

The Role of Education in Taming Authoritarian Attitudes

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

WITH A FOREWORD BY
JOHN J. DEGIOIA, PRESIDENT
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2020

GEORGETOWN UNIVERSITY



Center
on Education
and the Workforce

McCourt School of Public Policy



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Foreword

The classic tension between free will and determinism can be found in the contemporary college or university within disciplines ranging from sociology to neuroscience to political science. The enduring and challenging questions faculty, researchers, and students all wrestle with include: How much freedom do we really have? Do we decide and act with an understanding that we are responsible for the implications—the impact—of our choices? Or do we think these choices are the effects of external—or even innate—forces?

In this new report by Anthony P. Carnevale and colleagues from Georgetown University's Center on Education and the Workforce, we confront another framing of this tension: how can institutions of higher learning respond to the threats of rising authoritarianism? The report prompts us to ask how the work of our colleges and universities can respond to such threats—particularly if, as the report's authors assert, we all have "a predisposition toward authoritarianism that varies in relative strength according to the person."

One way of examining these themes is to consider what universities are for. These institutions are composed of three elements that are inextricably linked and mutually reinforcing: supporting the **formation** of our students; providing a context and support for the **inquiry** of our faculty—the research and scholarship of epistemic communities; and contributing to the **common good** of the broader

communities in which we participate. We can consider higher education's role in each of these areas in light of rising authoritarianism as explained in this report.

Formation

Colleges and universities support the formation of young people in multiple dimensions. Most of this development has already taken place in various settings and contexts before students ever arrive on our campuses. Young people emerge out of families, faith communities, primary and secondary schools, youth sports, and artistic experiences, such as drama and music; they are immersed in popular culture; they are connected to each other through social media. They have grown up with an array of cultural norms and assumptions. These settings and contexts all contribute to their personal development. And yet, our colleges and universities play a distinctive role in continuing and contributing to this formation process, one that is shaped by the centrality of knowledge.

Colleges and universities are dedicated to the acquisition and dissemination, the discovery and construction, the interpretation and conservation of knowledge. Together, these knowledge-developing activities determine the orientation of the university. In short, knowledge is what we are for; it is our work; it is what we contribute to the students who weave in and out of our orbit, and to the larger environments in which we're situated. And our role in students'

formation across all dimensions occurs at a particular time in their development, as part of an arc that begins at birth and continues throughout their lives.

Underpinning the work of formation is the conviction that we each can develop our own sense of authenticity through a rigorous process of self-interrogation and that we all will gradually become aware of conditions—within ourselves and external to ourselves—that enable us to do such self-authenticating work. Even in the face of a “predisposition toward authoritarianism,” the discipline of formation presumes that a capacity for developing an interior freedom can override authoritarian thinking. Colleges and universities can help make that so.

Inquiry

The knowledge pursuits that provide the resources for formation are built on the foundation of the second element—inquiry. Because inquiry is essentially characterized by uncertainty, it involves many retracings and repeated experiments and makes great demands on those who pursue it. Colleges and universities provide an environment that sustains and protects all those engaged in these uncertain endeavors.

The deepest conviction in the practice of inquiry is that it is possible to break through the blocks and obstacles to the discovery and construction of knowledge—that we have the capacity to discover truth, and to challenge it continually—under conditions of freedom that enable an inquirer to follow the journey wherever it may lead. Stefan Collini describes this conviction as the “ungovernable play of the inquiring mind.”ⁱ

The Common Good

Colleges and universities contribute to the common good of the communities in which they are situated, and to the larger arenas in which they are active. Their specific contributions may vary based on their missions: for example, a public land-grant university may contribute to economic development in its region or state through a strong commitment to agricultural research, while an urban university may have a focus on educating first-generation college students. Overall, the core conviction that shapes this third element of the university, however, is the emphasis on the importance of the public good. As pluralistic communities dedicated to the well-being of the broader communities in which they reside, colleges and universities embody and encourage diverse perspectives, enabling them to challenge both predispositions to and manifestations of authoritarianism.

