Escape from history: The perception of societal extremism and its psychological correlates

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Introduction

There is a strong belief that political and social life in the liberal-democratic West is becoming more radicalized. This research probes whether this is occurring and if such a perception is associated with extreme beliefs and openness to authoritarianism. It seeks to address whether a societal perception of radicalism could be fueling real-world escalation, even if society is not more radical on observable measures when compared with the past.

Research Questions

1. Do participants who view society as having grown more radical/extreme score higher on measures of authoritarianism (LWA, RWA, SDO)?
2. When controlling for political orientation, are bipartisan perceptions of rising radicalism associated with higher levels of traditional and/or non-traditional media consumption?
3. Do those who score higher on measures of authoritarianism hold nihilistic worldviews and conspiracy-oriented mentalities?

Methodology

- A representative group of American participants recruited via the MTurk crowdworking platform (*n = 387*).
- Participants were asked if they perceive their society as having grown more extreme/radical than previously, and if they have seen a dramatic shift in normative beliefs and behaviors when compared with the past.
- Participants completed a battery of measures on markers of authoritarianism (the LWA Index, RWA Scale, and SDO), as well as assessments of nihilism (ENS), conspiracy mentality (CMS), uncertainty, and loneliness.
- To the extent they view societal norms as having shifted, participants were asked to assess how responsible they hold certain parties for this change (e.g., foreign governments, mainstream media, higher education, Donald Trump).
- Analysis was conducted in R using linear regression models.

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General Results

- Individuals who score high on measures of right-wing authoritarianism and conspiracy mentality view society as having grown more extreme than in the past (see figure 1).
- Conversely, left-wing authoritarianism did not predict perceived societal change in extremism (figure 2).
- Higher consumption of both traditional and/or non-traditional media were not associated with greater perception of change in societal extremism.
- Models showed that conspiracy theory mentality positively predicted right-wing authoritarianism (figure 3), and existential nihilism positively predicted left-wing authoritarianism (figure 4).
- Left-wing authoritarians more often blamed political and institutional actors (figure 5), whereas right wing authoritarians tended to blame cultural actors (figure 5).
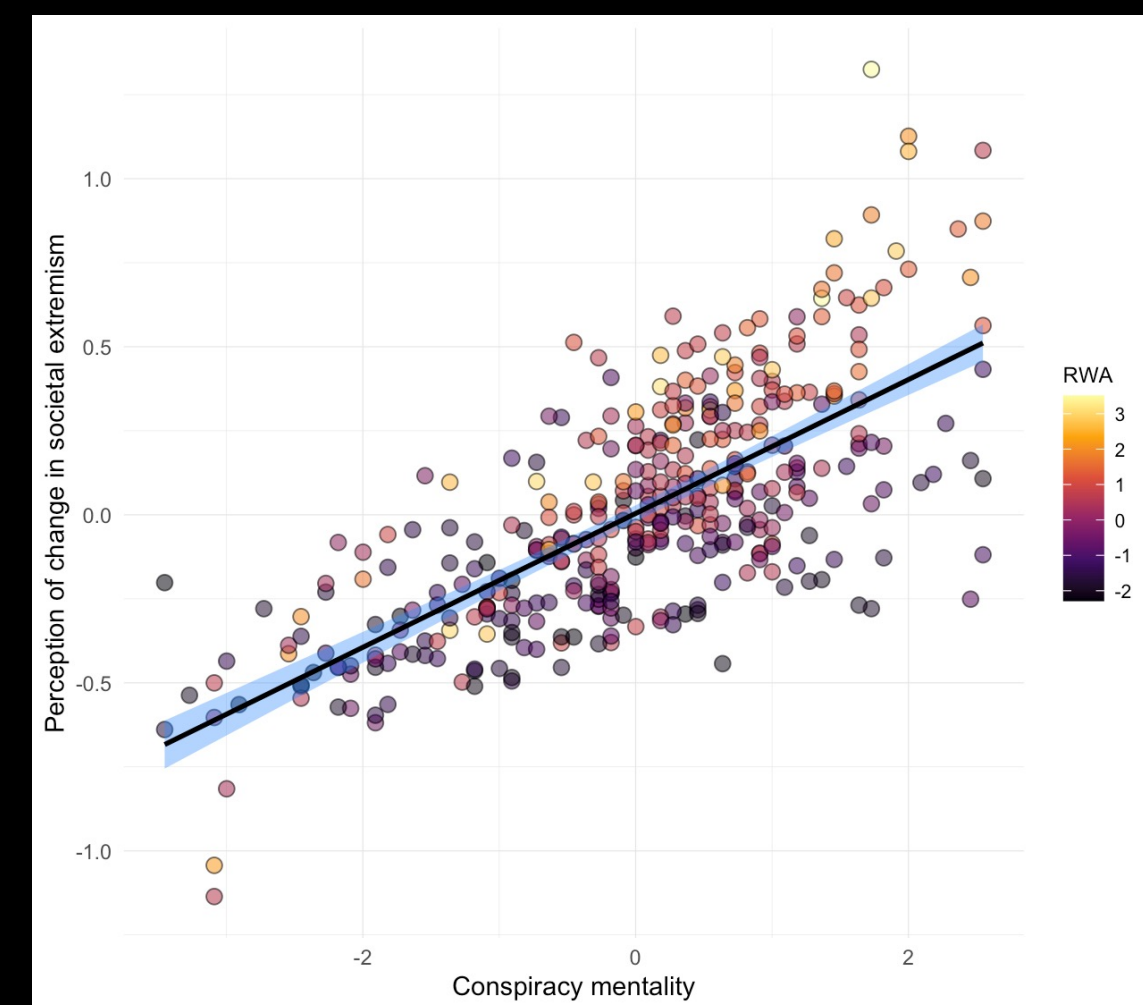

