

Nothing to see here, move along! Illiberal contexts as catalyzers of authoritarian misperception of democratic quality

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Abstract

This study investigates the role of authoritarianism, a psychological characteristic at the individual level, in systemic democratic backsliding. Authoritarianism has been primarily regarded as a driver of nondemocratic changes through the establishment of illiberal and antidemocratic attitudes and preferences. However, our multinational study proposes an additional mechanism. By analyzing data from the European Social Survey, gathered from representative samples across 31 European countries, we demonstrate that authoritarianism can also foster a misperception of the quality of liberal democracy, making an illiberal context appear more democratic than it is in reality. Specifically, individuals with authoritarian tendencies tend to perceive the functioning of liberal democratic principles more positively in more illiberal countries, where the actual quality of liberal democracy is lower. This discrepancy between an illiberal, antidemocratic reality and its contrasting perception is identified as a motivated perceptual distortion, catalyzed by a negative antidemocratic context. This latter mechanism can indirectly contribute to institutional democratic decline, making voters with authoritarian attitudes less sensitive to the violations of democratic norms.

KEYWORDS

authoritarianism, democracy, motivation, social context, system justification

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INTRODUCTION

Almost a century has passed since authoritarianism was described as one of the most fundamental psychological foundations of antidemocratic political attitudes by scholars of the Frankfurt School (Adorno et al., 1950; Fromm, 1941; Reich, 1946). Since then, a large body of research—based on more precise and empirically proven theoretical foundations—has confirmed that the core of authoritarian psychological dynamics aligns with illiberal and antidemocratic political views and policy preferences (for reviews, see Duckitt, 2022; Feldman et al., 2021; Feldman & Weber, 2023). Nonetheless, authoritarian attitudes might undermine democratic institutions and norms not only by establishing open support for nondemocratic policies, movements, and regimes, but also by ignoring and denying problems with democratic quality. This latter consequence of authoritarian attitudes might be more important in the contemporary context because “democracy” has become an almost universal norm in politics in the last few decades (Fukuyama, 2010), such that even obviously nondemocratic regimes try to mimic and counterfeit it: for example, when Vladimir Putin's authoritarian Russia adopted the self-definition of a “sovereign democracy” (Kortukov, 2020).

Negative social contexts have the potential to create a divergence between positively motivated perceptions and a more negative reality (Hadarics, 2024, 2025; Hadarics & Kende, 2025). This seems to be especially true in the case of motivational factors that serve as a foundation for positive attitudes toward the political, institutional, and economic system (Jost, 2020). Authoritarianism, as a psychological trade-off between the need for a secure and predictable social environment versus self-actualization, serves as a potential motivational base for rationalizing the societal status quo and justifying inequalities (Adorno et al., 1950; Altemeyer, 1988; Duckitt, 2001, 2022). In the multinational study presented below, we show that authoritarianism contributes to an illiberal and antidemocratic mindset in two ways. First, by the well-documented method of downplaying the personal importance of the basic principles of liberal democracy (Feldman et al., 2021; Feldman & Weber, 2023). Secondly, by establishing biased perceptions about the actual functioning of those principles, making nondemocracies or ill democracies appear democratic. As authoritarians usually have positive attitudes toward the status quo (which is regarded as dominantly democratic in almost all regimes in the world), illiberal and antidemocratic contexts may catalyze the divergence between motivated positive perceptions of democratic functioning and problematic reality, leading to a motivated ignorance of problems with the quality of liberal democracy. This helps authoritarian voters manage and reduce their negative feelings and anxiety, serving as a buffer for mental distress, which is an important psychological function of the authoritarian mindset (Van Hiel & De Clercq, 2009).

Authoritarianism and illiberal attitudes

The basic principles of liberal democracy have become central elements of modern democratic systems. Free and fair elections, the rule of law, protection of civil rights and liberties, political pluralism, and equality before the law are considered essential foundations of a well-functioning democracy and are often applied as evaluative criteria for assessing democratic quality (Beetham et al., 2008; Bühlmann et al., 2012). Liberal democratic principles have become normative, and leaders (Fukuyama, 2010) and citizens of autocratic regimes also tend to express their agreement with them (Letsa & Wilfahrt, 2018; Schedler, 2023). In line with the normative nature of democratic procedures, numerous autocratic and/or illiberal regimes call themselves democracies while denying any systemic violations of liberal democratic principles; however, obvious these might be (Bozóki, 2013; de Sa e Silva, 2022; Roth, 2009).

