

Higher Education Can Help Protect Democracy from Authoritarianism, Says New Georgetown University Report

Liberal arts majors are less inclined to express authoritarian preferences and attitudes than majors in business-related fields and STEM disciplines

(Washington, DC, September 22, 2020) The pressures of global competition, mass migration, and economic instability have produced a backlash in many parts of the world, namely a rise in authoritarian leaders. A new report from the Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce (CEW) in collaboration with Lenka Dražanová of the European University Institute finds that postsecondary education can play a critical role in protecting democratic republics against the threat of authoritarianism. *The Role of Education in Taming Authoritarian Attitudes* finds that American higher education’s emphasis on a combination of specific and general education, including coursework in the liberal arts, contributes to its strong effect on mitigating authoritarian preferences.

Authoritarianism is a form of governance whereby strict obedience to authority is enforced at the expense of personal freedoms. To be authoritarian is to carry the belief that there should be one culture, one religion, one way of life, and, ultimately, one leader. Under conditions of threat to social norms such as growing diversity, increased globalization, and economic instability, people are more likely to be susceptible to authoritarian appeals.

“In times of persistent change, especially economic threat, the pull toward authoritarianism—which is under the surface in any society—becomes stronger,” said Anthony P. Carnevale, lead author of the report and CEW director. “All of us have the propensity to seek the protection of group unity when faced with threats, but true authoritarians perceive diversity and nonconformity as threats and are willing to act on their biases.”

These dynamics may help explain why authoritarian populism has been on the rise globally in an era when advanced technology and changing demographics have made encounters with difference unavoidable. Authoritarian populism was gaining steam before the COVID-19 pandemic, and some authoritarian governments have restricted civil liberties even further as COVID-19 spread. Around the world, today’s authoritarianism is particularly insidious because it masks itself with a veneer of democracy. Some modern autocrats can appeal to voters who freely elect them, allowing them to amass power from within democratic institutions. While dictators in the past relied heavily on physical violence to assert dominance, modern autocracies have favored the subtlety of information control as a primary strategy. Instead of threatening physical coercion, they may preserve the appearance of democracy even as they suppress the rights of underrepresented groups and the press.

“Authoritarianism is the wolf at the door in any republic, and it now stands howling at our door,” Carnevale said. “We need every reinforcement available to us to secure American democracy for future generations.”

The new report presents empirical evidence that higher levels of education are associated with stronger support for democratic principles. While people can express authoritarian preferences at all levels of educational attainment, higher education, especially in the liberal arts, appears to mitigate against authoritarian tendencies. Compared to those with no more than a high school diploma, bachelor's degree holders were significantly less inclined to express authoritarian preferences and attitudes. Associate's degree holders were also somewhat less inclined than those with no more than a high school diploma to express such preferences and attitudes.

The United States ranks as the 16th least authoritarian among 51 countries based on residents' inclinations to express authoritarian preferences and attitudes, roughly on par with Chile and Uruguay. Germany, New Zealand, Sweden, and Ghana top the list of populations least likely to express authoritarian tendencies, while India, Kyrgyzstan, South Africa, and Lebanon have the most authoritarian populations.

However, postsecondary education appears to have a larger impact on reducing authoritarian preferences in the United States than in other countries. This may be because American higher education places a strong emphasis on a combination of specific and general education, including coursework in the liberal arts. Students who major in the liberal arts are less inclined to express authoritarian preferences and attitudes than those who major in business-related fields and STEM disciplines.

Higher education promotes independent thought, respect for diversity, and inquisitive assessment of evidence—all of which are antithetical to the unquestioning acceptance of authority that is characteristic of authoritarianism. Individuals with higher levels of education also typically have higher levels of self-esteem, personal security, and autonomy. As a result, they are less likely to be enticed by authoritarian appeals that promise security from outsiders with views, cultures, or norms different from their own.

The report also indicates that socioeconomic status and economic security play roles in influencing individuals' authoritarian inclinations and preferences. Members of the upper-middle class are less inclined toward authoritarianism than members of lower socioeconomic classes. However, the report clearly indicates that economics is not the only reason education has a mitigating impact on authoritarianism.

Another way higher education may influence an individual's propensity for authoritarian attitudes is by promoting civic responsibility. Those with postsecondary education are more likely to be politically active, which in the United States is associated with a lower inclination toward expressing authoritarian preferences and attitudes.

