frontiers | Frontiers in Social Psychology

TYPE Review
PUBLISHED 14 August 2024
DOI 10.3389/frsps.2024.1461701

OPEN ACCESS

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RECEIVED 08 July 2024
ACCEPTED 23 July 2024
PUBLISHED 14 August 2024

CITATION
Newman LS (2024) Of course people can reject democracy: psychological perspectives. *Front. Soc. Psychol.* 2:1461701. doi: 10.3389/frsps.2024.1461701

Of course people can reject democracy: psychological perspectives

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Concerns have been expressed about a worldwide retreat from liberal democracy and a turn toward more authoritarian forms of government. Along with that concern has come surprise: when the cold war ended, it was widely believed that a new historical era was dawning during which alternatives to Western liberalism would wither away. Influential psychological theories also assume that freedom and autonomy are powerful human needs—needs that are thwarted by dictatorships. However, a number of theoretical perspectives and programs of research in psychology lead to the conclusion that in certain circumstances, turns toward authoritarian forms of government and restrictive societies are not only explicable, but also *predictable*. Fromm's analysis of why people might want to escape from freedom, Baumeister's work on escape-from-self mechanisms, and Schwartz's review of the literature on choice overload all provide ways of understanding why in turbulent times, members of free countries might intentionally seek out—and perhaps even ecstatically embrace—authoritarian forms of government.

KEYWORDS

political psychology, authoritarianism, autonomy, choice-behavior, democracy, self

Introduction

Augusto Pinochet became Chile's dictator in 1973 after leading a coup that overthrew a democratically elected government. He remained in power for almost 17 years. During that time, 28,000 Chileans served time as political prisoners (and were often tortured), and over 3,000 were killed by the regime (including those who simply disappeared). Hundreds of thousands went into exile. It was only in late 1989 that democracy was reinstated in the country and Chileans were free to elect a new government.

So how do contemporary Chileans remember the dark days of Pinochet's rule? Polls in 2023 revealed that "66% of respondents agreed with the statement that rather than worry about the rights of individuals, the country needs a firm government." Thirty-six percent also fondly recalled Pinochet and his military allies as those who "'freed' Chile from 'Marxism,'" and 20% saw Pinochet as "one of the best rulers of 20th-century Chile" (all quotes from Vergari and Politi, 2023, p. A7).

Meanwhile, in Europe, although Victor Orban's title in Hungary is "Prime Minister," he has an iron grip on power, and according to the U.S. Department of State[1], his government can "pass laws by edict, bypassing parliament." Since his election in 2010, Orban has undermined the independence of the judiciary, restricted free speech, and blurred the line

1 https://www.state.gov/reports/2022-country-reports-on-human-rights-practices/hungary

between the state and his Fidesz political party. Nonetheless, a Pew Research Center survey in 2022 found that a comfortable majority of Hungarians approved of Victor Orban's performance as prime minister of Hungary, despite the fact that a sizeable percentage also agreed that the country had "become less democratic" under his rule (Clancy, 2022). Hungarians' ambivalence about liberal democracy may be a harbinger of things to come, given that the 2024 European parliament elections were widely seen as a triumph for far-right political parties, especially those in France, Germany, and Italy.

And in the United States, according to the *New York Times*, less than 6 months before Election Day in 2024, "Leading Republicans have refused to say flatly that they will accept the outcome of the presidential election if Donald Trump loses" (Bender and Corasaniti, 2024). Trump himself (who, at the time of this writing, is leading in the national polls) has suggested that his return to power might necessitate "the termination of all rules, regulations, and articles, even those found in the Constitution" (Yen, 2022).

Overall, according to the Global State of Democracy Initiative, in 2022, the latest year for which complete data were available, "countries with net declines in democratic performance again outnumbered those with net advances, as has now been the case for six consecutive years[2]." Thus, it seems safe to say, "The world is less democratic today than it was at the beginning of the 21st century" (Johnson, 2024).

To many, these developments are not only disturbing, but also inexplicable. In 1989, as one authoritarian communist government after the other was falling, Fukuyama (1989, p. 3) famously declared "The End of History;" more specifically, he argued that the world was witnessing "the total exhaustion of viable systematic alternatives to Western liberalism," which was emerging as "the final form of human government" (p. 4). To Anatoly Sharansky (2004), a survivor of Soviet gulags, such a development was inevitable, given that "freedom is a universal desire" (p. 18), and the "the vast majority of people will always prefer a free society" (p. 38). As Tony Blair, then prime minister of the United Kingdom stated in a speech to the United States Congress in 2003, "Anywhere, anytime ordinary people are given the chance to choose, the choice is the same: freedom, not tyranny; democracy, not dictatorship…"[3] (For another argument for how history bends toward liberal democracy, see Pinker, 2012).

