorism and immigration fueling European far-right parties to concerns about economic and cultural change in the United States driving white nationalism and racist movements, recent times have witnessed a surge of nationalist and populist sentiments that capitalize on voter anxiety across the globe. Thus, these patterns indicate the importance of understanding how, why, and under what conditions emotions like fear and anger can influence the public’s political calculus.

The following paper hopes to address these questions by examining the complex relationship between threat, emotion, and authoritarian attitudes. First, it outlines the classic theories of the authoritarian personality and the role that predispositions and socialization play in shaping threat responses. Next, drawing upon evidence from the post-9/11 era, the study explores how threats such as terrorism, war, mass migration, or public health crises can sway the public towards authoritarian tendencies. The third section is dedicated to the crucial distinction between fear and anger as political emotions and employs the Affective Intelligence Theory (AIA) to explain why these emotions often lead to divergent political outcomes. This is accomplished by reviewing studies describing how fear can sometimes discourage support for extreme policies while anger can ignite it [2]. Subsequently, the paper explores how authoritarian and populist leaders strategically employ fear and anger in their rhetoric to galvanize support for themselves and their policies. Similarly, the fifth section discusses how authoritarian regimes maintain stability and cling to power by manipulating threat perceptions and fears [3,4]. The paper also highlights the COVID-19 pandemic as a special case study exploring how fear can impact political attitudes by increasing public tolerance for restrictive measures and polarizing reactions

along ideological lines [5]. Finally, it presents recommendations to combat the manipulation of fear-based messaging in politics by authoritarian politicians and outlines directions for future research.

Authoritarian Personalities and the Power of Threat

While the discourse of authoritarianism as a political ideology has ancient philosophical roots traceable to Plato's emphasis on aristocratic rule, the study of authoritarianism through psychology is a relatively modern invention. By the 1940s, scholars began to view authoritarianism as more than just a form of governance, but also as a personality type or a deep-seated predisposition. For instance, in his 1941 book, *Escape from Freedom,* Erich Fromm explored the psychological factors that can lead individuals to embrace authoritarianism. Fromm argued that while people may desire freedom, they become overwhelmed by the anxieties and insecurities that come with it, leading them to seek the perceived security and structure offered by authoritarian systems, i.e., their "escape from freedom" [6]. Thus, in Fromm's perspective, people adopted authoritarian tendencies as a defense mechanism against feelings of fear and powerlessness that may arise in a world of liberty.

Nevertheless, it was Adorno et al. (1950)'s landmark study, *The Authoritarian Personality*, that truly revolutionized the discourse [7]. In their groundbreaking sociological book, Theodor Adorno and his colleagues portrayed authoritarianism as a syndrome of traits rooted in childhood experiences, including submissiveness to authority, aggression toward "out-groups," rigid conformity to social norms, and intolerance of ambiguity, which they called the "authoritarian personality" (AP). Motivated by a desire to understand how ordinary people could come to support fascist or extremist regimes in the brief aftermath of World War II and the Holocaust, the study pinpointed deep psychological insecurities and "fear of the Other" as core factors that predisposed individuals to embrace anti-democratic movements [7]. To measure an individual's AP, Adorno and his colleagues developed the F-scale (Fascism scale), arguing that those scoring high on authoritarianism were psychologically dispositioned to prejudice and fascist sympathies. Their findings suggest that such individuals possess an inherent eagerness to respond to perceived threats with aggression and obedience. In other words, they are psychologically inclined to champion security and order, even at the cost of freedom and civil liberties, whenever they feel endangered.

Building upon these foundations, later scholars expanded the scope of psychological authoritarianism by incorporating more specific attitudinal dimensions. For instance, Bob Altemeyer's work in the 1980s and 1990s refined Adorno's research by replacing the AP with Right-Wing Authoritarianism (RWA). In *The Authoritarian Specter*, Altemeyer defined RWA as a cluster of three attitudes encompassing authoritarian submission (deference to established authorities), authoritarian aggression (hostility against those deemed deviant or dangerous), and conventionalism (adherence to traditional norms) (Altemeyer 1996). Altemeyer's cross-national surveys found that roughly 20-30% of people consistently score high on RWA scales, endorsing statements such as "Our country needs a powerful leader, in whom we can put our trust, to do what must be done," and expressing willingness to encroach on the rights of minorities or dissenters in order to protect society [8]. Unlike Adorno's AP, which was scrutinized for its

Freudian, psychoanalytic approach, Altemeyer treated authoritarianism as a measurable social attitude that could vary with context. Notably, Altemeyer found that individuals high in RWA possessed an acute sensitivity to perceived threats to social order, such as criminals, immigrants, or cultural change, and were more likely to favor punitive and strict measures in response. Thus, Altemeyer's findings concur with Adorno's in highlighting how authoritarian-oriented individuals view the world as a dangerous place that requires strong authority to control threats.

