



# Why Do Trump's Authoritarian Followers Resist COVID-19 Authorities? Because They Are Not Really Authoritarian Followers

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People's responses to the threat posed by COVID-19 varied widely. In direct contradiction to the popular theory that Trump supporters prefer to submit to powerful people, Trump's most enthusiastic followers actually were the most vocal in resisting the urgings of authorities to get vaccinated and to wear masks. I explain this anomaly by showing that Trump's followers are driven less by a desire for authority and more by a desire to be secure from the threats human outsiders pose to society's historically dominant racial, language, religious, and cultural group. Far from being authoritarians, the followers of leaders such as Donald Trump stridently oppose all authority figures who divert attention from what they believe are the real threats: immigrants, powerful foreign enemies, diversity, terrorists, and criminals. From this perspective, it is unsurprising that those with a securitarian orientation would not take seriously authorities who are concerned with the threat posed by an mRNA virus.

**Keywords:** COVID-19, Trump supporters, anti-vaccine, securitarians, authoritarians

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## INTRODUCTION

As of June 2022, the COVID-19 virus in the United States had infected perhaps 100 million people, had overwhelmed hospitals and medical staffs across the country, and had killed over 1 million Americans. Vaccines and masks, though demonstrably effective in mitigating contraction of the disease and especially in reducing the severity of its symptoms, were nonetheless actively and vociferously resisted by large numbers of people. This concerted resistance led many observers to the realization that astounding medical advances such as the development of targeted, fully-synthetic mRNA vaccines in a matter of months amount to little absent an improved understanding of people's behavioral proclivities. For example, outgoing National Institutes of Health Director Francis Collins, when asked what he might have done differently during his tenure, had this to say: "To have now 60 million people still holding off of taking advantage of lifesaving vaccines is pretty unexpected. It does make me, at least, realize, 'Boy, there are things about human behavior that I don't think we had invested enough into understanding'" (Simmons-Duffin, 2021). Quite so. Can political science and political psychology help? Perhaps, but to this point efforts have been hindered by terminological confusion and misguided assumptions. The goal of this article is to provide evidence on the nature and motivation of those who were unwilling to be vaccinated and more generally to take precautions against the spread of COVID-19.

Who exactly are the—to use Collins's estimate at the time—60 million Americans who were vaccine hesitant or in many cases outright vaccine resistant? Of course, with that large a number

there can be no single profile. We know that some were on the political left, perhaps espousing a naturalist approach to medicine that spurns artificial laboratory vaccines; others were young, perhaps fitness-conscious, individuals who believed themselves to be indestructible; and still others, perhaps without a clear agenda, simply did not get around to being vaccinated. Still, though the diversity of the vaccine resistant population should not be underestimated, the fact remains that the lion's share identified themselves with the political right and, more specifically, as supporters of politicians such as former President Donald Trump.

Writing in late 2021, New York Times columnist David Leonhardt noted that “In the U.S., partisanship is the biggest factor determining vaccination rates. If Democratic voters made up their own country, it would be one of the world's most vaccinated, with more than 91 percent of adults having received at least one shot. Only about 60 percent of Republican adults have done so.” Leonhardt goes on to cite data indicating that as of November 2021, the “reddest” tenth of all U.S. counties saw death rates from coronavirus six times higher than the “bluest” tenth of counties and the political gap appeared to be widening as the pandemic persisted (Leonhardt, 2021; see also Galston, 2021). Other studies report similar findings. One states that “counties with higher levels of Trump support suffered relatively higher death rates” even after controlling for such factors as age, proximity to hospitals, and population density in the county (Gao and Radford, 2021, p. 224). And another finds similarly that, in the second half of 2021, people living in counties that voted heavily for Donald Trump have been nearly 3 times as likely to die from COVID-19 as those living in counties that voted for Biden (Wood and Brumfiel, 2021).

What explains this connection between right-of-center political orientation and anti-vaccine attitudes? Some assert that if Republican leaders such as Donald Trump had not played down the severity of the pandemic and had refrained from making false claims about alternative treatment approaches, their supporters would have willingly signed up for the vaccines (Wright, 2021). This explanation, however, does not account for the fact that their hero, former President Trump, played an important role in developing the vaccines and that, on those rare occasions when he (tepidly) encouraged people to get vaccinated he was booed lustily by his supporters (Slisco, 2021). In addition, the connection of anti-vaccine attitudes and right-wing political beliefs is common around the world and not confined to fans of Donald Trump in the United States. No, the reluctance of certain individuals to receive the vaccine and otherwise take COVID-19 seriously runs much deeper than an inclination of a group of Americans to do whatever Donald Trump says.