A retreat from democracy is arguably also inconsistent with widely accepted psychological perspectives on human nature. Self-determination theory (Deci and Ryan, 2008; Ryan and Deci, 2008), an influential theory of human motivation and well-being, posits that along with competence and relatedness, *autonomy*—the sense that one is a causal agent with psychological and behavioral liberty, able to choose one's own actions—is a basic and universal (Chen et al., 2015) psychological need. That proposition is consistent with learning theorist Mowrer's (1950, p. 472) conclusion, years earlier, that people "universally prize freedom;" and as a result, he asserted, "threats to freedom, under a totalitarian regime, are anxiety-producing" (see also Lefcourt, 1973).

Perhaps, though, discovering that people can be attracted to a life with less freedom to do and say whatever they desire, less freedom of choice, and less individual autonomy should not be all that surprising. As Schwartz (2016) notes, when formerly secular people opt for a religiously orthodox or fundamentalist lifestyle, they often seem to be doing so not *in spite* of the new constraints on everyday existence they will experience, but precisely *because* of those constraints. Indeed, when a number of once minimally observant Jews who had embraced orthodoxy were interviewed about their reasons for doing so, some expressed that directly. "I like the feeling that there are limits," said one; another reported being glad that "she no longer wants, for experience's sake, to check out every possible situation. 'I don't have to live through it to know it's not right for me'" (Jakobson, 1986, p. 54, 58). People do not always seek to maximize the possibilities available to them, politically or otherwise.

Reactions to the worldwide retreat from democracy should also be informed by the fact that the current era is not the first one to witness a widespread embrace of authoritarian and dictatorial forms of government. After World War I ended in 1918, democratic governments could be found in Austria, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Spain, and Yugoslavia. By the late 1930s, all of those countries were dictatorships.

Psychology's record of informing debates about major social issues is a mixed one (see Samelson, 1977; Ferguson, 2015; Grzanka and Cole, 2021). And certainly, no one would argue that psychological science has developed tools to reverse a global trend involving the rejection of liberal democratic forms of government (or any other form of government, for that matter)[4]. However, the implication of more than one well-established psychological theory and/or programs of research, reviewed below, is that turns toward authoritarian forms of government and restrictive societies are not only explicable, but also *predictable*. While democracy, liberty, and freedom can be things that people strive for, people can also at times feel the need to escape from them[5].

Fromm: escape from freedom

At the height of World War II, sociologist and psychoanalyst Erich Fromm set himself the task of making sense of why it was that "millions in Germany were as eager to surrender their freedom as their fathers were to fight for it. That instead of wanting freedom, they sought ways to escape from it" (Fromm, 1941, p. 19). For Fromm, the issue was of more than theoretical interest. He himself had been compelled to flee Germany after the Nazi takeover in 1933. He left behind family members who ultimately perished in

2 https://www.idea.int/gsod/2023/chapters/global/

3 https://www.cnn.com/2003/US/07/17/blair.transcript/

4 Liberal democracies are to be distinguished from illiberal ones (of which contemporary Hungary is an example), where democratic procedures and institutions are formally in place, but the protection of individual rights and freedoms is not a priority (Zakariah, 2003; Mounck, 2018). It is the decline of the former type that is at issue in this paper.

5 The study of individual difference approaches to preferences for authoritarianism and inequality is an even more robust and longstanding area of research in psychology (e.g., Adorno et al., 1950; Altemeyer, 1996; Jost et al., 2003; Šerek and Mužík, 2021). However, a review of those personality variables is beyond the scope of this paper.

the Holocaust (Frie, 2024). *Escape from Freedom* was his book-long answer to that question.

According to Fromm (1941), the rush to relinquish individual liberty and embrace authoritarian rule ultimately derives from the difficulties posed by people's awareness of themselves as separate beings—that is, as discrete entities who exist independently from others. More specifically, "by being aware of himself as distinct from nature and other people," an individual "necessarily feels his insignificance and smallness" (p. 36). This anxiety-producing predicament is one that all people face, starting at some point during childhood. Ideally, the subsequent process of individuation is characterized by growth and increasing strength and independence. And despite that fact that separation from others inevitably involves some aloneness, a healthy person can also "unite himself with the world in the spontaneity of love and productive work" (pp. 37–38).