Authoritarianism as a political system must be differentiated from authoritarianism as an individual-level psychological characteristic, although the latter is often considered a central motivational base for preferring the former. If we concentrate on the common points of several decades of psychological research on authoritarianism, we can see that the main elements, like endorsing conventional social and cultural norms, gravitating toward traditional authority figures, or disapproving, degrading, and discriminating against nonconventional outgroups, are all based on a strong need for security and certainty (Adorno et al., 1950; Allport, 1954; Altemeyer, 1988; Duckitt, 2001; Feldman & Weber, 2023; Fromm, 1941; Norris & Inglehart, 2019; Stenner, 2005). These needs can be efficiently satisfied by the acceptance and enforcement of conventional social rules and norms, which can create a sense of order, safety, and stability. Similarly, people with an authoritarian mindset tend to feel threatened by any possible significant social changes that can undermine social order and cohesion. Accordingly, they also express strongly negative views and attitudes toward nonconventional outgroups, as they are perceived either as threats to the status quo or as a denial of conventional cultural views or practices (Duckitt, 2022; Osborne et al., 2023).

As liberal democratic principles involve a strong commitment to tolerance, inclusion, and equality, it is not surprising that authoritarianism has been consistently found to predict resistance to these principles and a preference for illiberal policies and practices. Regarding intergroup relations, authoritarianism robustly correlates with policy preferences restricting the opportunities and rights of social groups perceived as posing a threat to social conventions and the status quo. Among others, this has been found in the case of gender equality (Duncan et al., 1997; Jiménez-Moya et al., 2022), LGBTQ rights (Bawden et al., 2023; Perrin et al., 2018), immigration policy preferences (Craig & Richeson, 2014), or attitudes toward homeless people (Fragó et al., 2022). Nonetheless, regardless of any specific outgroups, any significant social change toward greater freedom and equality could only be accomplished by at least partly giving up the status quo, which could be seen as a threatening prospect by authoritarians. This is why it is not surprising that authoritarianism predicts policy preferences that hinder such attempts, such as the restriction of protests, free speech, and other forms of civil liberties, and a lower level of overall support for human rights and democratic values (e.g., Altemeyer, 1996; Cohen & Smith, 2016; Cohrs et al., 2005; Crowson, 2009; Hetherington & Suhay, 2011; McFarland, 2022). Furthermore, authoritarians are in favor of the severe punishment of those posing a threat to social order and security (Duckitt & Sibley, 2009; Lindén et al., 2016; West & Yelderman, 2024). Results also show that people with an authoritarian mindset tend to interpret democracy more narrowly, emphasizing the majoritarian-electoral principles while ignoring the liberal criteria concerning human rights, civil liberties, and their institutional guarantees (Šerek & Lomičová, 2020).

Motivated system attitudes in different contexts

An essential motivational base for authoritarianism is a need for security, stability, and certainty, which often establishes positive general attitudes toward the system. Accepting the social status quo as desirable and/or natural satisfies these motivational needs. Accordingly, authoritarianism tends to correlate with different indicators of positive system attitudes, like political trust or system justification (Cotterill et al., 2014; Dunn, 2020; Ma & Yang, 2014; Pattyn et al., 2012; Pernia, 2022; Vargas-Salfate et al., 2018). Furthermore, additional psychological characteristics closely related to authoritarianism also often show positive relationships with the support of the system, its institutions, and its conventional procedures. Social conformity (Duckitt & Sibley, 2009), conservation values (Morselli et al., 2012; Sagiv & Schwartz, 2022), various indicators of cognitive rigidity (Jost, 2017; Jost et al., 2003; Kelemen et al., 2014; Van Hiel et al., 2004), or low openness (Howard et al., 2022; Mondak et al., 2017) are such examples,

which are usually considered as showing not just a motivational but also a conceptual overlap with the authoritarian psychological dynamics, as all these characteristics reflect a profound need for a secure and unambiguous social environment at the expense of autonomy and self-actualization. Nonetheless, there are also sporadic results from multinational studies showing no or even marginally negative relationships between authoritarianism and system attitudes (Weiner & Federico, 2017; Wong et al., 2011), which implies the possibility that certain contextual factors might moderate this relationship.

Such a possibility would align with recent results supporting that the effects of certain motivational factors that typically lead to positive system attitudes are context-dependent. The system justification theory emphasizes that certain epistemic, existential, and relational needs motivate us to rationalize and justify the legitimacy of the social, political, and economic status quo (Jost, 2020; Jost & Banaji, 1994). Empirical evidence indicates that the strength and the consequences of such motivated system justification are more intense in more problematic contexts. For example, multiple studies show that motivated system justification is stronger under more severe system threats (Friesen et al., 2019), while the endorsement of system-justifying ideologies and positive system attitudes enhances subjective well-being to a larger extent in more negative contexts with social problems like different forms of inequalities or lower levels of system performance (Napier et al., 2010, 2020; Napier & Jost, 2008; Onraet et al., 2017; Sengupta et al., 2017). Such negative contexts also seem to catalyze the strength of motivated perceptual distortions about the system. For example, belief in a just world, a common motivational factor establishing positive attitudes toward the political-institutional system, seems to create a wider gap between positive perceptions of system performance (e.g., procedural justice or societal development) and reality in countries where the system's actual performance is more problematic (Hadarics, 2024; Hadarics & Kende, 2025). Correspondingly, trust in the system was found to be related to more favorable perceptions of political performance regarding welfare services and the national economy in countries where real performance in these areas was more negative (Hadarics, 2025).