The Trump-supporter-anti-vaccine connection becomes even more mystifying in light of the common allegation that the Trumpian right is primarily composed of “authoritarians”—that is, individuals who, according to the dictionary, “favor strict obedience to authority at the expense of personal freedom.” Examples of the remarkable number of scholarly and journalistic works claiming that Trump supporters are authoritarians include: “Twilight of Democracy: The Seductive Lure of Authoritarianism” (Applebaum, 2020); “The Authoritarian

Nightmare” (Dean and Altemeyer, 2020); “Trump’s America and the Rise of the Authoritarian Personality” (Linden, 2017); “The Rise of Trump: American’s Authoritarian Spring” (MacWilliams, 2016); “Cultural Backlash: Trump, Brexit, and Authoritarian Populism” (Norris and Inglehart, 2019); and “The Rise of American Authoritarianism” (Taub, 2016).

The puzzle then is this. How can the very people who allegedly are most eager to follow powerful authorities immediately reject the edicts and encouragements of medical, professional, and political authorities, including the head of the Centers for Disease Control, the head of the National Institutes for Health, the President of the United States, most governors and mayors, and even on occasion former President Donald Trump himself? Of course, the events of January 6, 2021, during which thousands of Trump supporters staged an insurrection against police at the U.S. Capitol, with some even expressing a desire to hang the Republican Vice-President, raise further questions about the wisdom of applying the “authoritarian” label to Trump supporters.

Those persisting in the belief that Trump supporters are authoritarians attempt to get around this blatant contradiction by claiming that his followers only attach themselves to those authorities they believe to be “legitimate”—the latest iteration of a terminological trick first suggested by Altemeyer (1988, p. 4). In this case, the argument is that, because Trump supporters do not see authorities such as Anthony Fauci, Joe Biden, and Michigan Governor Gretchen Whitmer as legitimate, they are free to denigrate, disrespect, disobey, and perhaps even plot to kidnap them. Such an argument, however, is mindlessly circular at best and misleadingly dangerous at worst. By this logic, those of us who get vaccinated and wear masks also are authoritarians because we follow the encouragements and occasional mandates of those authorities in the scientific and political communities who we happen to perceive as legitimate.

The reason this line of thinking does not work is that real authoritarian followers take pleasure in submitting to authority figures regardless of the specific actions the authority figure is advocating. Those individuals who follow the edicts of authorities only if those authorities are urging them to engage in a particular substantive behavior are not really desirous of authority but rather of particular actions and outcomes, and they should be labeled as such. Thus, in order to understand why Trump’s strong supporters are prone to anti-vaccine and anti-mask sentiments and behaviors, we must first understand their broader objectives for the structure of society and its public policies.

## SECURITARIANS, NOT AUTHORITARIANS

If Trump’s core supporters are not authoritarians, what are they? I assert that they are securitarians—individuals who believe the noblest and most essential task of a human being is to protect person, family, culture, and country from the tangible threats posed by outsiders—people who do not contribute to the unity and security of the cultural core. As securitarians see it, relative to those constituting the cultural core, outsiders are those who have different appearances, different religions, different cultural

practices, different skin colors, different respect for societal norms, different languages, and/or different national origins. Securitarians also are bothered by those individuals who, though part of the demographically dominant group, for whatever misguided reason, are not eager to defend insiders in the face of outsider threats. These fellow travelers may even facilitate outsider threats by encouraging immigration, lax national and personal defenses, and lenient treatment of those committing crimes against societal insiders (Hibbing, 2020).

Securitarians in the United States are convinced that all the vestiges of insiderism are under threat: Christianity, the English language, whiteness, farmers, the police, small businesses, the national anthem, and pride in America's history. The multifaceted nature of the insider-outsider divide helps to account for the surprising number of racial minorities who supported Donald Trump. Respect for the dominant religion (Christianity), the dominant sexual orientation (straight), the dominant cultural practices (non-Muslim), and the dominant language (English), not to mention respect for those who are non-immigrants can sometimes counterbalance failure to belong to the dominant racial group (white).

Securitarians believe that vigilance against human outsider threats is essential and they have difficulty understanding how anyone could be cavalier in the face of the threats that seem so obvious and imminent to them. From the perspective of a securitarian, political leaders, particularly in recent years, have been far too eager to assist (rather than restrain) outsiders by giving American tax dollars to foreign countries, by being receptive to non-insider practices and customs, by being welcoming to immigrants, and by not being firm in punishing people who disobey insider-protecting norms and rules.

In direct contrast to authoritarians, if given the choice between submission to authority and personal freedom, securitarians choose personal freedom and they do so with alacrity. After all, without freedom, securitarians might not be able to pursue an agenda they see as existential: ensuring their own personal safety (by, among other things, defending the right to bear arms) and the security of what they see as their culture (by, among other things, discouraging diversity).