Figure 1: Linear regression model results of perception of societal extremism (R^2 = 0.08, $f(12, 371)$ = 2.8, $p < .01$) on conspiracy mentality (B = 0.18, $p < .001$) and right-wing authoritarianism (B = 0.14, $p = .028$).
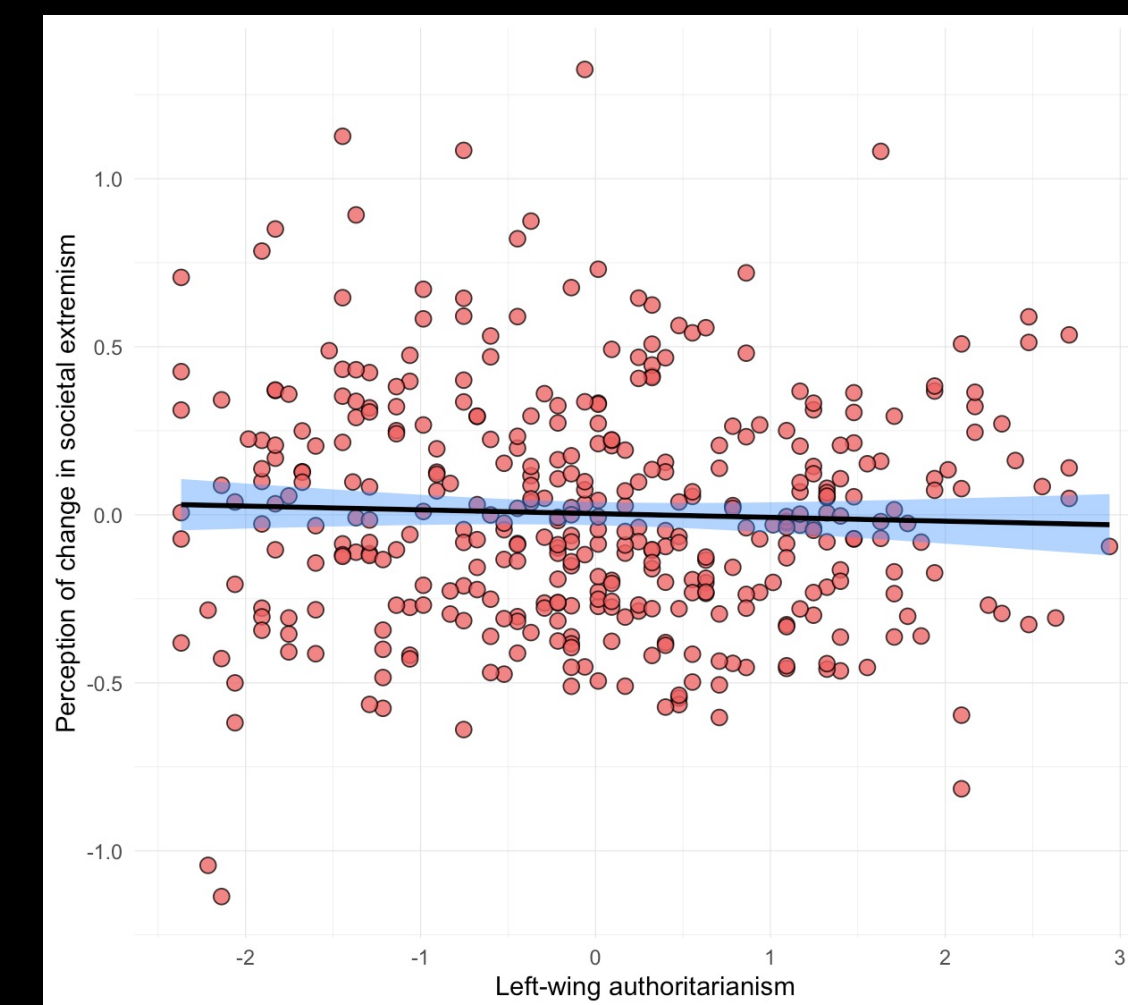