Authoritarians' potential blind spot for democratic deficit

As negative contexts catalyze the effects of psychological characteristics that make people see the system in a biased positive way, it is reasonable to assume that such contextual effects can also be identified in the case of authoritarianism. This possibility has important implications regarding authoritarians' potential views about democracy. It is well-known that authoritarians are less committed to the main principles of liberal democracy. Nonetheless, the perception of the actual functioning of these principles might also be affected by authoritarianism. Regarding the perception of liberal democratic quality, this would mean that authoritarianism might predict a more favorable evaluation of democratic functioning, especially in countries with flawed democracies. In such contexts, the illiberal policy preferences and inclination to justify the status quo can both be satisfied for authoritarians. On the one hand, less liberal regimes typically offer political practices and solutions that are more suitable to authoritarians' prioritized need for certainty and security over tolerance and equality (Norris & Inglehart, 2019). On the other hand, such regimes tend to define themselves as well-functioning democracies and deny any systematic violations of democratic principles (Bozóki, 2013; Roth, 2009). Contemporary illiberal regimes share “the master legitimating frame of our age: popular sovereignty as the ultimate source of state authority”, and they build on this democratic ideal while stretching it to the extreme (Smilova, 2021). By creating the illusion of a flawless democracy, these regimes can also provide authoritarians with the necessary justifications for a misperceived (un)democratic reality. Nonetheless, authoritarians' concurrent preference for the status quo and illiberal

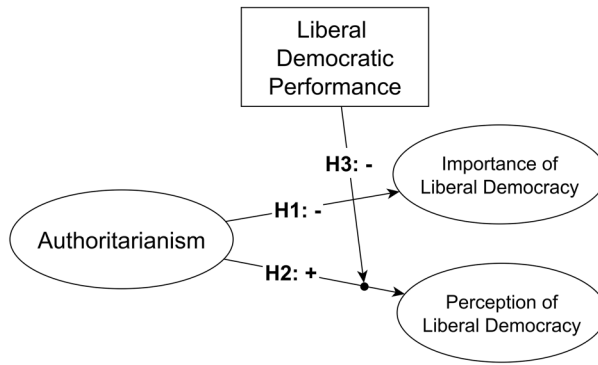


FIGURE 1 Hypothesized relationships between authoritarianism and democratic beliefs.

practices might be satisfied less easily at the same time in better-functioning liberal democracies because the liberal status quo contradicts authoritarian policy preferences. For these reasons, contexts with a liberal democratic deficit might have a larger potential to catalyze authoritarians' motivated misperception of democratic quality. This possibility would indicate that authoritarians not only hold more illiberal beliefs but might also perceive and evaluate the quality of liberal democratic functioning in a biased positive way, especially in the case of an illiberal reality.

THE CURRENT STUDY

In the study presented below, we aim to gather empirical evidence for our hypothesis that authoritarianism contributes to illiberal and antidemocratic political practices in two ways. First, by the better-documented way of downplaying the personal importance of basic liberal democratic principles, and secondly, by establishing more positive perceptions about the functioning of democracy even if these contradict reality. Relatedly, we also assumed that more illiberal contexts catalyze positive (mis)perceptions as these contexts enable authoritarians to satisfy both their needs for illiberal practices and for preserving the status quo simultaneously. The following three hypotheses were set (see also Figure 1) and tested with data gathered from the probabilistic representative samples of 31 European countries, extended with relevant country ranking indices quantifying actual democratic and political performance:

H1. The principles of liberal democracy are less important for authoritarians (vs. nonauthoritarians), consequently, authoritarianism negatively correlates with the personal importance of liberal democracy.

H2. Authoritarians (vs. nonauthoritarians) perceive the actual functioning of liberal democracy more positively. Consequently, authoritarianism positively correlates with the perception of liberal democratic performance.

H3. Actual liberal democratic performance moderates the relationship between authoritarianism and the evaluation of democratic performance, which becomes stronger in less democratic countries.¹

¹For exploratory purposes, we also tested whether actual liberal democratic performance moderates the relationship between authoritarianism and the importance of liberal democracy, but no specific hypothesis was formulated for this effect.

Datasets and variables

The individual-level data for the study were taken from the 2020 European Social Survey (ESS) dataset² (European Social Survey, 2023). The ESS is a biannual international survey program to measure views, attitudes, preferences, and basic values of citizens from multiple European nations regarding a wide array of social and political issues. One of the main modules of the 2020 survey round concentrated on Europeans' understanding of democracy, with multiple evaluative items. The ESS data were extended with a country-level index quantifying liberal democratic quality taken from the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) database. From 2017, the annual V-Dem democracy reports rank every country against multiple benchmarks designed to assess democratic quality.