If I am correct that the avid Trump supporters who oppose COVID-19 mitigation strategies are securitarians rather than authoritarians, it becomes easier to explain why they can be so resistant to the entreaties of those authorities the pandemic has rendered salient. The only remaining task is to demonstrate with appropriate empirical data that fervid Trump supporters harbor the securitarian dispositions that I have attributed to them rather than the authoritarian inclinations attributed to them by so many others.

## DATA AND METHODS

To do so I will draw on two novel surveys that were conducted for me by the international polling firm YouGov. The first went to the field in the early summer of 2019 ( $N = 1,000$ ) and the second in the early fall of 2020 ( $N = 1,200$ ), well into the COVID-19 pandemic. For each of these surveys, YouGov

compiled a demographically representative sample of voting age adults in the U.S. In identifying the real motivations of strong Trump supporters, I will rely primarily on the more recent 2020 survey and the COVID-related items it included but the 2019 survey is also valuable in that it included several of the traditionally-employed "authoritarian" items as well as numerous items that are central to identifying securitarian orientations.

Standard authoritarian items are often criticized because they conflate authoritarian sentiments with right-of-center political beliefs. In fact, authoritarianism is sometimes called "right-wing" authoritarianism and the items used to tap it frequently include references to such hot button political issues as "abortion rights," "school prayer," "homosexuals," "feminists," and "radical, immoral people who try to ruin [society] for their own godless purposes" (Altemeyer, 1981). The unfortunate result is that these items are unsuited for determining whether Trump's strongest supporters are authoritarians or whether they simply oppose abortion, homosexuality, feminists, and "radical, godless people."

Those scholars eager for a way to measure authoritarian tendencies separate from conservative stances on policy issues have wisely settled on items tapping attitudes for child rearing (see Feldman, 2003; Stenner, 2005; Hetherington and Weiler, 2009). The logic of this approach is that someone who believes "children should be raised to be obedient rather than to be self-reliant" and "to have good manners rather than to be independent" is quite appropriately labeled as having authoritarian tendencies. Given the value of this measurement approach, the 2019 survey included several child-rearing items that have been previously employed to tap authoritarianism.

Securitarianism, on the other hand, places value not on authority *per se* but rather on strength at both the personal and national levels, as well as vigilance and military might. It is measured here with the following four items: "Just about the worst thing a person could do is project weakness;" "our country's central goal should be strength;" "if we are not vigilant, we will quickly be victimized by criminals, immigrants, and by the power of foreign countries;" and "it is possible for a country to be truly great without being militarily strong" (reverse coded). My core expectation is that strong Trump supporters will be distinguished not so much by their attitudes toward authority (the child-rearing items) but rather by the value they place on personal strength, national strength, vigilance against outsiders, and military might.

To identify Trump's strongest supporters, I used the following item: "Donald Trump is one of the very best presidents in the entire history of our country." (As with all the items described herein, respondents chose between five options: strongly disagree, disagree, neither agree nor disagree, agree, and strongly agree.) Strongly agreeing that Trump is one of the best presidents ever is a high bar, going well beyond simply voting for or expressing support for Trump. Many conservatives, even Trump voters, may not be willing to go so far as to assert that Trump ranks right up there with Washington and Lincoln but it seems valid to label those who *are* willing to go that far as Trump's strongest supporters, what I like to call his venerators.

On the basis of this "one of the greatest president ever" item as well as the standard "are you a liberal,

moderate, or conservative” item (similar findings are obtained if party identification is substituted for ideology), I divided the demographically representative YouGov sample into four groups: those who identified themselves as liberals; those who identified themselves as moderates, those who identified themselves as conservatives but who did not strongly agree that Trump was one of the best presidents ever (in the tables, these individuals are labeled as NTVCs—non-Trump-venerating-conservatives), and finally those who did in fact strongly agree that Trump was one of the best presidents ever (in the tables, these individuals are labeled as Trump’s vener., short for Trump venerator). Of particular interest is the difference in responses between those who are Trump venerator and then those who are conservative but not Trump venerator (NTVCs).

In fact, given the importance of this comparison, in addition to presenting the percent agreeing with the various survey items across the four categories mentioned above, in the last column of the tables I present the size (and significance level) of the difference in responses between the NTVCs and the Trump venerator. This was calculated by focusing only on those respondents who self-identified as conservative and/or strongly agreed that Trump was one of the “very best presidents ever” and then computing the correlation of a dummy variable (Trump venerator or not) with response to the item in question (for example, whether the respondent strongly agreed, agreed, neither agreed nor disagreed, disagreed, or strongly disagreed that children should be raised to be obedient rather than self-reliant). This procedure has the advantage of incorporating the complete range of information on responses whereas the first four columns of the table merely report percent agreeing/strongly agreeing. (In fact, because the first four columns simply report the percent agreeing while the last column incorporates strength of agreement or disagreement, for several of the items the size of the correlations sometimes do not appear to match the size of the gap in percent agreeing across the categories.) As such the numbers in the last column provide a summary measure of the degree to which Trump venerator and NTVCs are different (and how confident we can be that those differences are real) across the entire range of possible responses to the pertinent survey item. Positive values indicate that, compared to NTVCs, the responses of Trump venerator were higher in degree

of agreement; negative values indicate that Trump venerator’s responses were lower in degree of agreement. The standard YouGov weights were employed throughout these analyses.