However, a crucial question remains: how much authoritarian tendencies are fixed traits as opposed to responses that can be triggered by environmental factors? Contemporary research suggests that the answer lies in an interaction between predisposition and threat context. For instance, some people possess an inherently higher tendency towards authoritarian thinking due to biopsychosocial factors, but whether this inclination translates into intolerant or anti-democratic and illiberal attitudes often depends on situational triggers. In *The Authoritarian Dynamic*, Karen Stenner argues that a latent "authoritarian predisposition" in some people remains dormant until they are activated by a perceived threat to social cohesion or traditional norms [9]. Once triggered, these individuals become significantly more intolerant and supportive of authoritarian policies, a phenomenon she describes as the "authoritarian dynamic." Thus, once provoked, threatened authoritarians seek to restore order and cohesion by suppressing dissent and diversity.

An analysis of empirical evidence seems to support Stenner's theory. For example, Feldman and Stenner (1997) found that in survey data, individuals with authoritarian leanings became far more intolerant of dissidents when they felt social norms were threatened, while during times of stability, the attitudinal gap between high and low authoritarians shrank [10]. Similarly, Hetherington and Suhay (2011) highlighted how, after the 9/11 terrorist attacks, many Americans displayed heightened authoritarian attitudes [11]; however, interestingly enough, these attitudinal shifts were depicted in more than just individuals with high authoritarianism. Their analysis revealed that when threatened by external stimuli such as terrorism, even citizens with relatively low authoritarian predispositions often adopted more authoritarian measures, such as supporting hawkish foreign policy and reducing civil liberties, to promote security. In other words, the heightened threat appraisal significantly reduced the normal range of difference between authoritarian and less authoritarian individuals [11]. Less authoritarian individuals who would normally prioritize civil rights and tolerance began to favor surveillance, profiling, and aggressive security measures. In contrast, more authoritarian individuals were already predisposed to support such measures and did not drastically shift their views since they already possessed a securitarian mindset. Therefore, these findings reveal how times of crises and heightened threat appraisal can catalyze a shift in public sentiment towards authoritarian tendencies, even if many of the same people might protest the same policies under stable circumstances.

Still, a core question remains: why do threats have such a profound effect on political outcomes? Psychology tells us that fear and uncertainty create an aversive state, which many individuals resolve by seeking greater control, clarity, and coherence. During this instability, authoritarian leaders and policies seem extremely appealing because they promise exactly those remedies: a strong hand to impose order and harsh, decisive action to remove threats and

subversive elements. As Thomas Hobbes once famously argued in *Leviathan*, fear—more specifically, fear of death and the violent state of nature leads citizens to surrender their freedoms to an all-powerful sovereign for protection [12]. When analyzing modern authoritarian regimes and how they often justify repression by invoking dire threats and the fear factor, like terrorism or cultural decay, Hobbes's theory especially shines. Notably, subsequent research by Duckitt (2001) has found that individuals high in authoritarianism or with authoritarian attitudes tend to view the world as a dangerous, threatening place that requires a strong defense. Duckitt's "dangerous-world view" thus explains why fear thrives and authoritarian solutions seem natural during times of crises and distress [13]. In addition, Duckitt's framework reiterates that perceptions of threat and danger are central pillars of the authoritarian mindset, distinguishing it from other ideological motivations.

It is also important to note that predispositions often show identifiable physiological markers and can even be influenced by genetic factors. Recently, a growing body of scholarship has begun to analyze the psychophysiological foundations of political attitudes. For example, some people are inherently more threat-sensitive and exhibit stronger subconscious reactions to alarming stimuli, e.g., galvanic skin response, startle reflex, etc. Consequently, they are more likely to support conservative and authoritarian views, especially on social issues relating to groups and security. In one study, Anspach (2023) employed a combination of surveys and physiological tests to differentiate between individuals who fear external threats and those who fear threats from authority or the government [14]. Anspach found that people who are highly sensitive to external threats like out-groups possessed more socially conservative or authoritarian attitudes, often endorsing tougher law-and-order and anti-immigration policies. In contrast, individuals who feared authority generally expressed more libertarian and anti-authoritarian positions [14]. Thus, the findings indicate that "whom" one is afraid of matters greatly: while fear of external threats or disorder can produce authoritarian preferences, fear of an overbearing state catalyzes resistance to authority. Notably, since sensitivity to threat appears to have at least partial biological or hereditary influences, Anspach's findings reveal two distinct predispositional pathways—one that causes an authoritarian response and the other that causes an anti-authoritarian one, depending on what kind of danger these individuals perceive.

Decades of research into the psychology of authoritarianism have found that it can both be a stable disposition in some people and have a latent potential to be triggered by threatening circumstances in others. When faced with grave threats like terrorist attacks, economic crises, or social unrest, there is a risk that fear can activate authoritarian tendencies and support for authoritarian policies among the public masses. During these predicaments, people can become more willing to support strongman leaders, measures that encroach on civil liberties, and scapegoat or push out minority groups to preserve security and order.