For the constructs with multiple indicator variables, the indicators were merged into latent variables during subsequent statistical modeling. Compared with scale mean scores, latent variables are more effective for accounting for measurement errors by modeling the relationship between observed variables and the underlying construct (Finch & Bolin, 2017). Where necessary, scoring was reversed to higher numbers indicating stronger agreement.

Authoritarianism

Individual-level authoritarianism was measured by two ESS items (“Obedience and respect for authority are the most important values children should learn.” [1 – agree strongly; 5 – disagree strongly]; “What [country] needs most is loyalty towards its leaders.” [1 – agree strongly; 5 – disagree strongly]). Both ESS authoritarianism items are based on notable measures of authoritarianism. The first is from the classic F-scale (Adorno et al., 1950). In terms of its wording, it stands close to the “child-rearing values” measurement tradition of authoritarianism, which conceptualizes it as a psychological predisposition, and measures it in a relatively apolitical nonideological way (Engelhardt et al., 2023). The second item is based on the scale of Duckitt et al. (2010), which defines authoritarianism as a learned ideological-attitudinal cluster. In this way, the two indicators tap into both major measurement and conceptual traditions of authoritarianism.

Views on liberal democracy

Two sets of items from the ‘Understanding of Democracy’ module from the 2020 ESS focused on the basic principles of liberal democracy (European Social Survey, 2023). The first set assessed their personal *importance* (“how important you think it is for democracy in general ...”; 0 – not at all important; 10 – extremely important) and the second measured the *perception* of their functioning (“to what extent you think each of the following statements applies in [country].”; 0 – does not apply at all; 10 – applies completely). Both sets consisted of the principles of free elections (“national elections are free and fair”), political pluralism (“different political parties offer clear alternatives to one another”), accountability (“governing parties are punished in elections when they have done a bad job”), freedom of speech/press (“the media are free to criticise the government”), minority rights (“the rights of minority groups are protected”), and the rule of law (“the courts treat everyone the same”). In the course of subsequent statistical analyses, the importance

²participating countries: Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Switzerland, Cyprus, Czechia, Germany, Estonia, Spain, Finland, France, United Kingdom, Greece, Croatia, Hungary, Ireland, Israel, Iceland, Italy, Lithuania, Latvia, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Serbia, Sweden, Slovenia, Slovakia.

and the perception of liberal democracy were constructed as two separate latent variables based on their indicators.

Liberal democratic performance

The actual quality of the functioning of liberal democratic principles was operationalized by the 2020 Liberal Democracy Index of the V-Dem database (V-Dem Institute, 2021). This index ranks countries along a 0–1 scale based on 69 indicators, where 0 means ‘closed autocracies’ with a complete lack of liberal democratic principles, and 1 refers to perfect ‘liberal democracies’ with free and fair elections, protection of civil liberties and human rights, the rule of law, institutional checks and balances, and equality before the law, among other criteria for a well-functioning liberal democracy.

Control variables

Additional control variables were also applied in our analyses. On the individual level, these were gender (0 = man; 1 = woman), age, education (according to the levels of the International Standard Classification of Education), household income (1 = lowest decile; 10 = highest decile within a country), religiousness (0 = not at all religious; 10 = very religious), personal ideological orientation (0 = left; 10 = right), and satisfaction with the national government (0 = completely dissatisfied; 10 = completely satisfied). The application of these controls was reasonable because respondents with a higher social status in terms of their demographic characteristics typically show more positive attitudes toward the social and political system just like religious and right-wing people (e.g., Jost & Kay, 2005; Mayne & Hakhverdian, 2017; Sidanius & Pratto, 1999). Satisfaction with the national government was included to differentiate both authoritarianism and the perception of liberal democracy from a general attitude toward the incumbent government. On the country level, we also controlled for general system performance operationalized by the Inequality-Adjusted Human Development Index (IHDI) which quantifies how effective the political-institutional system is in providing equal opportunities to live a long and healthy life, being knowledgeable, and having a high standard of living (United Nations Development Program, 2024).

Data analysis

We applied multilevel structural equation modeling (MSEM) to test our hypotheses with the MPlus 8.6 software (Muthén & Muthén, 1998–2017). We used full-information Bayesian estimation with 100,000 iterations (with the first half of these as the burn-in phase), two Markov chain Monte Carlo (MCMC) chains, and a thinning rate of 10. We used priors with a mean of zero, an infinite variance, and a normal distribution in the case of each estimation, which is a flexible choice if there are not any well-grounded prior assumptions about the exact strength of the estimates (Asparouhov & Muthén, 2010). Bayesian estimation was applied because, compared to traditional frequentist estimation approaches, it gives more reliable estimates with sample sizes and data structures typical in the case of multinational datasets like the ESS (Hox et al., 2012). Furthermore, unlike frequentist approaches, Bayesian estimation does not rely on distributional assumptions and is more effective with smaller samples, which is often the case with international databases with a limited number of countries (Finch & Bolin, 2017; Hox et al., 2012).