Figure 2: Linear regression model results of perception of societal extremism (R^2 = 0.08, $f(12, 371)$ = 2.8, $p < .01$) on left-wing authoritarianism (B = -0.2, $p = .72$).
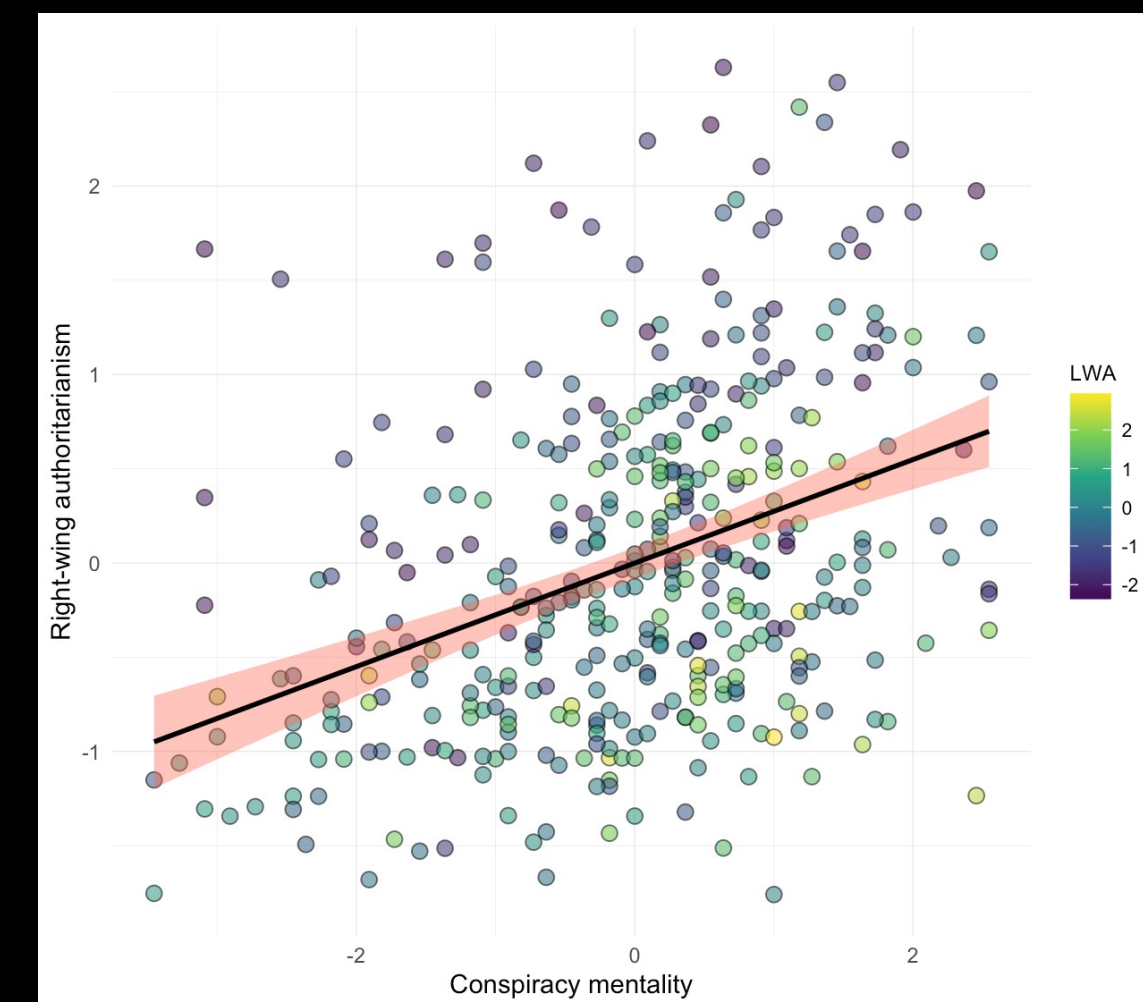