Threat and Authoritarian Shifts in the War on Terror Era

The aftermath of the September 11, 2001 attacks on the United States provided a grim, natural case-study for examining how perceived threats can influence public opinion. In the weeks that followed the deadliest and most fatal attack on US soil in American history, Americans were confronted with a new reality and a profound sense of national vulnerability. Consequently, a

wave of collective fear began to spread across the nation, significantly impacting public opinion and policy, and turning many people towards authoritarian measures. Many empirical studies in the early 2000s documented these shifts. For instance, when Davis and Silver (2004) began analyzing national survey data, they found that Americans who perceived a high threat of terrorism were significantly more willing to trade civil liberties for protection and security [15]. Many individuals who felt endangered began to support more authoritarian policies, including increased government surveillance, identity checkpoints, and suspension of habeas corpus. However, this shift was still moderated by institutional trust—citizens who trusted the government more were especially likely to endorse such restrictions on civil liberties when they felt threatened, while those with greater distrust were slightly less likely to trade their freedoms for security [15]. Similarly, Huddy et al. (2005) found that Americans who felt personally endangered in the post 9/11 era increasingly supported aggressive counterterrorism measures and profiling of suspected groups [16]. This ultimately reflected a broader psychological shift toward increased vigilance and “us-vs-them” attitudes under conditions of fear.

The threat of danger and fear in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks also influenced other aspects of political life. For instance, in *Democracy at Risk*, Merolla and Zechmeister (2009) highlighted a series of experiments and surveys in the US and Mexico that investigated how terrorist threat warnings affected citizens [17]. Their study found that whenever reminded or exposed to terrorism, people experienced increased psychological distress, which caused attitudinal shifts towards intolerance, distrust, and authoritarianism. For instance, when primed with terror threats, people became not only increasingly less trusting of strangers and less tolerant, but survey data also displayed participants expressing lower sympathy for gays and immigrants, and taking tougher stances on crime and immigration [17]. The research also indicated that those with predisposed authoritarian leanings were more likely to possess greater intolerant and punitive attitudes when threatened and would endorse harsher treatment of suspects, dissidents, and out-groups.

Notably, the terror threat also triggered a “rally-around-the-leader” effect, but specifically for incumbents who were perceived as “strong”. Merolla and Zechmeister’s (2009) experiments also revealed how threatened citizens in a state of fear not only gravitated towards strong leadership, but also rated current leaders more favorably—for instance, reevaluating previously “ordinary” political figures as more charismatic or “heroic” [17]. In the case of George W. Bush, who was the incumbent at the time, American participants who were primed with terror threats rated him as a stronger and more effective leader and rated his opponents more negatively than participants who were surveyed without priming. The study also revealed how people were more likely to be forgiving of leaders’ failures. For instance, when under heightened threat, participants were less likely to hold President Bush accountable for policy shortcomings or scandals, presumably because they rallied to his defense in hopes of safety and security [17]. The study also revealed a similar pattern in Mexico, where threat cues motivated voters to desire a protector figure and glorify their incumbent leaders. Thus, as fear sways public attitudes towards decisiveness and protection, sitting leaders who employ hardline rhetoric or authoritarian measures benefit greatly.

Public policy preferences also shifted to an interventionist, militant direction when faced with threat. In both the US and Mexico, citizens fearing terrorism began to support more aggressive

foreign policy, such as military action abroad, and were more willing to accept civil liberty trade-offs in the name of counterterrorism [17]. Examples of these trade-offs included increased surveillance, detaining suspects without trial, banning controversial groups, and limiting immigration. Again, these patterns confirm a historical trend where citizens prioritize security over liberty and consent to extraordinary measures that they might usually protest when they feel threatened or under attack.

While many of these attitudinal shifts can be understood as short-term coping responses to a mass tragedy, researchers nevertheless raised concerns about their long-term impact on democratic principles. While changes like citizens becoming more vigilant and united against threats can be constructive for society, others, such as glorifying and submitting to an empowered leader or erosion of civil liberties, risk undermining democracy over time. In the case of the United States, the post 9/11 era saw many Americans supporting the enactment of more authoritarian measures such as the USA PATRIOT ACT, widespread surveillance programs, and prolonged and (sometimes) unjustified detentions without trial, which caused long-term institutional consequences and attitudinal shifts that persist until today. Daniel Byman (2019) argues that terrorism can endanger even the most mature democracies not only due to the mass destruction it causes, but mainly because “the fear terrorism generates can distort public debates, discredit moderates, empower political extremes, and polarize societies” [18]. In his Brookings policy brief, Byman notes that terror-related fear can influence citizens to discredit moderate voices because they may seem “weak” or indecisive during times of crisis, and instead elevate hardliners who promise swift and harsh retaliation [18]. Indeed, Byman was just one of many scholars who observed that in the aftermath of 9/11, many democracies witnessed the rise of far-right and populist politicians who campaigned on strict security measures and permitted expansive counterterrorism powers, which faced little to no initial resistance. Polls in the mid-2000s and early 2010s even found that many Americans accepted or approved of extreme tactics that were forbidden by the Constitution. For instance, a majority of citizens supported the use of torture on terrorism suspects in some circumstances and backed detaining suspects indefinitely, highlighting how perceived threats can desensitize citizens to measures considered normally taboo [19].