The crucial insight of this new report is the role, first and foremost, of higher education as a bulwark against the threat of authoritarianism. Each element intrinsic to the university—formation, inquiry, and the common good—contributes to this solidity. This report is a clarion call for all in the academy to accept responsibility for performing a role that only we can play in our society. We are all indebted to Anthony P. Carnevale and his colleagues for this invaluable contribution to our civic discourse, and for challenging us to sustain the conditions of democracy that enable the promise of the American project.

—John J. DeGioia,
President, Georgetown University

ⁱ Stefan Collini, *What Are Universities For?* (New York, NY: Penguin, 2012).



The Role of Education in Taming Authoritarian Attitudes

In late spring 2020, the United States was roiled by colliding political and social forces unleashed against the backdrop of a global pandemic that triggered an economic recession. Across the country, military and police vehicles patrolled the streets, sometimes using force against peaceful protesters calling for long-denied racial justice. An executive order encouraging police reform contrasted with official rhetoric promising to preserve “law and order” and punish further resistance against police brutality. With the presidential primaries complicated by the presence of COVID-19, concerns about potential voter suppression circulated. Shuttered educational institutions and businesses heightened the sense of uncertainty. Propaganda and traditional media competed fiercely to win credibility with a skeptical public.

While a divided populace argued about what was true and what was false, many could agree on at least one thing: the deep political polarization that had been building for some time was reaching newly unsettling extremes. For years, political commentators have observed increasing polarization in the United States and have loudly sounded alarms. Based on past history, they have warned, the stage is being set for authoritarianism to take hold. But how big is the threat?

While there may be intense disagreements about how great a danger authoritarianism poses at any given moment, there is no doubt that authoritarianism presents a unique and persistent conundrum for modern democracies. Authoritarian approaches to governance are in direct conflict with democratic principles such as freedom and justice. At the same time, throughout history, democratic support for populist leaders has provided an avenue for authoritarian governments to take hold.

Yet what would drive citizens of a democracy to support a government that would suppress their rights and freedoms?

One important motivation may lie in how people respond to perceived threats to their way of life. People who place particularly high value on social cohesion, order, and established norms may strongly favor in-groups over outgroups and feel threatened by diversity and social change. When they perceive such threats as particularly salient, they may be willing to support strong leaders who promise that they will enforce conformity to existing norms, including by force if necessary. A group of voters reacting to such perceived threats can have an enormous influence on the political direction of a country, even in free and democratic societies like the United States.

Researchers have long sought to understand authoritarian-leaning voters and their role in enabling totalitarian figures to gain standing in democratic

societies. In the immediate aftermath of World War II, they wanted to know, for example, what allowed the Nazi Party to claim power in, and then dissolve, the Weimar Republic. Most famously, Theodor Adorno and colleagues explored the relationship between authoritarianism, ethnocentrism, and fascism in *The Authoritarian Personality*, published in 1950. Their work attempted to clarify how certain personalities might be prone to accept and promote authoritarian leadership.

The study of authoritarianism has evolved since Adorno's time. In contemporary research on authoritarianism, one of the most influential definitions comes from researcher Karen Stenner, who describes authoritarianism as a "worldview" that leads individuals to prefer "authority and uniformity" over "autonomy and diversity."¹

Stenner has proposed that some individuals have a strong predisposition toward authoritarianism and that this predisposition can be activated by the presence of threats to accepted norms. People who sense that they or their way of life are in danger may prefer the reassurances of authoritarian leadership, with its insistence on uniformity and coordinated top-down responses to threats, over the perceived messiness of a pluralist democracy. Members of the majority may see such leadership as crucial to protecting their way of life, even when it means suppressing the rights of others—usually members of minority groups.

In fact, for voters drawn to authoritarian styles of leadership, limiting rights for minority groups may be a central goal. Perceived threats to group identity or social norms can activate authoritarian inclinations: when an individual with strong authoritarian tendencies identifies strongly with a group or a set of traditions, and the identity of that group or those traditions seem to be threatened, intolerance can result. For example, people who feel that either their majority status or their cultural practices are threatened by growing demographic diversity in the United States may be drawn to leaders who express scorn for diversity in their rhetoric and who limit the rights of minority groups through their policies.