Figure 3: Linear regression model results of right-wing authoritarianism (R^2 = 0.46, $f(11, 372)$ = 28.81, $p < .001$) on conspiracy mentality (B = 0.1, $p = .029$) and left-wing authoritarianism (B = -0.04, $p = .46$).
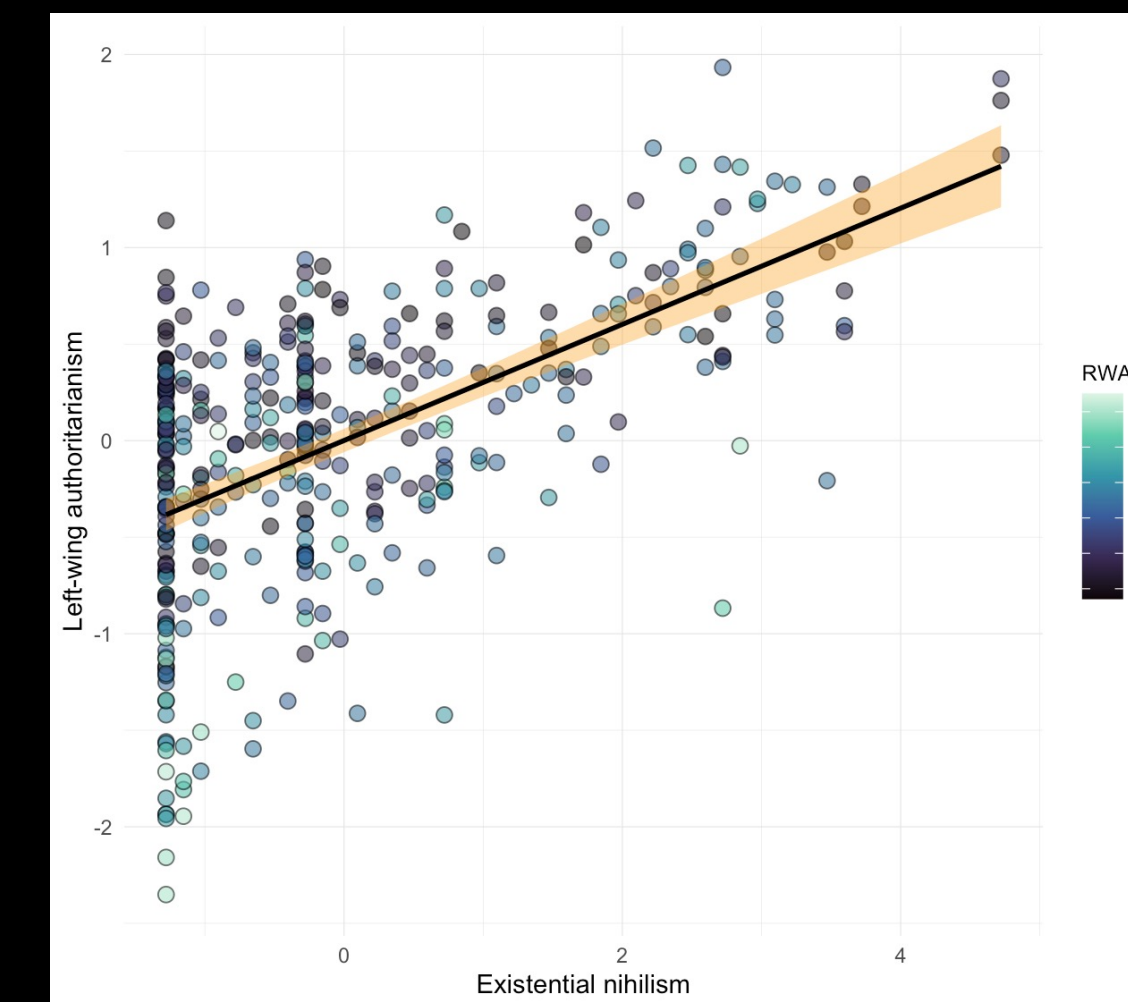