In accord with the discussion just concluded, the three hypotheses tested here are:

- H<sub>1</sub>: Trump venerator are distinguished from conservatives who are not Trump venerator more by their desire for strength and security than by their desire for authoritarianism.
- H<sub>2</sub>: Trump venerator are distinguished from conservatives who are not Trump venerator more by their fear of human outsiders than by their fear of amorphous, non-human threats.
- H<sub>3</sub>: Trump venerator are distinguished from conservatives who are not Trump venerator more by their stances on security issues than by their stances on social or economic issues.

## TRUMP VENERATORS AND ATTITUDES TOWARD COVID

Before testing these three hypotheses, an important preliminary step is to document that Trump venerator in particular harbor cavalier attitudes toward COVID. Previous analyses (e.g., those cited above) tend to use aggregate data to make points such as death rates from COVID tend to be higher in counties that voted for Trump. It is important here to demonstrate that similar patterns are present in individual-level survey data.

To this end, I conducted a simple regression analysis. The dependent variable was derived from a 2020 survey items stating “I feel threatened by COVID-19” (strongly agree = 5; agree = 4; neither agree nor disagree = 3; disagree = 2; strongly disagree = 1). As independent variables, I included several standard demographics: age, female, and educational level attained (I also repeated the analyses with income included but the results were similar and the number of cases much reduced because of the number of respondents who prefer not to disclose their family income.) Most importantly, I also included self-reported ideology (5 = strongly conservative; 4 = conservative; 3 = moderate; 2 = liberal; 1 = strongly liberal) and the Trump veneration item described above. The central expectation here is that the Trump veneration item will be strongly and negatively related to fear of COVID-19 even after controlling for demographics and ideology. The results of the regression are presented in **Table 1**.

None of the coefficients for the demographic variables has a significant effect of fear of COVID-19. Self-reported ideology does not either when Trump veneration is included in the model. The key to understanding who is least likely to fear COVID-19 is not age or sex or education or holding a conservative political ideology; it is whether or not individuals are enthusiastically part of Trump’s base, even to the extent of believing him to be on a par with George Washington and Abraham Lincoln. The evidence is clear: avid Trump backers tend to not be fearful of COVID-19. This being established, the central task becomes understanding what drives individuals to belong to Trump’s base. I believe the explanation is to be found in the presence of securitarian rather than authoritarian attitudes.

**TABLE 1** | Explaining variation in fear of COVID-19.

Variable	“b”	Beta	Sign.
Age	0.007	0.001	0.98
Female	0.029	0.012	0.80
Education level	-0.028	-0.040	0.47
Ideology (conservative)	-0.069	-0.042	0.11
Trump veneration	-0.270	-0.341	0.01

Dependent variable = “I feel threatened by COVID-19”.  
*N* = 392; *R*<sup>2</sup> = 0.15; *Adj. R*<sup>2</sup> = 0.14; *F* = 13.21; *p* < 0.001.  
 Source: 2020 YouGov Survey.



**TABLE 2** | Authoritarian and securitarian items and Trump veneration.

<b>Authoritarian items</b>					
<b>Children should be raised to...</b>	<b>% agreeing liberals</b>	<b>% agreeing moderates</b>	<b>% agreeing NTVCs<sup>#</sup></b>	<b>% agreeing Trump veneration<sup>^</sup></b>	<b>Correlation of difference b/w NTVCs and Trump veneration.</b>
Be obedient <sup>a</sup>	17	37	41	38	-0.03
Respect elders <sup>b</sup>	47	72	76	76	0.00
Follow authority <sup>c</sup>	34	62	72	74	0.02
Be well-behaved <sup>d</sup>	18	37	37	38	0.01
Have good manners <sup>e</sup>	39	64	67	72	0.06
<b>Securitarian items</b>					
The worst a person could do is project weakness	27	37	42	60	0.17**
Our country's central goal should be strength	29	50	73	88	0.25**
If we are not vigilante we will be victims	18	36	72	88	0.23**
A country can be great without military strength	65	41	31	21	-0.18**

<sup>a</sup>Rather than be self-reliant.

<sup>b</sup>Rather than be independent.

<sup>c</sup>Rather than challenge authority.

<sup>d</sup>Rather than be considerate.

<sup>e</sup>Rather than be curious.

\*\*sign. ( $p < 0.01$ ).