However, a key nuance in the research remains in deciphering which segments of the public are most likely to shift attitudinally under fear or threat. Earlier, Hetherington and Suhay’s findings established that less authoritarian individuals shifted towards more authoritarian views post-9/11 and narrowed the gap with high authoritarians—implying that grave threats can create mass attitudinal shifts in an authoritarian direction. However, other studies suggest that those predisposed to authoritarian tendencies may also intensify their views when threatened. Merolla and Zechmeister’s experiments revealed that the strongest intolerant and punitive responses came from conformity-minded authoritarians when threat was high. Thus, in extreme cases, it is possible that everyone sways towards authoritarianism, but a ceiling effect still exists—i.e., those with predisposed authoritarian tendencies have less room to shift further, while those with low authoritarian tendencies have a larger propensity to increase. In reality, the result is a broad shift in attitudes across the general public. For instance, after 9/11, many Americans across the ideological spectrum began to support illiberal policies like the ethnic and racial profiling of Arab and Muslim travelers and increased government powers and secrecy [11,15]. Arguably, if not for

the unifying threat of terrorism and the fear it brought upon the general populace, it would be extremely unlikely for the American public to reach such a consensus in majority numbers.

More importantly, the period of the "War on Terror" effectively demonstrated how political elites could manipulate fear to garner support and power. For instance, the US government would occasionally raise homeland security levels or issue vague warnings of impending attacks, which aroused suspicion in critics who believed these actions could be politically motivated. Although these suspicions have never been officially addressed, Merolla and Zechmeister's findings surprisingly give credence to this concern. As previously mentioned, their study found that even warnings of a threat could rally the public around incumbent, strong leaders and overlook government failures. When analyzed further, their findings revealed that threat cues not only helped President Bush's image, but the Bush administration's popularity also benefited from periodic terror alerts [17]. Such dynamics both blur the line between genuine security concerns and political mind games, incentivizing leaders to exaggerate or prolong threats to stoke fear and consolidate power.

The aftermath of the 9/11 attacks and the War on Terror provided a vivid demonstration of how external threats can tap into fear and sway democratic citizens to adopt more authoritarian attitudes and policies. When faced with the threat and fear of terrorism, people across ideological divides and predispositions began to: (i) demonize out-groups and dissenters, (ii) idolize strong incumbent leaders and entrust more power to the executive branches, and (iii) willingly surrender civil liberties and rights for supposed safety and security. While these shifts were primarily documented in the US, studies of other nations like Mexico produced the same results, corroborating with longstanding theories detailing how fear can be used to undermine liberal democratic norms.

Fear vs. Anger: Distinct Emotional Pathways

Up to this point, this paper has often referred to "fear" or "threat" broadly and interchangeably when discussing their role in driving authoritarian attitudes. However, political psychology suggests that not all negative emotions have the same impact on politics. For instance, while fear and anger are both triggered by threats, they elicit distinctly different responses [20]. Recognizing this distinction is crucial as it explains why fear can sometimes lead people to act with caution or submission, while anger can incite aggression and defiance.

To this end, the theory of Affective Intelligence (AI) developed by Marcus, Neuman, and MacKuen (2000) provides a particularly useful analytical framework. AI theory posits that people possess two fundamental emotional systems that are relevant to their political behavior [20]. First, the disposition system, linked to emotions such as enthusiasm and, in related contexts, anger, governs routine decision-making that arises from habit and partisan loyalty. Second, the surveillance system: activated by a perceived threat or anxiety, this process interrupts habitual cues and encourages increased attention, active information seeking, and more deliberate consideration [20]. In contrast, when people are angry or enthusiastic, which puts the disposition system in overdrive, they rely on ingrained habits, prior beliefs, and quick "gut" judgements. Consequently, this often leads them to reinforce and double down on preexisting predispositions.

Thus, when analyzed from this perspective, fear (anxiety) can actually produce a moderating or enlightening effect. For instance, because it disrupts automatic responses, it can make people more open-minded—when they realize a situation can be risky or abnormal, they snap out of autopilot mode. On the other hand, anger often drives individuals to act on their predisposed impulses, frequently in risky or punitive ways. According to Marcus (2019), many political behaviors long attributed to fear, such as support for extreme or repressive measures, are actually driven by anger [21]. This is due to the fact that fear plays a different role: it alerts individuals to threats, increasing vigilance and caution, but it is anger that compels people to take action against perceived offenders or obstacles.