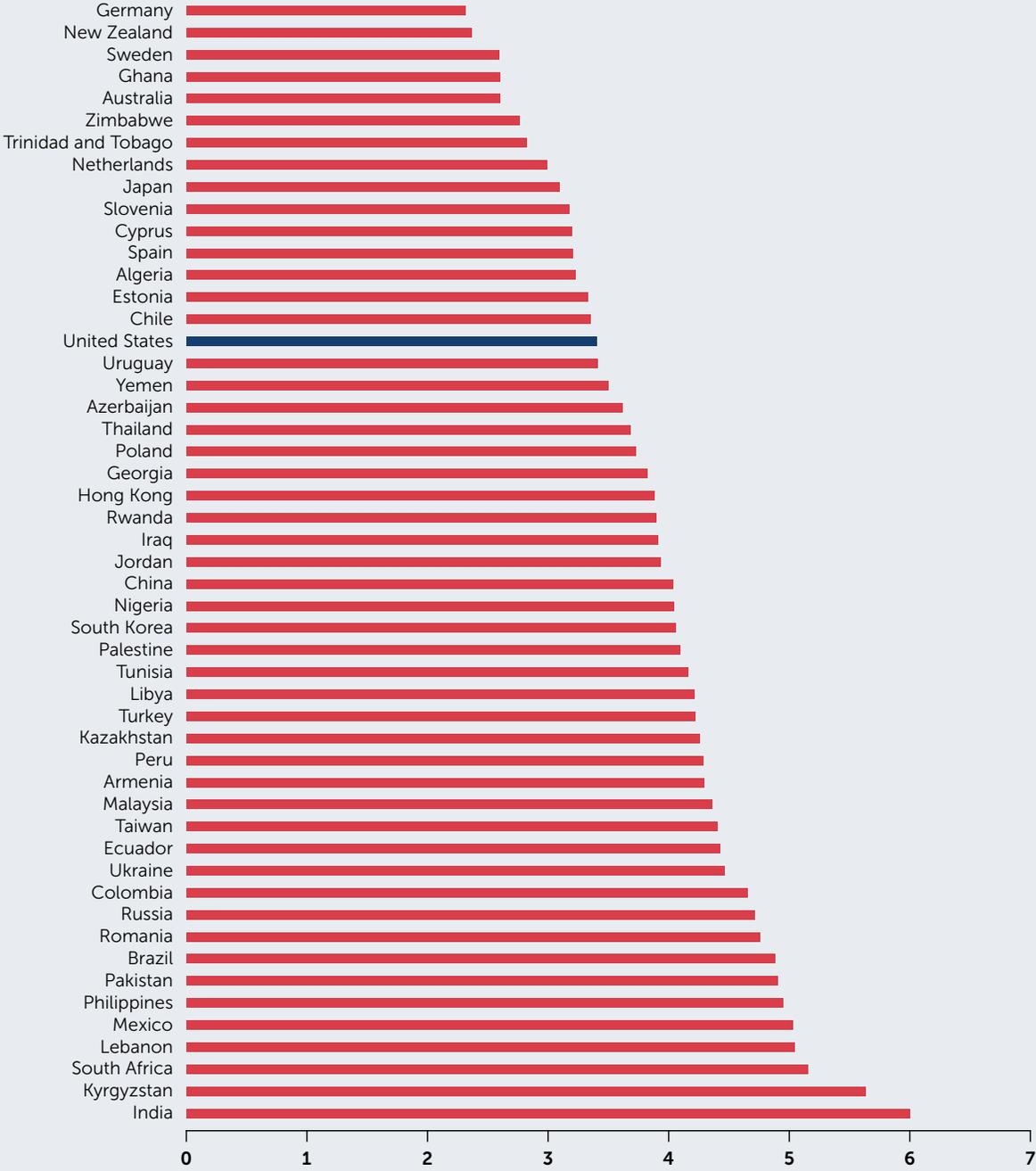
Sweeping crises that represent physical or economic threats can also be an opportunity for authoritarianism to tighten its grip. The COVID-19 pandemic is one potential example: alongside devastating effects on public health and the global economy, the disease has sown a creeping unease with the ability of public institutions to keep citizens safe from physical and economic harm as well as preserve their customary ways of life. Facing uncertainty about the best course of action, most governments have taken exceptional measures to halt the transmission of the virus. In some countries, actions that are presented as temporary solutions could permanently curtail democratic freedoms.