As a first step, the variance of each ESS variable was decomposed into a between-part showing the proportion of the total variances that varies between countries and into a within-part which varies between individuals regardless of their country of origin. Significant (non-zero) between-level variances of the variables would warrant the use of random intercept multilevel models which can handle the distorting effect of country-level differences in the variables when modeling individual-level differences. For the same purpose, intraclass correlation coefficients (ICCs), another measure of data clustering, were also calculated for each variable. After that, we set up an MSEM model with random intercepts where both the perception and the importance of liberal democracy were predicted by authoritarianism and the control variables. Perception and importance of liberal democracy were constructed as latent variables just like authoritarianism based on the within-level variances of their indicator items.³ To model the cross-level interactions, the effects of authoritarianism on both outcome variables were defined as random slopes that could vary across countries as random effects. Both the Liberal Democracy Index and IHDI were then regressed on the variance of these random slopes on the between-level of the model to see whether the strength of the slopes changed as a function of these between-level moderators.

Results

Descriptive statistics for each variable are reported in [Table 1](#) along with ICCs for the ESS variables. Variance decomposition showed that each ESS variable had a significant between-level variance (see [Table 1](#) in the online supplementary material [OSM]), and we also found relatively high ICC values for several ESS variables (see [Table 1](#)). Both findings indicate severe clustering in the data, which justified our multilevel approach to the subsequent analyses. Detailed results of our MSEM model are reported in [Table 2](#) in the OSM, while the most important ones are highlighted in [Figure 2](#). These show that authoritarianism had a positive effect on the perception of liberal democracy ($\beta = .09$; $p < .001$) and a negative one on the personal importance of it ($\beta = -.14$; $p < .001$). Most importantly, while the IHDI did not moderate either of these effects (perception: $\beta = -.22$; $p = .268$; importance: $\beta = -.04$; $p = .880$), the Liberal Democracy Index had a significant negative effect on the relationship between authoritarianism and the perception of liberal democracy ($\beta = -.51$; $p = .016$) and did not moderate the effect of authoritarianism on the importance of liberal democracy ($\beta = -.31$; $p = .218$).⁴

Subsequent simple slope analysis revealed that the positive effect of authoritarianism on the perception of liberal democracy gets even stronger as actual liberal democratic performance decreases but turns into nonsignificant at higher levels of liberal democratic performance ([Table 2](#)). The country-level relationship between actual performance and the effect of authoritarianism on the perception of liberal democracy is shown in [Figure 3](#), which highlights that authoritarianism's effect on perception is at its peak in countries that have been the champions of de-democratization—such as Hungary, Poland, or Serbia. According to

³A multilevel model was set up to test the latent variables' measurement qualities. On its 'within' level, the three latent variables were constructed based on the 'within' variances of their indicator variables and were allowed to correlate. On the 'between' level of the model, the 'between' variances of the same indicator variables were also allowed to correlate to prevent any artificial inflation of model fit due to ignoring significant relationships on the 'between' level of the multilevel model. When testing this measurement model, maximum likelihood estimation was applied as the software does not produce any traditional fit indices in the case of Bayesian multilevel models. The measurement model showed adequate fit to the data which supports the appropriate measurement qualities of the latent variables ($\chi^2 = 1571.002$; $df = 74$; $CFI = .933$; $RMSEA = .018$; $SRMR_{within} = .042$; $SRMR_{between} = .000$).

⁴A version of the multilevel model without the within- and between-level control variables is reported in the OSM ([Figure 1](#) and [Table 3](#)). This version shows the same pattern of results as the model reported here.

TABLE 1 Descriptive statistics and intraclass correlations of variables.

Variable	Mean	Variance	ICC
Authoritarianism – Obedience	3.464	1.342	.085
Authoritarianism – Loyalty	2.865	1.172	.060
Importance – Free Elections	8.997	3.126	.043
Importance – Pluralism	7.857	4.914	.048
Importance – Freedom of Speech	8.463	4.276	.028
Importance – Minority Rights	8.152	4.783	.057
Importance – Rule of Law	9.151	2.688	.058
Importance – Accountability	8.251	4.544	.050
Perception – Free Elections	7.055	8.357	.220
Perception – Pluralism	5.563	6.683	.119
Perception – Freedom of Speech	6.611	8.463	.160
Perception – Minority Rights	6.339	6.500	.090
Perception – Rule of Law	5.255	9.829	.241
Perception – Accountability	5.057	9.384	.122
Gender	1.530	.249	.005
Age	50.472	344.217	.019
Education	4.261	3.229	.069
Income	5.537	7.426	.038
Religion	4.456	9.95	.114
Ideology	5.009	5.914	.037
Satisfaction with Government	4.357	7.123	.129
Liberal Democracy Index	.702	.028	–
IHDI	.818	.004	–

Note: Reported estimates are the median points of the Bayesian posterior distributions. SD=Posterior standard deviation; 95% CI LB=Lower bounds of the 95% Bayesian credibility interval; 95% CI UB=Upper bounds of the 95% Bayesian credibility interval; ICC=Intraclass correlation coefficient.