Vasilopoulos et al. (2019) provides a striking example of these contrasting effects when examining French citizens' emotional responses to the November 2015 Paris terrorist attacks [21]. While conventional scholars would predict that fear of terrorism would drive voters to support far-right authoritarians and populists like the National Front—known for their hardline positions on immigration and security—the study revealed a more nuanced pattern. By singling out each emotion, Vasilopoulos and his colleagues discovered that citizens who felt anger towards the tragedy were significantly more likely to vote for the far-right in subsequent elections. However, those who felt fear were more likely to turn away from the far-right [21]. This was due to the fact that anger caused more authoritarian and punitive responses, while fear fostered caution and a preference for the status quo—pushing such voters away from extremism. Therefore, contrary to longstanding beliefs that all negative emotions swayed public opinion toward authoritarianism, the findings revealed that anger was the primary emotion driving voters to support the National Front, while fear was associated with greater support for more moderate candidates. Interestingly, these effects were strongest among individuals already predisposed to authoritarian views. For instance, high-authoritarians who felt anger became the staunchest far-right supporters, while fearful high-authoritarians paradoxically denounced the far-right and instead opted for more moderate parties or abstention from voting altogether. Thus, the study demonstrated how fear and anger can lead to starkly different electoral choices even among similarly predisposed individuals, depending on which emotion is strongest.

Vasilopoulos and his colleague's radical findings challenge previous scholarship, which posits that all responses to threats would drive citizens towards authoritarianism. Instead, it reveals a more conditional dynamic where threats that elicit anger are more likely to push people towards authoritarianism or extremism, while threats that produce fear or anxiety can actually restrain aggression and encourage more careful evaluation. Without question, the aftermath of the Paris attacks saw many French citizens feeling fearful and seeking security. Nevertheless, this wave of fear did not automatically lead to support for authoritarian measures—instead, it prompted some to carefully consider who could guarantee the most stability. Consequently, this led those people to favor more experienced and moderate candidates over the anti-establishment far-right. In contrast, citizens who reacted with anger, especially towards the terrorists, the government, or immigrants, were galvanized to embrace more authoritarian measures.

Marcus et al. (2019) further explore this dynamic by examining how fear's effects on authoritarian support is mediated by other factors [21]. Notably, their research identifies anger

and latent authoritarian predispositions as the main channeling factors. They argue that fear alone does not directly determine whether individuals endorse or reject authoritarian policies, but instead posits that fear can reduce people's sense of control and suppress the anger that often propels support for extremism or authoritarianism [21]. Thus, when people are feeling fearful, they tend to also feel uncertain, preventing them from taking drastic actions and even questioning their own aggression or impulsiveness. Anger, on the other hand, is positively correlated with increased authoritarianism and a desire for strong, vengeful responses. In fact, recent evidence even suggests that fear can indirectly reduce support for right-wing extremism because it has the ability to lower levels of public anger and limit authoritarian aggression in the immediate aftermath of grave threats while anger consistently has the opposite effect [21].

It is also important to note that fear and anger have distinct and often converse effects on political mobilization. For instance, since fear is generally associated with avoidance and risk-aversion, a fearful citizen might abstain from political participation or submit to authorities because they desire safety. This is especially evident in authoritarian regimes like North Korea, where citizens fear repercussions so much that they refrain from speaking out or opposing the government. Anger, on the other hand, incites people to take action and confront perceived wrongs. Social movements and protests typically begin when an angry group of citizens convenes to call out injustices or government failures. Even in authoritarian states, mass uprisings are common when fear of the regime is replaced by anger—usually due to an outrage or a spark of hope. To this end, Marcus (2019) notes that anger is one of the most powerful tools that can be used to drive collective action and is "vital to a well-working democracy" because "righteous anger" can help citizens hold their leaders accountable and advocate for change [21]. For example, many civil rights movements have harnessed public anger in constructive ways to empower their campaigns. Nevertheless, anger can also be utilized by demagogues and populists to attack democratic institutions or scapegoat minorities, as evidenced by the fascist and Nazi movements of the mid-20th century. In essence, when leaders utilize anger, they tend to focus on specific targets like the elites, a minority group, or a culprit, and motivate people to eliminate that target. However, when they employ fear, they tend to focus on a looming danger and drive citizens to protect themselves from it.