“To ensure higher education's role in strengthening the American economy and American democracy, it will be essential that we expand postsecondary opportunity moving forward, particularly for the most vulnerable members of society,” said Nicole Smith, co-author of the report and CEW's chief economist.

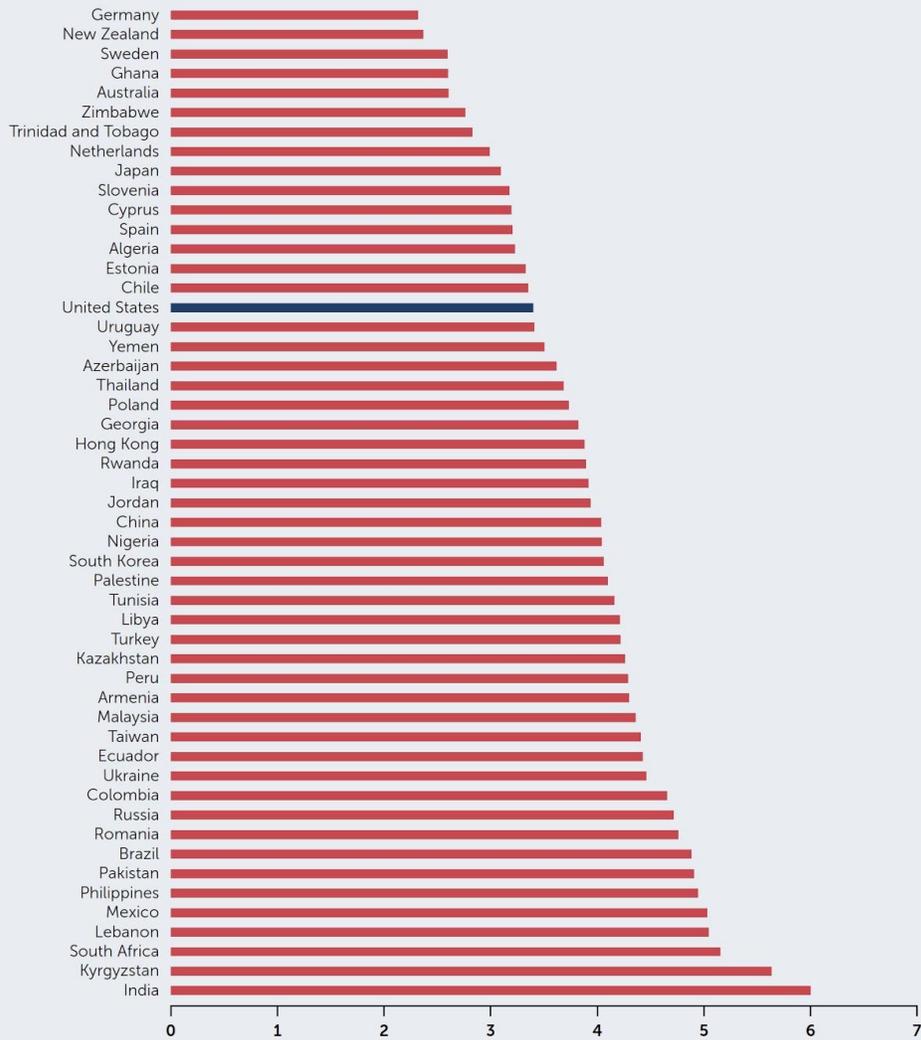
Other Key Findings

- Exposure to the liberal arts can provide humanitarian grounding for scientists and technologists, whose work may involve making decisions that have far-reaching consequences across the globe, thereby mitigating the adverse effects of technological and scientific authoritarianism.
- People who tend to trust others are less inclined toward authoritarianism.

- People who are more religious are more inclined toward authoritarianism.
- While authoritarian tendencies are distinct from political party affiliation, Republicans are more inclined to express authoritarian preferences and attitudes than Democrats.

Authoritarian Preferences Among 51 Countries

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; see Appendix B for additional information about the international comparison. The bars represent the average level of authoritarian preferences and attitudes in each of the 51 countries.

To access the full report and executive summary, visit cew.georgetown.edu/authoritarianism.

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