<sup>#</sup>NTVCs = non-Trump-venerating conservatives.

<sup>^</sup>Trump veneration. (venerators) = those strongly agreeing Trump is one of the best presidents ever.

Source: 2019 YouGov Survey.

$N = 888$  (275 liberals; 257 moderates; 186 NTVCs; and 170 Trump veneration).

## AUTHORITARIAN VS. SECURITARIAN SENTIMENTS

In **Table 2**, I present data on responses to five child-rearing items and then the four securitarian items. Turning first to the authoritarian items, it is clear that attitudes on the whole tend to become more authoritarian as attention shifts from the left of the political spectrum to the right. Only 17% of liberals prioritized obedience over self-reliance but 41% of non-Trump-venerating conservatives and 38% of Trump veneration did. This overall pattern is repeated for the other authoritarian items and this is not surprising. But if we focus only on the two columns connoting right-of-center attitudes the story becomes more interesting in that there is hardly any difference. In other words, Trump's hardcore base—his veneration—are not any more authoritarian than conservatives who do not idolize Trump. The difference between these two columns across the five child-rearing authoritarianism items is never more than a couple of points and never comes close to being statistically significant. Authoritarian attitudes do not distinguish Trump's base from conservatives who do not venerate Trump.

The story is quite different, however, when we shift to the securitarian items in the bottom half of the table. Here we again see differences between the left and the right—in fact, some of the spreads between liberals and Trump veneration are massive (70 points for the “vigilance against outsiders” item and 59 points for the “national strength” item). The key point, however, pertains to comparisons of NTVCs and Trump veneration and here, unlike

what we found when focusing on the authoritarianism items, Trump veneration are very different from conservatives who do not venerate Trump.

Those in Trump's base are 18 points more likely to agree that personal weakness is terrible, 16 points more likely to agree that we need to be vigilant, 15 points more likely to agree that a country's central goal should be strength, and 10 points less likely to believe a country can be great without being militarily strong. All of these differences are statistically significant at the 0.01 level.

An alternative methodology also illustrates the comparative advantage of the securitarian items. This approach simply correlates the “Trump is one of the best Presidents ever” item with the five child-rearing items and then the four securitarian items. The results of this analysis are presented in **Table 3**.

These correlations are consistent with the results presented in **Table 2**. As expected, the authoritarian items correlate positively and significantly with Trump veneration but the size of the correlations is generally modest—never higher than 0.22—and the index of the five items correlates with Trump veneration at only 0.31. In contrast, the correlations of the four securitarian items with Trump veneration are always substantially higher than the correlations of the authoritarian items. In fact, the index of the four securitarian items correlates with Trump veneration at 0.60, nearly double that of the index of the authoritarian items.

With regard to reliability and validity, the Chronbach's alpha of the four securitarian items is over 0.7 (for purposes of comparison, the Chronbach's alpha of the five child-rearing items is just under 0.6) and even at that is held down

**TABLE 3** | Authoritarian and securitarian items' correlation with Trump veneration.

Children should be raised to...	Bivariate correlation with Trump veneration	Significance
<b>Authoritarian items</b>		
Be obedient <sup>a</sup>	0.13	$p < 0.01$
Respect elders <sup>b</sup>	0.20	$p < 0.01$
Follow authority <sup>c</sup>	0.22	$p < 0.01$
Be well-behaved <sup>d</sup>	0.18	$p < 0.01$
Have good manners <sup>e</sup>	0.21	$p < 0.01$
Additive index of the childrearing items	0.31	$p < 0.01$
<b>Securitarian items</b>		
The worst a person could do is project weakness	0.30	$p < 0.01$
Our country's central goal should be strength	0.46	$p < 0.01$
If we are not vigilante we will be victims	0.57	$p < 0.01$
A country can be great without military strength. (reverse coded)	0.39	$p < 0.01$
Additive index of the securitarian items	0.60	$p < 0.01$

<sup>a</sup>Rather than be self-reliant.

<sup>b</sup>Rather than be independent.

<sup>c</sup>Rather than challenge authority.

<sup>d</sup>Rather than be considerate.

<sup>e</sup>Rather than be curious.

Trump veneration: "Donald Trump is one of the best presidents in the history of the country." 5 = strongly agree; 4 = agree; 3 = neither agree nor disagree; 2 = disagree; 1 = strongly disagree.