Authoritarian and Populist Leaders' Use of Fear and Anger

In contemporary politics, the most effective politicians have learned to strategically utilize both fear and anger to garner support. Right-leaning populists, in particular, seem to have mastered this powerful technique. By regularly employing fear cues towards immigrants, crime, terrorism, or cultural change, in tandem with anger at elites, corruption, or scapegoated minorities, contemporary right-leaning parties have been highly successful in rallying constituents who feel anxious about their future and resentful of perceived losses and grievances. Hloušek et al. (2024) effectively demonstrate this dynamic in play by analyzing the social media discourses of radical right leaders in Central and Eastern Europe (Czechia, Hungary, and Slovakia) during the Russo-Ukrainian War [22]. While one might expect these leaders to portray the war itself as the primary threat, the study found that they reframed the international crisis as local grievances and employed emotionally charged rhetoric to focus attention on domestic issues [22]. As a result, the data revealed how anger and fear emerged as the most salient and dominant

emotions spanning thousands of tweets. In this case, fear was invoked to highlight dangers ranging from border disputes and potential war spillover to cultural threats, including mass displacement and migration, moral decline, and economic distress. Anger, on the other hand, was repeatedly directed at politicians, the European Union, geopolitical rivals, and other threats. Furthermore, despite differences among the three nations, their radical right figures all relied on a similar, two-pointed approach. They accomplished this by coupling fear appeals, like claiming their nation was in danger, with anger appeals like blaming elites or foreign forces—effectively transforming the Russo-Ukrainian war from what may have been a unifying external threat into a political tool that could be manipulated to fuel fear and resentment domestically. Thus, Hloušek and colleagues' findings clearly reveal that fear and anger are central elements in the emotional repertoire of radical right populists.

Interestingly, the presidential campaigns of Donald Trump in the United States also illustrate similar dynamics. For example, in both 2016 and 2020, Trump campaigned on highly exaggerated depictions of crime and immigration crises and blamed these issues on Washington's elite, inciting fear and anger within the American populace. Evoking an image of "American carnage," he painted a frightening picture of cities overrun by violence, terrorism, crime, and illegal immigration, priming his constituents to seek a strongman to resolve their feelings of fear and anger at the perceived threats and grievances [23]. Like Trump, Hungary's Viktor Orbán has also built support through fear-based politics. For instance, Orbán has consistently orchestrated campaigns vilifying migrant "invasions" and has accused the EU of secretly plotting to undermine Hungary's national sovereignty. Orbán further taps into nationalist anger against liberal elites by scapegoating George Soros as an alleged mastermind behind these schemes, even going as far as launching a "Stop Soros" law and mounting anti-EU billboards across the nation [24]. By fabricating or exaggerating such threats, both Trump and Orbán spread a wave of fear and anger among their constituents, activating their authoritarian impulses and presenting themselves as saviors who would rectify perceived wrongs. Over time, this form of divisive rhetoric often erodes democratic norms as political opponents are vilified to justify crackdowns. When this occurs, independent media is labeled as unpatriotic and starts to get censored, and emergency powers are invoked to stretch the rule of law. In the case of Hungary, this is particularly evident, as their Freedom House Score (FHS) and Freedom House Label (FHL) have seen a gradual decline since Orbán began vilifying Soros and the EU in 2017, when Hungary's FHS was 58 and its FHL was described as a semi-consolidated democracy. As of 2024, however, their FHS has been reduced to 43, and their FHL is now considered a transnational or hybrid regime.

Authoritarian leaders also strategically manipulate fear to control their citizens and secure compliance, often through coercion and the use of force. In more authoritarian or hybrid regimes, fear is usually systemically entrenched and imposed. In this climate, citizens submit to authorities out of fear of surveillance, punishment, or violence. In Azerbaijan, for example, explicitly protesting against the regime is effectively banned and has been suppressed by force since 2019. The regime has made it abundantly clear that challenging the government will result in harsh consequences, which deters most citizens from mobilizing against it. Nevertheless, Kamilsoy (2021) observes that the regime does selectively tolerate small, issue-specific demonstrations over local social or economic grievances like rice shortages—preventing scattered disgruntlement from snowballing into a full-blown rebellion [3]. Thus, by deploying fear

instrumentally through this strategy of selective repression, the regime effectively fosters a climate of durable authoritarian stability where citizens have outlets to vent their frustrations but fear standing up to the government itself [3].

Authoritarian regimes also propagate a fear of external enemies to maintain control. To accomplish this, authoritarian leaders brand those who oppose them as traitors or threats to national security and claim that if they did not guide the country with an iron fist, the nation would surely descend into chaos or become crime-infested. By spreading these narratives of fear, authoritarian regimes garner support or, at the very least, compliance from the populace by convincing citizens that the alternative to their rule is anarchy or lack of security. When studying the effectiveness of this form of messaging in Brazil's military regime, Geddes and Zaller's classic study revealed how moderately informed citizens—those who were exposed to the regime's propaganda but lacked the information or education to critically counter it—were the most supportive of authoritarian policies [4].

In contrast, those who were isolated from the propaganda viewed authoritarianism less favorably because they did not believe their national security was at stake, and those who were more educated and informed were highly skeptical because they had the knowledge to filter out misinformation. This pattern, while unsurprising, suggests that authoritarian systems rely on a certain level of public fear and a managed information environment, as propaganda invoking fear cues can effectively manipulate at least a large segment of the population to embrace authoritarianism in defense against greater evils.