TABLE 2 Simple slope analysis for the effect of authoritarianism on the perception of liberal democracy.

Level of liberal democracy	Estimate	SD	95% CI LB	95% CI UB	<i>p</i>
+2 SD	-.210	.177	-.556	.141	.232
+1 SD	.001	.104	-.203	.209	.992
Mean	.212	.062	.088	.336	<.001
-1 SD	.423	.103	.214	.624	<.001
-2 SD	.636	.176	.279	.978	<.001

Note: Reported estimates are the median points of the Bayesian posterior distributions. Estimate=Unstandardized regression coefficients; SD=Posterior standard deviation; 95% CI LB=Lower bounds of the 95% Bayesian credibility interval; 95% CI UB=Upper bounds of the 95% Bayesian credibility interval.

the latest democracy rating report of V-DEM, these three countries are among the “top 10 autocratizers” that underwent the most spectacular democratic backsliding in the last years (Nord et al., 2024). Dismantling basic democratic procedures, institutions, and norms in these countries is well documented and described in the academic literature in recent years (see, for example, Bernhard, 2021; Castaldo, 2020). Meanwhile, the results also show that the same

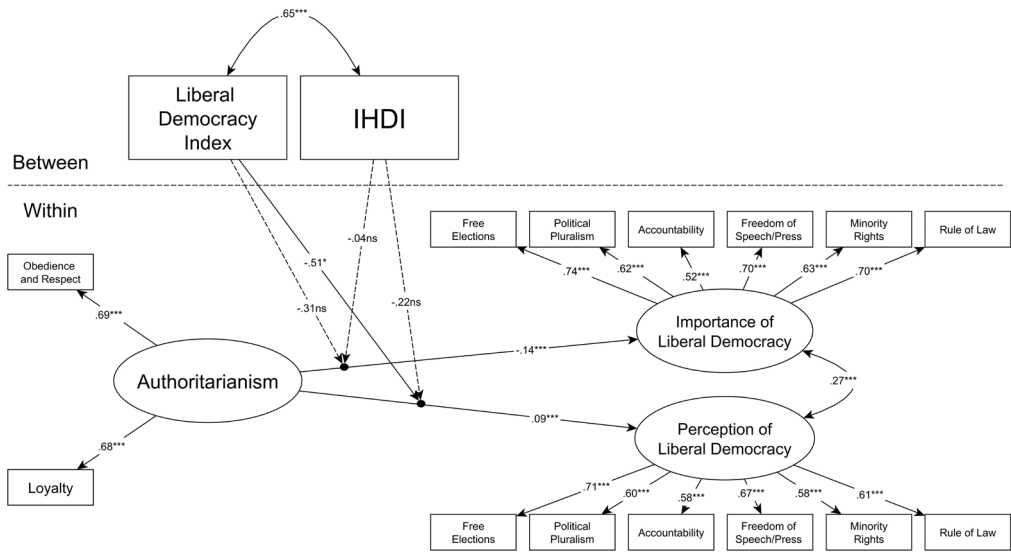


FIGURE 2 Multilevel model predicting the personal importance and perception of liberal democracy. Estimates are standardized coefficients. The effects of control variables are not displayed for greater clarity of the figure. IHDI = Inequality-Adjusted Human Development Index. *** $p < .001$; ** $p < .05$; ns = nonsignificant.

effect of authoritarianism weakens practically to zero in countries with high-quality democratic procedures.

DISCUSSION

The results of our multilevel analysis showed that authoritarianism had a significant effect on both the personal importance of liberal democratic principles and the perception of their current functioning. The first of these relationships fits the well-documented tendency of authoritarians to endorse illiberal political attitudes and policy preferences due to their need for social order, security, and predictability over personal autonomy and tolerance (Duckitt, 2022; Feldman & Weber, 2023). Nonetheless, the second identified effect of authoritarianism supports the assumption that it can contribute to the erosion of democratic quality in another way, too. Although the main principles of liberal democracy are less important to authoritarians, they tend to perceive their functioning more favorably, regardless of their opinion about the incumbent government. This aligns with authoritarians' preference for the social status quo over large-scale social changes, as the former suits the authoritarian need for certainty and predictability (Duckitt & Sibley, 2009; Osborne et al., 2023). However, our results showed that the positive perception of democratic quality is conditional on the actual quality of the liberal democratic context, as authoritarianism establishes more favorable perceptions in countries with more severe problems with the actual functioning of liberal democratic principles, while the same effect of authoritarianism is weaker or even nonexistent in better-functioning democracies.