Source: 2019 YouGov Survey (N = 999).

by the fact that one of the items (the first) refers to personal strength while the other three refer to the society or country. Similar securitarian indices focusing exclusively on societal concerns have a Chronbach's alpha of 0.89 and, in terms of validity, securitarian indices outperform more established authoritarian-relevant indices when tasked with explaining the differences between Trump veneration and non-Trump-venerating conservatives. When the societal securitarian index is included in multivariate models alongside right-wing authoritarianism (RWA), social dominance orientation (SDO), and an index of the child-rearing items, the standardized coefficients for RWA, SDO, and the childrearing items are much smaller than the coefficient for the securitarian index and all three fail to achieve statistical significance at the 0.05 level while the coefficient for the societal securitarian battery is significant at the 0.01 level (Hibbing, 2020, p. 158–159). In sum, Trump veneration is not any more authoritarian than conservatives who do not venerate Trump but they are significantly more securitarian.

## FELT THREAT

Contrasting variations in responses to authoritarian and securitarian items is not the only way to highlight the differences between Trump veneration and others. Differences may also appear in the particular entities and situations perceived to be

threatening. Scholars have long been interested in the possibility that threat sensitivity varies across the political spectrum (e.g., Oxley et al., 2008). One theory is that, compared to those on the political left, those on the right side of the political spectrum are in a general sense more threat sensitive, but more recent thinking (e.g., Hibbing, 2020) holds that variations in threat sensitivity are contingent on the specific type of threat being referenced. Pursuing this latter line of thought makes it possible to enhance understanding of the seemingly non-chalant attitude of so many strong Trump supporters toward COVID-19 as well as the need for mitigation strategies. The 2020 YouGov survey included a series of items asking respondents about the degree to which they felt each of a range of entities and situations, including COVID-19, posed a threat.

The results are presented in **Table 4**, where the overall format is identical to that found in **Table 2** except now respondents are not asked whether they agree or disagree with various authoritarian or securitarian statements but rather whether they "feel threatened by" each of the various possibilities listed in the table.

Again, we see large differences between the left side of the political spectrum and the right. Given the overall contours of political debate in the modern era, these differences are to be expected. Compared to Trump veneration, liberals are 59 points more likely to report feeling threatened by "the harm being done to the environment," 55 points more likely to report feeling threatened by the income gap, and 47 points more likely to report feeling threatened by "people without healthcare." No surprise here.

If, however, the focus is narrowed to differences in felt threat between NTVCs and Trump veneration the results are markedly more surprising and instructive. Parallel to **Table 2**, the last column of **Table 4** reports and size (and significance level) of the difference in NTVC and Trump veneration responses. In fact, I have used the value of the resulting coefficients to order the various potential threats in the table.

People on the political right are hardly a piece in the degree to which they find various entities and situations threatening. More specifically, we see that, compared to NTVCs, Trump veneration are significantly ( $p < 0.01$ ) more likely to report feeling threatened by "the might of countries such as China" ( $r = 0.22$ ), criminals (0.16), terrorists (0.15), and immigrants (0.12). For all of the other potential threats, however, Trump veneration either are not significantly different from NTVCs or are significantly LESS threatened. Note that even on what would appear to be the least politically charged referent—natural disasters—Trump veneration are significantly less threatened than NTVCs—and especially than liberals.

The key finding is that the four potential threats felt most acutely by Trump veneration are China, criminals, terrorists, and immigrants. These are precisely the kinds of threats on which securitarians fixate: outsiders and those who do not play by the rules. Things such as natural disasters, environmental harm, the income gap, and a lack of healthcare are not particularly bothersome to Trump veneration—in fact, relative to individuals with other political beliefs they tend to be dismissive of these threats.

**TABLE 4** | Differences in felt threat.

I feel threatened by...	% agreeing liberals	% agreeing moderates	% agreeing NTVCs #	% agreeing Trump venter.^	Correlation of difference b/w NTVCs and Trump venter.
China	29	41	59	78	0.22**
Criminals	38	60	77	86	0.16**
Terrorists	35	48	57	75	0.15**
Immigrants	8	12	28	44	0.12**
People w/o healthcare	74	53	30	27	-0.07
Income gap	85	58	34	30	-0.11*
Natural disasters	66	58	46	38	-0.11*
Environmental harm	91	73	40	32	-0.13**
COVID-19	81	63	45	31	-0.17**

\* sign. ( $p < 0.05$ ).

\*\* sign. ( $p < 0.01$ ).

#NTVCs = non-Trump-venting conservatives.

^Trump venter. (venterators) = those strongly agreeing Trump is one of the best presidents ever.

Source: 2020 YouGov Survey.

N = 1,093 (366 liberals; 356 moderates; 161 NTVCs; and 210 Trump venterators).

On this point, the perceived threat posed by COVID-19 is particularly relevant and here we find that Trump venterators are 14 points less likely than conservatives who do not venerate Trump to agree that they feel threatened by COVID-19—and 50 points less likely than liberals. No doubt the fact that Trump venterators do not feel more threatened by COVID-19 is an important reason so many Trump venterators were reluctant to get the vaccine and/or to “mask up.” The only threats Trump venterators tend to take seriously are those posed by human outsiders who are believed to threaten the core of America. Other threats, such as mRNA viruses, natural disasters, and environmental degradation, do not fit into this category so are not of much concern. In fact, Trump venterators may worry that a focus on these diffuse, non-human threats will distract societal attention from the threats that they feel in their bones: the threats posed by immigrants, terrorists, diversity, criminals, and foreign powers.