Crisis Case Study: COVID-19 Pandemic and the Authoritarian Dynamic

The COVID-19 pandemic presented a new kind of global threat, in that it tested how willing societies were to trade liberty for safety against an invisible virus. Due to the novel nature of such a crisis, the pandemic generated widespread fears of illness and death, economic collapse, and uncertainty. In response, many democracies worldwide have adopted emergency powers that were historically only activated during wartime or authoritarian rule. For instance, lockdown orders confining people to their homes, martial law, mandatory business closures, contact tracing and infection surveillance, and strict travel restrictions were just some of the many restrictive measures mandated at the time. Surprisingly, public opinion largely supported these authoritarian measures at the height of the pandemic, even in the most established democracies. How could these restrictive measures enjoy such widespread support around the world? In short, because when faced with a shared, acute threat, the public recalibrated the liberty-security calculus: fear fostered risk aversion and deference to trusted authorities, especially when leaders framed restrictive measures as necessary and the media echoed a unified risk narrative.

Interestingly, surveys across democracies in 2020 revealed how a majority of citizens were willing to accept temporary restrictions on freedom in order to defeat the virus. For instance, Vasilopoulos et al. (2019) found that in a multi-country study based in Europe, a higher personal fear of COVID-19 correlated with greater support for strong government interventions, such as mask mandates, lockdowns, and mandatory vaccinations, even if these infringed on individual rights [21]. These sentiments resonate with earlier patterns seen in post-9/11 America, where

people tend to prioritize survival and order when faced with threat. Unsurprisingly, authoritarian-oriented individuals were most likely to welcome stringent rules and enforcement during the pandemic as they viewed these actions as necessary to overcome an external danger [25]. Consequently, authoritarian tendencies may have increased during the pandemic since it was considered a major threat to life and social stability, prompting a desire for strong authoritarian measures among the populace. Studies in Poland and other European countries further revealed that levels of authoritarian sentiments heightened amid the pandemic in many populations [25].

Nevertheless, the pandemic's politics also revealed nuances in responses of authoritarian-minded individuals. While the majority of citizens did rally around government mandates, many countries saw a vocal minority vehemently protesting such policies [25]. However, the split between those supporting the government and those opposing it fell along ideological lines that did not neatly align with the traditional authoritarian and libertarian divides. For instance, in the US and Europe, the majority of those protesting against government mandates actually leaned towards the right, which meant that they were generally associated with more authoritarian leanings. Yet why would such individuals, who would usually be supportive of authority and strong, nationalist policies, rebel against their own government's health mandates? A study by Deason and Dunn (2022) may provide an answer—their research revealed how participants high in authoritarianism tended to perceive COVID-19 as more than just a health threat, but also as a symbolic threat to their prevailing values and way of life [5]. Therefore, it may seem that some authoritarians viewed these measures through an ideological lens, and such mandates may have been construed as examples of government overreach and a disruption of the social order. Consequently, this shifted their sense of fear from the threat that the virus imposed to the threat of an invasive government that challenged social norms and personal freedoms. On the other hand, those with less authoritarian predispositions primarily viewed the virus as merely a physical threat to their health and well-being [5].

Ultimately, the pandemic reveals how emotions such as fear and anger can sway public opinion towards authoritarian policies under certain conditions. Popular support for such measures arose under three core conditions: first, people felt that the threat was immediate; second, the threat was voiced by authority figures that emphasized their necessity; and third, when the media echoed the government's narratives. However, people withdrew support or began to resist once the object of fear shifted from COVID to the government itself or as fear transformed into anger against the government's perceived overreach. This pattern also displayed evidence of decay—when the immediacy of the threat receded and counter-narratives emerged against the government's policies, people's tolerance for emergency powers declined. Thus, the pandemic highlighted a contemporary case study of how fear and anger cues can influence the public's support for authoritarian policies, with the magnitude and direction of these emotions depending on who is feared and which emotions are activated.

Conclusion

Fear and anger are double-edged swords in the political arena. As this review has revealed, fear can influence the public to submit to authority. Consequently, this may foster unity and decisiveness during times of crisis but also open the door to more authoritarian infringes. Anger,

on the other hand, can catalyze citizens to mobilize against perceived injustices and promote democratic reform, but it can also empower demagogues, political polarization, and extremism. Nevertheless, the link between these emotions is conditional upon circumstance. When people feel threatened, it activates a latent desire for security and order is activated, leading to a reaction of either vigilance and fear of authority or support for stronger, authoritarian policies, depending on which emotion is stronger, how the threat is framed, and who does the framing.

One key takeaway from this review is the integral role leaders and institutions play in shaping the trajectory of public emotion when faced with threat. When governments are responsible and effective, they can acknowledge citizens' fears while channeling them towards positive impacts, such as problem-solving and solidarity, rather than scapegoating out-groups or the opposition. When officials prioritize transparency and justifying why some edicts are necessary, it can prevent fear from morphing into panic or hatred. In contrast, irresponsible leaders may exploit these emotions by amplifying fear or redirecting anger towards out-groups or their opposition to increase their power and self-serving interests, a hallmark of authoritarianism. Thus, the role of democratic checks and balances, such as courts, legislatures, and the media, is integral in preventing these manipulative tactics from transforming fear and anger into blind panic and mob mentalities.