As history has demonstrated, once a majority of citizens in a democracy opt in to authoritarian political systems by electing rulers with authoritarian leadership styles and letting their actions go unchecked, the democratic freedoms of everyone in the society, majority and minority groups alike, may be at risk. Whether or not the citizens of an authoritarian regime prefer extreme versions of authoritarian leadership such as overt military rule, they are subject to the wishes of their leaders once democratic safeguards and protections for minority groups deteriorate. With COVID-19 at the forefront and demonstrations in response to racial and economic injustice fueling calls for "law and order" in the United States, American democracy—and democratic governments worldwide—may be at a tipping point.

Despite the risks, the triumph of authoritarian governance is not a foregone conclusion. There are factors that can help prevent a population from succumbing to authoritarian appeal: in particular, education has been shown to counteract a preference for authoritarian leadership, particularly at the postsecondary level. This is especially true of college education in the United States, where the unique features of the higher education system and its emphasis on the liberal arts may help offset the popular appeal of authoritarianism.

1 Karen Stenner, *The Authoritarian Dynamic* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

Figure 1. People in the United States show moderate inclinations toward authoritarianism.



Source: Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce analysis of data from the World Values Survey (WVS), 2010–14.
 Note: These results are based on a multilevel cross-country analysis; for full results, see Appendix B in the full report. The bars represent the average level of authoritarian preferences and attitudes in each of the 51 countries.

Relative to other countries, the United States has moderate inclinations toward authoritarianism.

As the coronavirus pandemic unfolds and governments around the world take unprecedented actions, some Americans may wonder if the United States is at risk of authoritarian overreach.

The United States is a well-established democracy, with constitutional safeguards and strong protections of civil rights. Yet it is not impenetrable to authoritarian influences. Surveys show that the people of the United States are moderately inclined toward authoritarianism, with authoritarian inclinations that are roughly on par with those of the people of Chile and Uruguay. These surveys also show that the people of Germany, New Zealand, and Sweden have the weakest inclinations toward authoritarianism, while the people of India, Kyrgyzstan, and South Africa have the strongest inclinations toward authoritarianism (Figure 1).

Americans with more education are less inclined toward authoritarian political preferences.

While Americans as a whole have relatively moderate inclinations toward authoritarianism, this tendency

differs among respondents with different educational attainment levels. At each higher level of educational attainment, respondents are less likely to express preferences for authoritarian-style political leadership (Figure 2). People with a bachelor's degree or higher have especially weak inclinations toward authoritarian political preferences.

A variety of factors related to higher education may affect this relationship. For example, higher education is known to improve economic security, increase civic responsibility, confer higher self-esteem, provide a sense of autonomy and control over one's life, and instill interpersonal trust, all of which might make individuals less likely to be enticed by authoritarian appeals.

Higher education in the United States plays a particularly strong role as a safeguard against authoritarianism.

In the United States more than in other countries, a college education is strongly associated with lower preferences for authoritarianism. Other countries where higher levels of education are strongly associated with lower preferences for authoritarianism include Romania, Sweden, and Poland. In contrast, countries where this relationship is weak include Iraq, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan (Figure 3).

Figure 2. People with higher levels of education are less inclined toward authoritarian political preferences.

Source: Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce analysis of data from the World Values Survey (WVS), 1994–2014.

Note: The figure presents selected coefficients from a multivariate linear regression equation; for full results, see Appendix A in the full report. The coefficients show the inclination toward expressing authoritarian political preferences and attitudes by education level, relative to respondents with less than a high school diploma.

*The coefficient for respondents with a high school diploma is not statistically significant, indicating that high school graduates are not statistically different from those with less than a high school diploma in their authoritarian political preferences and attitudes.