## POLICY STANCES

Finally, if I am correct that Trump venterators are driven by securitarian concerns, they should hold policy preferences that distinguish them from others, even from others on the political right. This hypothesis is tested in **Table 5**. The format of this table is the same as that found in **Tables 2, 4**; however, it reports results from items addressing the degree to which respondents agreed with a series of twelve issue positions. I have placed the issues into three groups. The first five reflect securitarian issues: defense spending, English as a national language, gun rights, reducing immigration, and the death penalty. All five of these fit squarely within the securitarian vision in that four pertain to security from outsiders/norm violators and the fifth (English as a national language) involves protection of a longstanding core element of American culture. The next group of five items deals with economic issues: lower taxes, reducing welfare

payments, small government, government-arranged healthcare, and taxing the rich. Finally, the last three issues—legalizing marijuana, abortion rights, and gay marriage—all concern hot button social matters.

My expectation is that the issues that most distinguish Trump venterators from other individuals and especially from other individuals on the political right (i.e., NTVCs) are the securitarian rather than economic and social issues.

The results are found in **Table 5** and, similar to those in **Table 4**, are drawn from the 2020 survey. Once again, the expected differences between the political left and political right are obvious. It would have been shocking if, compared to those on the right side of the spectrum, liberals were not significantly more supportive of abortion rights, legalizing marijuana, taxing the rich, and government healthcare and significantly less supportive of small government, the death penalty, and defense spending.

Focusing on differences confined to the right side of the political ledger is more edifying. On average, Trump venterators always display preferences that are more conservative than NTVCs but the degree of difference varies widely. The biggest differences between NTVCs and Trump venterators are always on the securitarian issues and the smallest are always on the social issues (in fact, one of the social issues—legalizing marijuana—does not even reach statistical significance at the 0.05 level). Differences between NTVCs and Trump venterators on the economic issues are usually significant and sometimes sizable but the coefficients are never as large as they are for the securitarian issues at the top of the table. Moreover, with regard to the economic issues, it could be argued that, to a large extent, Trump venterators are attracted to policies such as lowering taxes, reducing welfare payments, and shrinking government because they believe government to be too generous to “outsiders” such as racial minorities, immigrants, and foreign countries. In other words, to a certain degree, Trump venterators are likely to see many economic issues through a securitarian lens. Even at this,

**TABLE 5** | Differences in policy preferences.

Issue positions	% agreeing liberals	% agreeing moderates	% agreeing NTVCs#	% agreeing Trump venger.^	Correlation of difference b/w NTVCs and Trump venger.
Defense spending	15	27	52	83	0.34**
English national language	33	57	86	96	0.31**
Gun rights	27	50	76	93	0.29**
Reduce immigration	13	26	61	80	0.27**
Death penalty	28	40	63	83	0.26**
Lower taxes	31	52	71	84	0.22**
Reduce welfare	11	27	56	70	0.15**
Small government	22	43	67	75	0.14**
Gov.-arranged healthcare	84	53	23	19	-0.13**
Tax the rich	89	63	38	30	-0.08
Legalize marijuana	80	58	42	40	-0.02
Abortion rights	85	62	30	24	-0.11*
Gay marriage	83	64	29	27	-0.12*

\* sign. ( $p < 0.05$ ).

\*\* sign. ( $p < 0.01$ ).

#NTVCs = non-Trump-venerating conservatives.

^ Trump venger. (venerator) = those strongly agreeing Trump is one of the best presidents ever.

Source: 2020 YouGov Survey.

N = 1,093 (366 liberals; 356 moderates; 161 NTVCs; and 210 Trump vengers).

the issues on which Trump vengerators are most different from others are the classic securitarian issues.

## CONCLUSION

The best strategy for determining why so many strong Trump supporters are resistant to getting vaccinated and wearing masks is to uncover the broader motivations of this group. As an important side benefit, this approach highlights several prevalent misconceptions regarding what it is that leads so many people to support political candidates such as Donald Trump.

Beginning with issue preferences (Table 5), the evidence presented here suggests the real distinguishing policy stances of those enamored of the former President do not involve social issues such as greater opposition to abortion rights, gay rights, and marijuana legalization. In fact, on these issues Trump vengerators and non-Trump-venerating conservatives are hardly different at all. Moving to economic issues such as taxing the rich, government arranged healthcare, and a desire for small government, Trump vengerators adopt somewhat more conservative stances than non-Trump-venerating conservatives but these differences are much smaller than those dealing with securitarian issues. Even compared to individuals who label themselves “conservative,” Trump vengerators are significantly more likely to support gun rights, making English the national language, increases in defense spending, and decreases in immigration. Desires for personal and cultural security are the defining policy stances of those who venerate Trump.