Notably, as we transition into the digital age, the stakes are only heightened. Many stakeholders with varying agendas have begun to use social media as a tool to advance their own agendas and spread high-arousal content or misinformation. For instance, during times of crisis, false or exaggerated claims and conspiracy theories about out-groups or the government can become viral, fueling fear and anger beyond what the facts actually warrant. Consequently, these conditions may not only shift people towards extremism, but also make them feel as if authoritarian solutions are warranted under the circumstances. Thus, countering these dynamics requires both principled leaders who will not exploit the situation for their own gain and healthier, more transparent information systems that will help filter through misinformation, highlight credible experts, and reveal the costs and limitations of emergency powers and authoritarian policies.

Nevertheless, while empirical data demonstrate that fear-based messaging can garner support for authoritarian policies, current literature still leaves some important questions open. First, the scope and generalizability remain low and highly Eurocentric. Most of contemporary literature and research comes from North America and Europe, with the Global South and Asia being severely underrepresented. Furthermore, the majority of the nations covered tend to be democratic or more democratic in nature as opposed to the more hybrid and authoritarian regimes prominent in the East and South. Second, measurement standards remain too broad. For instance, researchers often define support for authoritarian policies using limited survey questions that fail to distinguish between nuances, such as protective and punitive policies, and procedural limits versus restrictions on rights. In the same vein, emotions are often measured through single-item self-reports, which can blur the distinction between similar yet distinct emotions, such as fear and anger, and overlook other important feelings, including whether people believe a policy will work or who they believe is the source of the threat.

Third, more work needs to be done on how researchers identify causes and how effectively lab results translate to real-world scenarios. For instance, while survey experiments may reveal short-term effects, they often overlook how partisan cues, elite disagreements, and the impact of social media algorithms shape responses in the real world. Analyzing natural experiments and field studies, such as sudden policy changes, platform bans, or court rulings, could offer stronger evidence of how people actually react. Fourth, time frames are understudied. Current research only focuses on post-threat emotions. However, an analysis of data that tracks participants' pre-threat, peak, and post-phases is required to test whether shifts in authoritarian attitudes caused by fear can fade or solidify over time. Fifth, researchers still lack a firm understanding of how emotions interact with or influence one another. For future studies to be more comprehensive, it is essential to distinguish the differences between fear of external threats and fear of authority, as well as how emotions like fear and anger can often transform interchangeably depending on the stimulus.

Sixth, researchers should begin to treat social media dynamics as a central factor. There is a need for more experiments that analyze the content of the message in relation to how individuals actually perceive it, and ultimately, how it may shape their policy views. Due to privacy concerns, current research cannot fully explore who sees what, and how much of what they see affects them, as well as who is most affected by different types of content. Furthermore, there is a need to investigate the impact of misinformation on influencing individuals to support various measures. To resolve this gap, researchers could implement testing interventions like prebunking, accuracy reminders, and moderating the speed at which inflammatory content is exposed to test how quickly beliefs change or whether they change at all. Seventh, institutional trust and the identity of who conveys the message deserve more attention. This stems from the fact that the very same message could have different effects on how people perceive it and react depending on whether they are a neutral expert, a partisan politician, a court ruling, or a political opponent. Thus, future research should also analyze variables such as the identity messenger, the respondent’s relationship to the institution, and partisanship to provide greater clarity.

The revelations and the gaps in contemporary research highlight a need for a change in policy to combat authoritarian shifts. Governments worldwide can approach this task in several ways. First, democracies can respond to crises without edging into authoritarianism if they prioritize transparency, justify their strong actions with verifiable evidence, provide independent checks, and establish expiry dates for extraordinary measures. Second, announcements about crises and threats should emphasize effectiveness and practical solutions rather than inciting panic or anxiety. Leaders should also avoid scapegoating out-groups or their opposition. Third, governments can also better prepare citizens to combat propaganda and manipulative messaging through media literacy and civic education programs. Ultimately, social media platforms must exert greater effort in monitoring and mitigating the spread of misinformation and dangerous rhetoric, while also safeguarding the ability of citizens and the free press to hold the government accountable.

History proves that fear and anger have the power to shape political outcomes in decisive ways. As this review has established, politicians have long exploited fear and anger to manipulate their citizens into exchanging their civil rights for protection against perceived threats. Today, as

society moves into a digital age plagued by polarization and the spread of misinformation and fear-mongering at unprecedented speeds, the stakes are only higher. Democracies must therefore treat the management of fear and other emotional cues as integral to their survival. Whether fear is contained by transparency, accountability, media literacy, and civic education, and whether anger is channeled towards democratic reform or scapegaoting—these dynamics will ultimately shape both immediate policy outcomes and the long-term prospects of democratic resilience.

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