It is not uncommon, though, for freedom to be experienced as an "an unbearable burden" (p. 52), leading to an urge to "give up one's individuality, to overcome the feeling of aloneness and powerlessness" (p. 45). In fact, such feelings are likely to be widespread if social, political, and economic conditions are such that they do not allow for personal growth, mastery, and meaningful human connections. Rapid economic and social changes (like those experienced by Weimar Germany between the world wars) can make people feel "threatened by gigantic forces" (p. 144), and people cannot tolerate being "bewildered and insecure" (p. 141) for an indefinite period of time. The distress that they feel can heighten the appeal of becoming "a part of a bigger and more powerful whole outside oneself" (p. 177), and in that way eliminate "the gap that has arisen between" one's "individual self and the world" (p. 161).

Fromm argues that one way to achieve that goal is via submission to a leader; in that way, one could "fuse one's self with somebody or something outside of oneself in order to acquire the strength which the individual self is lacking" (p. 163). Achieving a sense of security in this way, though, necessarily requires sacrificing a great deal of one's freedom. Although not every individual will find submission to a powerful leader to be an effective way to find refuge "from what man most dreads: isolation" (p. 35), in times of chaos and uncertainty, one does not need to be particularly neurotic to do so.

Thus, it was a "fatigue with freedom and the denigration of individuality" (Gay, 1968, p. 85) in Germany between the world wars that paved the way for the rise of Nazism, with its ideology dictating that "the individual is nothing and does not count." In Nazi Germany, it was expected that the individual would "accept this personal insignificance, dissolve himself in a higher power, and then feel proud in participating in the strength and glory of this higher power" (Fromm, 1941, p. 258).

Overall, Fromm provided a framework for understanding how challenging and destabilizing social and economic conditions can trigger a psychological crisis among members of a society that can lead to collective ambivalence toward forms of government that prioritize individual freedom and loose social structures. Fromm, however, similar to other theorists for whom the difficulty of "life conditions" is a key variable (see also Staub, 1999; Frey and Rez, 2003), does not specify in any detail the nature of the societal disruption that would be necessary to trigger the chain of events he describes (Newman and Erber, 2003). Furthermore, his theory was grounded in his clinical experiences, not empirical research. Nonetheless, contemporary research has supported the hypothesis that threat and economic hardship are indeed associated with higher levels of authoritarianism (Doty et al., 1991; Napier and Jost, 2008).

Baumeister: escape from self

Baumeister's (1991) conception of escaping the self bears some superficial similarities to Fromm (1941) theory. Both highlight the potential of human beings to become overburdened by the modern world, and both focus on how people seek ways to escape the aversive psychological state that results from feeling overwhelmed. For Baumeister, however, the proximal triggering factor is not a general sense of anxiety and insecurity, but more specifically, the negative affect derived from the "difficulties of selfhood" (p. 34). People are generally motivated to be liked and respected, and in the post-enlightenment world, they know that they are expected to be in control of their lives, and to want to be so. But the constant need to be valued by other people and to assume responsibility for one's successes and failures can be exhausting. At a certain point, not having to be aware of oneself as an object of evaluation, and not having to be judged for one's successes and failures, can be a relief. To that end, people might seek out situations in which they are either not required to or unable to reflect on their own individuality and how they are measuring up—that is, they might want to escape the self.

From this perspective, then, it is not just any crisis or calamity that would lead a person to yearn to reduce "the discrepancy between 'I' and the world," "and with it the conscious fear of aloneness and powerlessness" (Fromm, 1941, p. 208–209). Instead, it is those stressors that directly threaten a person's self-conception as a free and responsible individual, with all of the expectations and obligations that involves, and all of the social standards that need to be met.

Baumeister and colleagues have reframed a number of seemingly paradoxical phenomena, including sexual masochism (Baumeister, 1988), binge eating (Heatherton and Baumeister, 1991), alcohol consumption (Alquist and Baumeister, 2012), and even suicide (Baumeister, 1990) as escape-from-self phenomena. In the case of masochism, for example, rituals of submission (e.g., being tied up and treated like a slave) remove all expectations that one should assert control, and all obligations to do so; the humiliation involved (e.g., being forced to crawl around on all fours and bark like a dog) make concerns about self-esteem and dignity entirely moot; and "if at the same time you are being whipped and slapped, you will not have the capacity to care" (Newman, 1997, p. 165).

The political implications of escaping the self have not been the subject of scholarly attention. Aspects of participation in a representative democracy, however, can be subjectively experienced as burdensome. Elections in the United States are heralded by media editorials and with exhortations that have included "Vote, it's your duty;" "Yes, You Have a Duty to Vote;" "Voting is not

only a right but our civic duty;" "Voting is your duty and your obligation;" and even "It's your moral duty to vote." Indeed, people can experience guilt feelings as a result of not voting in elections (Bernstein et al., 2001; Blais and Achen, 2019).