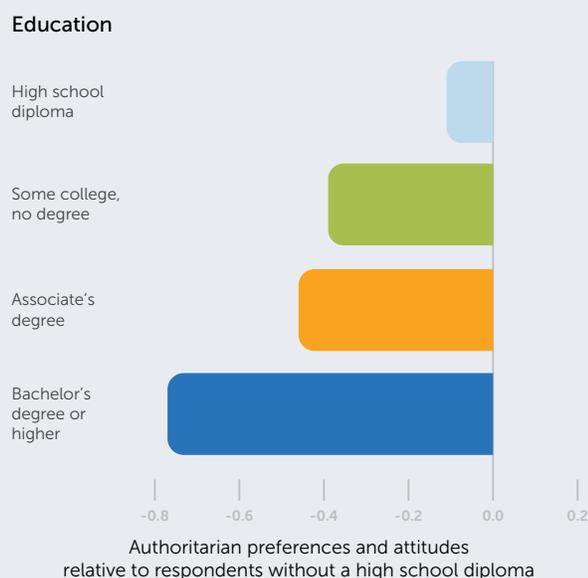
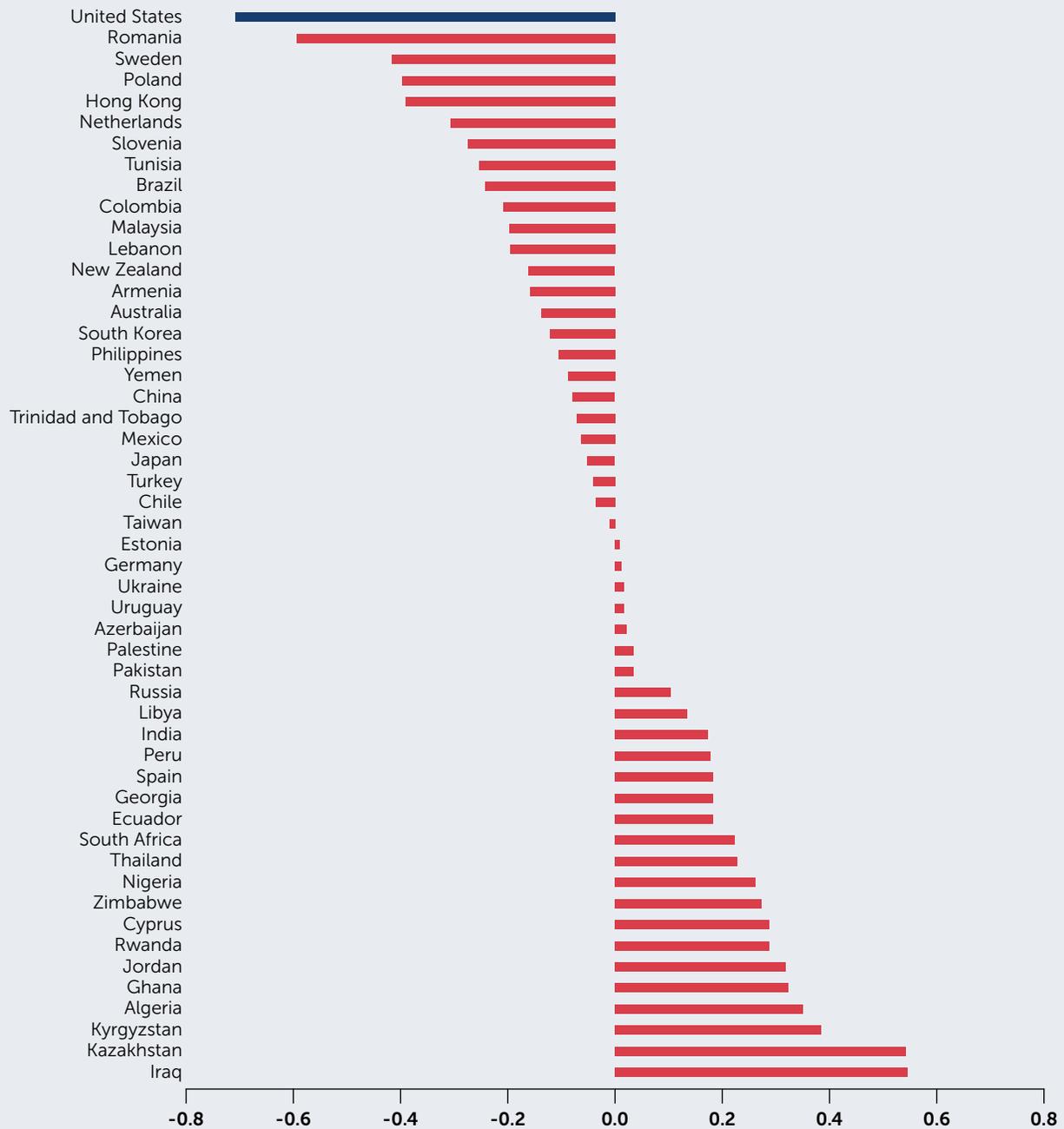


Figure 3. College education has the strongest association with lower inclinations toward authoritarianism in the United States.