Asking respondents to identify the entities and situations they find threatening (see Table 4) only serves to confirm this interpretation. Far from feeling more threatened across the

board, Trump vengerators, compared to non-Trump-venerating conservatives, report being significantly LESS threatened by natural disasters, the income gap, environmental harm. Most relevant to this article, Trump vengerators are 14 points less likely than non-Trump-venerating conservatives to see COVID-19 as a threat—a finding perfectly consistent with the public behaviors that were so much in evidence during the pandemic. However, when the potential threats are posed by outsiders such as criminals, terrorists, immigrants, and the might of countries like China, Trump vengerators report being significantly more threatened. In sum, Trump vengerators are not particularly threat sensitive in an overall sense but they are highly sensitive to threats posed by human outsiders.

Setting aside policy stances and perceived threats, are Trump vengerators unusual in their broader preferences for social life and societal arrangements? To be more specific, are they distinguished, as I hypothesized, by the degree to which they value strength, vigilance, and security or, as so many others have hypothesized, by their “authoritarian” tendencies—their desire for a society based on order, authority, and obedience? The results in Tables 2, 3 deliver a clear verdict on this matter. Compared to non-Trump-venerating conservatives, Trump vengerators are not significantly more likely to believe children should be raised to be obedient, respectful, and submissive to authority but they are significantly more likely to value personal and national strength, military muscle, and vigilance in the face of outsider threats.

To be fair to the existing literature, many observers use the term “authoritarian” to refer to people who are not supportive of democracy. If this is what is meant, then many Trump vengerators are indeed authoritarians, as is evidenced by their actions subsequent to the 2020 election. If, however, the term is used



more literally, to refer to people who crave authority, the data suggest that the term is not particularly apt. Trump veneratorators are often turned off rather than turned on by authority. They do not want to replace democracy with stronger authority but rather with less authority. Trump veneratorators, and securitarians more generally, live in fear of being prevented by authorities from being able to protect themselves and their core culture from the inroads they believe are being made by outsiders. It is in this regard that I question the applicability of the term “authoritarian.”

Trump veneratorators’ highly focused concerns help to explain their otherwise incongruous behaviors regarding COVID-19 and available mitigation strategies. Why were those in Trump’s orbit so resistant to vaccines, masks, and social distancing? Because mRNA viruses, like environmental degradation and other non-human threats do not fall into the category of threats that alarm Trump veneratorators: those posed by human outsiders. Thus, they see little reason to alter their behaviors, policy preferences, and general desires for social structures and social life as a result of a pandemic. In fact, given the degree of concern with which Trump veneratorators view human outsiders, it is quite likely that they view threats such as COVID-19 as dangerously distracting—capable of diverting society’s eye from the real threats.

Direct evidence for this last assertion is not available but one final set of results from the 2020 YouGov survey is consistent with it. The pertinent item read as follows: “let’s face it, virtually all diseases come from foreign cultures.” Only 11% of liberals agreed with this statement but 35% of non-Trump-venerating conservatives and fully 44% of Trump veneratorators did. In other words, Trump’s core followers were four times as likely as liberals (and significantly more likely than non-Trump-venerating conservatives) to believe that diseases virtually always come from abroad.

These divergent sentiments on the source of diseases were reflected in responses to COVID-19. During the pandemic, many Trump veneratorators fixated on the possible culpability of China in the initiation and spread of the virus (Silver et al., 2020). Meanwhile, many on the political left had difficulty

understanding the importance of the virus’s likely origins and were focused instead on the steps most likely to limit the damage it was causing.

Given these attitudes, if historical accuracy was of no concern and the sole focus had been to get more people to take the vaccine, it may well be that dismissing suspicions regarding China’s role in the pandemic was a mistake. On the basis of the evidence presented here, Trump veneratorators probably would have been significantly more likely to appreciate the dangers posed by COVID-19 and the associated need for serious prophylactic measures if there had been universal acceptance of the narrative that the virus was a diabolical and deliberate attempt by a dangerous foreign power to undermine the core of American society and the safety and security of its citizens. To put it differently, if getting vaccinated had been framed as the best way to thwart a dangerous threat to American security—a threat emanating from the plans of a hostile, potent, and nefarious foreign power—Trump veneratorators likely would have been the first in line.

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

## ETHICS STATEMENT

The studies involving human participants were reviewed and approved by University of Nebraska-Lincoln IRB. Written informed consent for participation was not required for this study in accordance with the national legislation and the institutional requirements.

## AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

The author confirms being the sole contributor of this work and has approved it for publication.

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