The pressure to vote does not just derive from self-evaluative concerns. Despite low turnout in many elections, those who participate believe their votes matter (the "belief in personal relevance;" Acevedo and Krueger, 2004). More generally, levels of political efficacy—the confidence that one can have an impact on the government and influence the political process (Campbell et al., 1954; Zimmerman, 1989)—can be high in any given electorate. Thus, there are pressures on people to be in control of political affairs, not just personal ones.

Political efficacy can also lead people to ruminate over their votes after they have been cast, and even to suffer from feelings of regret (Blais and Kilibarda, 2016; Bol et al., 2018; Collins et al., 2022; Tunç et al., 2023). In sum, free elections have the potential to trigger the many difficulties associated with selfhood. And when national elections are called frequently, as is the case in some parliamentary democracies (Israeli voters went to the polls 4 times between April, 2019, and March, 2021), the disquiet involved can be particularly relentless.

A single party state provides relief from those forms of distress. In addition, Baumeister (1990) speculated about the possibility that "mere participation in groups can be a means of escape" in which, as Fromm suggested, individuals can "merge with a compelling group" (p. 208). Sports fandom was provided as an example; as Baumeister (p. 206) noted

> The fan narrows his or her awareness to one, small, circumscribed domain of activity. The fan, unlike the players, is essentially passive, so the individual self is not implicated. Identification with a favorite team can replace one's everyday sense of self and divert attention from one's personal affairs. Moreover, the sports fan's individuality is submerged in the community of fans.

It is arguably a simple matter to transpose that description onto a populist and authoritarian leader's political rally.

Although this analysis is speculative, a recent study by Neerdaels et al. (2024) arguably provides some support for the idea that the kinds of crises that might drive people into the arms of dictators involve burdens on the self. Neerdaels et al. replicated the reliable finding that poverty is correlated with support for authoritarian leaders and regimes. In addition, though, they found that the relationship was mediated not by generalized anxiety or stress, but more specifically by shame. Shame is one of the self-conscious emotions—that is, it is an emotion triggered by people's concerns about how they see themselves (and how they think they are seen by others). In sum, the concerns that underlie the relationship between poverty and support for authoritarian leaders seem to be self-evaluative in nature.

Schwartz: escape from choice

For a country or state to qualify as a democracy, at the very minimum elections must be held; giving people opportunities to choose their leaders and representatives is a necessary criterion. Indeed, the author of this paper, over a 2–3-year period, might be called upon to vote in elections for his president, governor, mayor, county executive, senator (or senators), congressional representative, state senator, state representative, and county representative—and that's not even counting the many other offices that might be contested such as state comptroller, sheriff, and Family Court Judge. Being in the United States, though, he only has to (for all intents and purposes) choose between two political parties. Things get more complicated elsewhere. For example, in the Netherlands in 2024, 15 political parties held seats in the country's House of Representatives.

As discussed at length by Schwartz (2016), although it would seem hard for most people to argue that freedom of choice is a bad thing, *too much* choice can often be aversive. Schwartz reviews in detail the seemingly infinite number of choices people confront in their everyday lives, whether it be shopping for food, clothing, and other consumer products, choosing between different forms of entertainment, picking a medical doctor to see, figuring out what kind of health insurance is best, designing one's educational curriculum, deciding on a career path, evaluating different potential romantic partners, and much more.

Having a wide variety of choices raises expectations that one will identify and select a particularly excellent option. But it also increases the disappointment felt when the choice made (which inevitably involves trade-offs) turns out to be imperfect, and also increases the regret then experienced because of what come to be seen as missed opportunities. Indeed, as Schwartz notes, "being forced to confront trade-offs in making decisions makes people unhappy and indecisive" (p. 129), and as a result, people prefer to avoid them. On top of all that, making difficult decisions can be a significant drain on mental energy—in a word, exhausting (Baumeister et al., 1998, Study 2; cf. Moller et al., 2006).

In a series of experiments, Iyengar and Lepper (2000; see also Iyengar, 2010) provided a well-known demonstration of the downsides of too much choice. In one study, shoppers at a market were given the opportunity to sample from a selection of either 6 different kinds of jam or 24 of them. Not surprisingly, more people stopped at the table to taste the different varieties when there were 24 choices (although individuals sampled approximately the same number in both conditions). However, while 30% of the people in the six-jam condition ended up buying a jar, in the 24-jam condition, the corresponding percentage was just 3%. In a second study, students (allegedly participating in a "marketing survey") had the opportunity to choose (based on appearance and description) one piece of chocolate from a selection of either six or 30 pieces. When they were given an opportunity to taste the chosen piece of chocolate, those in the six-chocolate condition were more pleased with it than those in the 30-chocolate condition (the former were also more likely to forgo a cash payment for their participation in the study and instead accept a small box of the chocolates). Overall, participants in this research who were faced with a bounty of choices were more likely to try to avoid making a choice at all, and those who had to do so were less satisfied with their choices.