Figure 4: Linear regression model results of left-wing authoritarianism (R^2 = 0.35, $f(11, 372)$ = 18.35, $p < .001$) on existential nihilism (B = 0.24, $p < .001$) and right-wing authoritarianism (B = -0.04, $p = .46$).
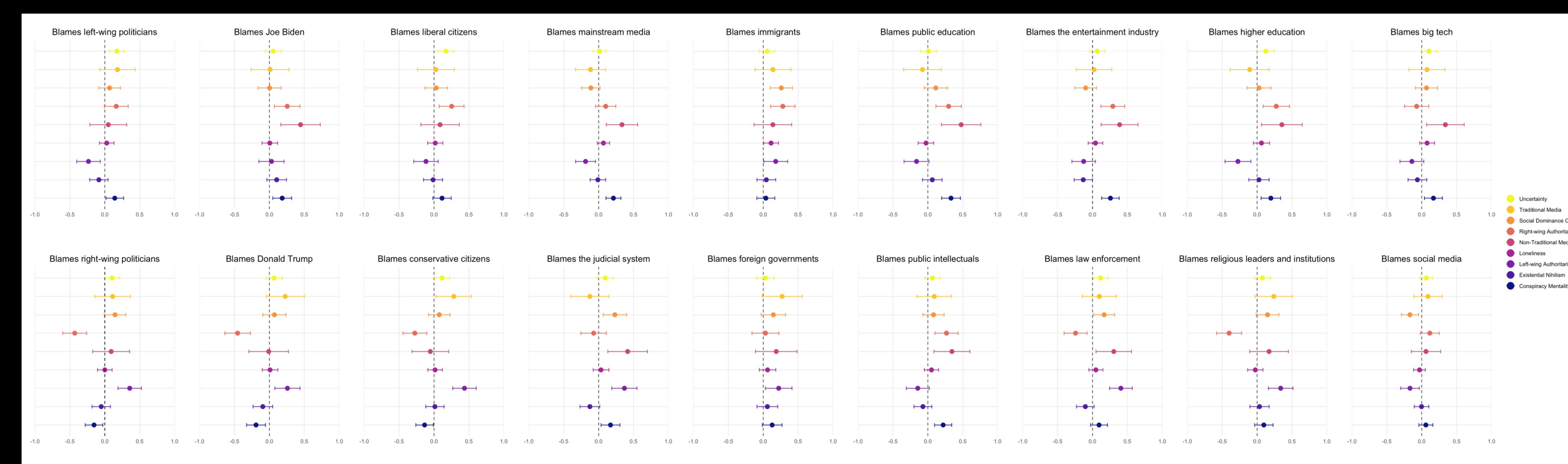

Figure 5. Linear regression results for blame object on uncertainty, media use, SDO, RWA, LWA, loneliness, existential nihilism and conspiracy mentality (controlling for political orientation).

Discussion

This research tests how the perception of society as having become more extreme may be fueling radicalism in a relationship of mutual re-enforcement. Findings suggest that this may only be the case for right-wing individuals who scored high on measures of authoritarianism and who possess conspiratorial mental frames (though these were not found to interact in the models that were tested).

It's possible the left-wing authoritarianism was not significant in this regard because radical leftism places an emphasis on progress and revolutionary change, while the radical right fears the loss of tradition and authority (Arendt, 2006). However, it may still be the case that left-wing authoritarians see society as become more rightwardly radical than it in fact is, but they view it less in terms of overall change, and more as further emergence of what they already view society as being — more research is needed to address this question.

There appears to be a connection between problems of information and belief on the part of radical right-wing and left-wing individuals, with the former embracing a conspiratorial view of the world and the latter displaying a general lack of belief and a sensibility that nothing truly matters. This may suggest that part of the root of bi-partisan authoritarianism is that nothing is felt to be true or real, leading to apophenia-informed authoritarianism on one hand, and non-belief informed punitive ordering on the other — both of which are detached from social and political realities.

Limitations & Future Directions

- Due to the correlational nature of this first study, causality cannot be concluded and is not implied.
- This is an American-centric study because the United States has been demonstrated to be ahead of the rest of the world in polarization trends (White, 2023). Further extensions would involve research in other English-speaking nations, followed by other Western nations and non-WEIRD countries — cross cultural comparisons on these questions are of the utmost importance in a shifting global order.
- Study 2 (Spring 2024) will examine if participants are willing to revise their beliefs around society having grown more radical when presented with historical data that is inconsistent with their expectations, as well as test if this has a moderating effect on displays of authoritarian behavior.

References

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