The moderating role of actual democratic quality implies that authoritarianism strengthens positive perceptions more intensely where reality strongly contradicts this perception, and the lower the actual democratic quality is, the wider the gap between reality and perceptions becomes. In this way, illiberal and antidemocratic contexts catalyze the effect of authoritarianism as it seems to work as a motivational base for biased positive perceptions. This result is in line

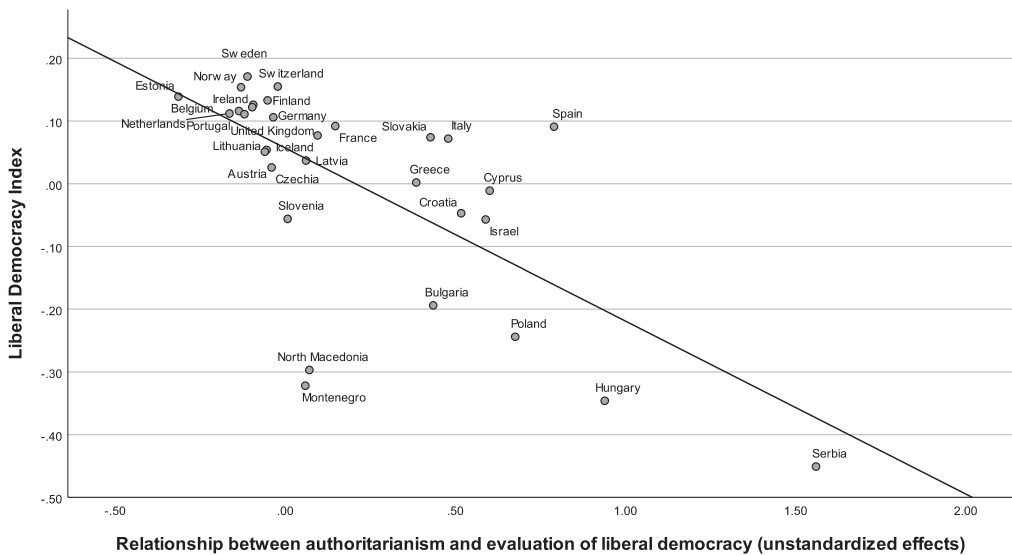


FIGURE 3 Relationship between the Liberal Democracy Index and the effect of authoritarianism on democracy evaluation.

with recent findings showing that certain motivations lead to more biased (positive) system attitudes in more problematic contexts (Hadarics, 2024, 2025; Hadarics & Kende, 2025). Less liberal and democratic regimes are more suitable for both preferences of authoritarians: on the one hand, a preference for illiberal political practices, and a preference for the status quo on the other. According to our results, the actual level of liberal democratic quality does not moderate the relationship between authoritarianism and the personal importance of liberal democracy. Although such moderation was not explicitly hypothesized, its presence would not have been completely unexpected either. Authoritarians tend to follow ingroup norms, occasionally even if these contradict traditional social conventions (Dusso, 2017; Roets et al., 2015). If liberal democratic procedures are more established in well-functioning democracies, one might assume that ingroup conformity would push authoritarians into a more liberal (or at least a less illiberal) direction in terms of their preferences. Nonetheless, it seems that the authoritarian dynamics establish less liberal attitudes regardless of contextual democratic quality. In this case, the content of liberal democratic principles promoting tolerance, equality, and inclusion seems to neutralize the potential appeal that they could exert due to their normative nature.

Taking the twofold effect of authoritarianism together, it is possible that somewhat different patterns of authoritarian dynamic work in different democratic contexts. Authoritarians attribute less importance to liberal principles everywhere but perceive them to function better than nonauthoritarians in less democratic contexts. This might be the result of authoritarian insensitivity or ignorance of actual democratic problems. As they do not support democratic principles in the first place, they are less likely to monitor their functioning critically either. Illiberal regimes often facilitate the possibility of the emergence of such ignorance as they tend to label and frame themselves as democratic systems while not just denying any democratic flaws but also initiating numerous illusionary measures and rhetorical exercises to mask their antidemocratic practices (Bozóki, 2013; Roth, 2009), creating the illusion of a “democratic illiberalism” (Smilova, 2021). Such political narratives, among other antidemocratic measures, were systematically applied in illiberal states like Hungary, Serbia, and Poland at the time of the ESS data collection. An important function of propaganda in authoritarian states is to discredit information that