Schwartz (2016) reviews a great deal of evidence supporting his hypothesis that these same dynamics play out in the choices people make in their everyday lives. For example, the more retirement investment options employees of a company have many to choose from, the more likely are they not to enroll in any of them. When

utilities are deregulated, most people react to the sudden need to choose from between a variety of new options for electric and telephone service by sticking with their existing plans, even when they could easily save money by shopping around for better ones.

Elections, of course, can confront people with difficult choices to make, decisions that often involve trade-offs (the economic policies one candidate describes seem sensible, but they have little experience in foreign policy; another candidate's perspective on social and cultural issues matches your own, but they have been embroiled in financial scandals). Those choices can be time-consuming and effortful, and (as discussed above) there is no guarantee you will not regret your vote. What is certain, though, is that the more care taken considering one's options, the more upsetting it will be if you conclude that you should have voted for someone else. Indeed, if people have high levels of illusory political efficacy, they may well feel partially to blame for the unhappy outcome. It is thus not surprising that Nagler (2015), in a study of Australian federal elections, found that increases in the number of candidates appearing on the ballot seemed to demotivate voters, leading them to opt for simplified, lower effort voting procedures, including turning in blank ballots. (Turnout was not a variable in this study because voting in Australia is compulsory).

Most disconcerting of all, in the context of this paper, is Schwartz's list of recommendations for how people can deal with the overload of choices they are confronted with. One of them is to "choose when to choose;" in other words, a way to cope with choice overload is to "give up some decisions altogether" (p. 226–227). For example, when purchasing a new car, one could choose to simply accept the default options and not spend mental energy evaluating all of the other possible configurations. When booking trips, one could decide to select flights and hotels on just one of the many websites available (Expedia, Kayak, Travelocity, Priceline, etc.), given that the time and effort saved probably outweighs the small amount of money that could possibly be saved via an exhaustive search. A related piece of advice is for people to reduce their opportunities to feel regret about the choices they make by, whenever possible, reducing the number of options they will consider.

Another bit of advice is to "make your decisions nonreversible." As Schwartz (p. 233) notes, after getting married, a person will inevitably "encounter people who are younger, better looking, funnier, smarter or seemingly more empathic than your wife or husband." But deciding that marriage is forever spares one from ruminating over whether the alternatives warrant leaving one's spouse, and "allows you to pour your energy into improving the relationship that you have rather than second-guessing it."

Finally, Schwartz advises people to learn to embrace constraints, and "view limits on the possibilities we face as liberating not constraining" (p. 239). Choices take time and energy, and there is no way to guarantee that we will be happy with the choices we make; it is, however, almost certain that we will later regret many of them and chastise ourselves for having chosen so poorly. If "freedom of choice eventually become a tyranny of choice" (p. 239), then eliminating occasions on which one must make difficult choices can be seen as an escape from tyranny rather than a restriction of one's liberties.

Rejecting messy, complicated, demanding, and sometimes disappointing liberal democratic forms of government is consistent with all of those recommendations. A one-party, authoritarian state can liberate one from the stress of frequent and possibly difficult choices about whom to support politically. Supporting such a regime allows one to choose not to choose when it comes to who has political power. Once a dictator takes office with your consent, the situation is, if not irreversible, quite difficult to change. And such a state of affairs does not have to be mourned; it can even be celebrated.

Conclusion

The perspectives on human psychology reviewed in this paper do not, of course, imply that societies will inevitably reject free and open democratic forms of government. For example, rejection of democracy does not necessarily follow from Schwartz's analysis of the paradoxes involved in free choice and his recommendations for how to cope with them. People could decide that the choices they make when participating in elections and choosing a government are actually the most important choices they could make, and worth all of the possible costs to they incur. As it is, history shows that nations do not always become dictatorships, and even when they are in place, they can be overthrown.

But the theories reviewed here at least suggest why no one should be surprised when, in turbulent times, members of free countries intentionally seek out—and perhaps even ecstatically embrace—a very different organizing principle for society. Progress in understanding when that does and does not occur will require a multidisciplinary effort, one that should involve not just political scientists, historians, and economists, but as suggested in this paper, psychologists as well.

Author contributions

LN: Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

Funding

The author(s) declare that no financial support was received for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Conflict of interest

The author declares that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

Publisher's note

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