Source: Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce analysis of data from the World Values Survey (WVS), 2010–14.

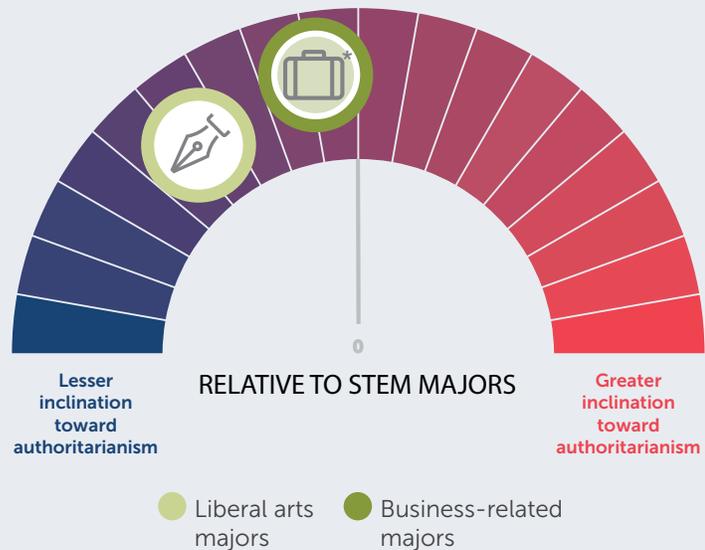
Note: These results are based on a multilevel cross-country analysis; for full results, see Appendix B in the full report. The bars represent the relative strength of the association between postsecondary education and inclinations toward authoritarianism, as compared to the average across the 51 countries considered in this analysis.

Figure 4. Liberal arts majors are less inclined toward authoritarianism than business or STEM majors.

Source: Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce analysis of data from the General Social Survey (GSS), 2010–16.

Note: The figure represents selected coefficients from a multivariate linear regression equation; for full results, see Appendix C in the full report. The coefficients represented in the figure are relative to STEM majors.

*The coefficient for business-related majors is not statistically significant, indicating that business-related majors are not statistically different from STEM majors. See Appendix C for the majors included within each of the three major categories.



This indicates that American education may be particularly effective in countering authoritarian preferences and attitudes. In part, this relationship may reflect the tendency of formal education in the United States to reinforce prevailing national values, including a long-standing but imperfectly realized commitment to democratic pluralism.

The prevalence of the liberal arts in American higher education may make it especially effective in mitigating authoritarianism.

American higher education is well known worldwide for its strong commitment to general education. Most postsecondary degree programs in the United States involve both study in a specific subject area and a general education component that exposes students to a broad range of academic disciplines, including the liberal arts (a broad set of disciplines that generally includes the arts, humanities, and sciences).

Liberal arts majors (excluding the sciences) are less inclined toward authoritarianism than those who major in either business-related fields or STEM disciplines (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) (Figure 4). The prevalence of at least

some exposure to the liberal arts among US students may help explain why an American higher education in particular is associated with a weak preference for authoritarianism.

Education is an important safeguard against authoritarianism—but vigilance is also key.

Education on its own is not sufficient to protect a country against authoritarian influences. Moreover, some people with lower levels of educational attainment stand as firmly opposed to authoritarianism as those with college degrees. Nonetheless, education can play an important role in mitigating authoritarian inclinations in the population as a whole.

Historically, such threatening conditions as the COVID-19 pandemic have been fertile soil for a rise of authoritarian regimes. In a world besieged by such new and acute threats, vigilance is critical—and every tool that can be used to guard against authoritarianism may play a crucial role. Authoritarianism has displaced representative democracy before, and we cannot allow it to happen in the United States.



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can be accessed online at cew.georgetown.edu/authoritarianism.

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