questions the regime's competence or political practices (Stanley, 2015). State-sponsored disinformation, along with conspiracy narratives, is flooding the information space in Hungary (see, for example, Polyák et al., 2024) to such an extent that the country increasingly qualifies as an 'informational autocracy' (Guriev & Treisman, 2022; Krekó, 2022). In Serbia, where media capture has been developing for more than two decades (Milojević & Kleut, 2023), conspiracy narratives—including those originating from Russia—are also abundant (Zivotic & Obradovic, 2022). Similarly, in Poland, conspiracy theories—mostly propagated by the political right—are widespread in political and media discourses (see, for example, Matuszewski et al., 2024). In this context, criticism of the ruling elites' undemocratic practices by domestic or international actors is easily dismissed as Western disinformation aimed at destroying the reputation of a government elected by the people — or, in short, as a conspiracy against the nation. Such communication provides authoritarians with plausible justifications for their biased perceptions of democratic quality, which explains why these countries demonstrated the strongest relationship between authoritarianism and democratic evaluation in our study.

Nonetheless, in more democratic contexts, the relationship between authoritarianism and the perceived quality of liberal democracy weakens or even turns into nonsignificant, while authoritarians, like elsewhere, still attribute less importance to democratic principles. This result may be attributed to the divergence between authoritarians' illiberal policy preferences and the actual status quo in which they live. Well-functioning liberal democracies grant the legal and institutional conditions for inclusive political participation and equality before the law, which means that nonconventional social groups have a wider array of possibilities to change the traditional status quo. Authoritarians typically perceive such groups as threatening their need for security and certainty (Duckitt & Sibley, 2007; Osborne et al., 2023); consequently, they might see the social and political inclusion of such groups as the direct ignorance of their own policy preferences. Nonetheless, authoritarianism is related to a preference for the status quo as well. The two needs for an illiberal system on the one hand, and a stable status quo on the other, unavoidably contradict each other in liberal democratic contexts, which can explain why authoritarianism does not show a clear relationship with the perception of democratic quality in these countries.

Some important limitations of our study need to be highlighted as well. First, we used a cross-sectional dataset to test our hypotheses, and as such, it was not appropriate for identifying causal relationships between the variables. Nonetheless, the direction of the causal relationship from authoritarianism to more specific beliefs and attitudes is well established both theoretically (Adorno et al., 1950; Altemeyer, 1988; Duckitt, 2001, 2022) and is also supported by empirical evidence (Asbrock et al., 2010; Satherley et al., 2021; Stanley et al., 2017). As an additional methodological limitation, we have to point out also that the analyzed ESS dataset contained data from 31 European countries. Although there is a substantial variation among European countries in terms of their democratic quality, compared to the global average, European countries are heavily overrepresented on the upper side of the liberal democratic global ranking (V-Dem, 2021). Future studies should test the catalyzing effect of antidemocratic contexts within a wider pool of countries where more autocratic forms of political regimes are less underrepresented.

The moderating effect of democratic quality clearly shows that authoritarianism strengthens positive perceptions more intensely in less democratic countries. This indicates a motivated misperception, as authoritarianism pushes perceptions in the opposite direction from reality. Nonetheless, in our study, it was not possible to quantify the exact magnitude of misperceptions – neither for individuals nor for countries – because the Liberal Democracy Index and the perception of democratic quality variable are not based on the very same indicators and apply different scaling, which did not allow their direct comparison. Finally, it should also be noted that the limited number of observations at the country level necessarily elevates the danger of

Type-2 errors, which could also be a possible reason why we did not find the contextual moderating effect of liberal democratic quality in the case of the effect of authoritarianism on the personal importance of liberal democracy. A higher number of countries could have enabled us to reveal weaker moderating effects as well, which is another aspect that should be considered in future research.

CONCLUSION

Through the analysis of data gathered from over 56,000 Europeans across 31 countries, we found that authoritarianism, as a psychological trait, can undermine liberal democracy in two distinct ways. Firstly, it can foster illiberal beliefs and attitudes, a phenomenon that has been extensively studied and well documented. However, this effect is compounded by an additional distortion: authoritarianism can cause a divergence between the perceived quality of democracy and its actual state. This discrepancy tends to be larger in less liberal contexts, which appear to catalyze the motivated misperceptions of an antidemocratic reality. This suggests that combating the antidemocratic effects of authoritarianism may be significantly more challenging in illiberal autocracies. This is not only because the operational rules of such regimes align more closely with the illiberal preferences of authoritarians, but also because these less democratic contexts provide a more fertile ground for motivated authoritarian misperceptions. These misperceptions can mask serious issues with democratic quality and maintain the illusion of a well-functioning liberal democracy, despite the reality of an illiberal, undemocratic regime.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data were derived from the following resources available in the public domain: European Social Survey, <https://ess.sikt.no/en/>, V-Dem, <https://www.v-dem.net/data/the-v-dem-dataset/>, Human Development Reports, <https://hdr.undp.org/data-center/human-development-index#/indicies/HDI>.

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SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.

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