



Authoritarianism Emerges in Response to Threats of Pandemics and Famine

Description

While the rise of authoritarianism as the result of a declared global pandemic may seem an unusual response to such an event, there is actually decades worth of research describing why we are witnessing this growth of tyranny. For example, the study '[Pathogens and Politics: Further Evidence That Parasite Prevalence Predicts Authoritarianism](#)', provides a deeper understanding of how humans react to perceived threats and how that relates to the type of government the people will accept.

"Results revealed that parasite prevalence predicted measures of authoritarian governance, and did so even when statistically controlling for other threats to human welfare. (One additional threat – famine – also uniquely predicted authoritarianism.)"

The study focuses on the "parasite stress" hypothesis which proposes that when a species faces parasites and diseases their values are shaped by the experience. In this context, "parasite" is used to refer to any pathogenic organism, including bacteria and viruses. The theory states that depending on how a disease stresses people's development it can lead to differences in mating preferences and changes in culture. Proponents of the parasite stress theory also note that disease can alter the psychological and social norms of societies.

"According to a 'parasite stress' hypothesis, authoritarian governments are more likely to emerge in regions characterised by a high prevalence of disease-causing pathogens," the researchers write. They define authoritarian governance as "highly concentrated power structures that repress dissent and emphasise submission to authority, social conformity, and hostility towards outgroups."

Due to the invisible nature of "disease-causing parasites," attempts to control the spread of a disease "historically depended substantially on adherence to ritualised behavioural practices that reduced infection risk." The researchers also found that society tends to promote a collectivist worldview, favouring obedience and conformity from the population, in response to parasites.

They examined two different studies, which themselves were analyses of previous works on the parasite stress theory and the implications for authoritarian tendencies in government and individuals.

The first study shows that “parasite prevalence” strongly predicted the likelihood for individuals to express authoritarian personalities. The second study focused on “small-scale societies” and found that parasite prevalence “predicted measures of authoritarian governance, and did so even when statistically controlling for other threats to human welfare.”

The researchers concluded that “these results further substantiate the parasite stress hypothesis of authoritarianism, and suggest that societal differences in authoritarian governance result, in part, from cultural differences in individuals’ authoritarian personalities.”

The research also indicates that individuals who dissent from or fail to comply with the aforementioned “ritualised behaviour” are seen as a health threat to society.

“At a psychological level of analysis, empirical evidence reveals that the subjective perception of infection risk causes individuals to be more conformist, to prefer conformity and obedience in others, to respond more negatively toward others who fail to conform and to endorse more conservative socio-political attitudes,” the study states.

Additionally, a “societal level of analysis” reveals that in countries and cultures with a historically higher prevalence of diseases, “people are less individualistic, exhibit lower levels of dispositional openness to new things, are more likely to conform to majority opinion.” These cultures strongly endorse moral values that emphasise group loyalty, obedience, and respect for authority.

Simply put, where there is a high prevalence of parasitic diseases the resulting stress on human health is likely to result in the emergence of authoritarian forms of governance. The researchers note that this effect is consistent with previous research which also found “pathogen prevalence” was uniquely linked to conformist attitudes and personality traits. The researchers examined the effects of malnutrition, warfare, and famine, finding that only the threat of famine and pathogens correlate with authoritarian governance.

“This conclusion is consistent also with psychological evidence showing that, while other threats can also influence individuals’ conformist and ethnocentric attitudes, the perceived threat of infectious disease has effects that are empirically unique,” the researchers write.

Another study referenced by Pathogens and Politics delves further into the psychology behind perceived threats and conformity. The study, [*Threat\(s\) and conformity deconstructed: Perceived threat of infectious disease and its implications for conformist attitudes and behaviour*](#), found that the threat of disease “may trigger conformist attitudes” in the population at large.

For this study, the researchers used two methodological strategies to examine the effects of disease threat on conformist attitudes and behaviour. First, they examined the impact on individuals by focusing on chronic individual differences in Perceived Vulnerability to Disease (“PVD”). To do this they tested whether individuals who felt more chronically vulnerable to infectious disease also exhibited more strongly conformist attitudes and behaviour.

“Importantly, we also tested whether these predicted correlations remained when statistically controlling for individual differences in concerns pertaining to other (disease-irrelevant) threats,” they write.

What they discovered was that when the threat of infectious disease was prominent the population expressed “greater liking for people with conformist traits and exhibited higher levels of behavioural conformity.” However, there was no comparable increase in conformist attitudes as a result of temporary threats that were not related to disease.

“These results support the hypothesis that the perceived threat of infectious disease exerts an especially potent (and perhaps psychologically unique) influence on individuals’ conformist attitudes and behaviour.”

Disturbingly, the study found that an individual’s perception of vulnerability to infection does not necessarily need to be rooted in reality to produce a profound psychological effect. If an individual perceives they are vulnerable to infection they tend to prefer conformity and accept authoritarian measures, even if they are not actually under threat. “Our experimental manipulation focused on perception, not reality,” the researchers note.

When it comes to society as a whole, the researchers found there may also be consequences that impact entire populations.

“A disease epidemic, or even the perceived threat of an epidemic (such as the H1N1 outbreak of 2009), may lead to temporarily higher levels of conformity within populations and may dispose individuals within those populations to respond more harshly to normative transgressions.”

This field of research clearly indicates the empirical evidence for authoritarian governance and conformist mindsets in response to a perceived threat of infection from a disease. If one takes a step back and examines the results of these studies and the events currently playing out around the world, it’s clear the hypothesis is being proven during the Covid panic.

Republished from [The Last American Vagabond](#), 20 August 2020

by Rhoda Wilson

Category

1. Freedom-Free speech-Resistance & H-rights
2. Health-Wellness-Healing-Nutrition & Fitness
3. Main
4. Politics-Geopolitics-Gov.-Events

Date Created

04/30/2022