

Law and order, magical spirits, and false flag operations: On the co-occurrence of authoritarianism, spirituality, and conspiracy beliefs and their association with support of violent protests

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Abstract

In Western democracies, commentators have noted an unprecedented diversity in protest movements opposing ecological and health regulations, including traditional right-wing authoritarians alongside conspiracy and spiritual believers. Some of these beliefs appear to be incompatible with one another, since authoritarianism is a hallmark of (extreme) right-wing movements, while spirituality is typically expected to be more prevalent in liberal alternative milieus. This research aims to examine the co-occurrence of these attitudes and their connection to the endorsement of illegal and violent protests. The study employed Latent Profile Analyses and moderated regressions on four extensive quota-based datasets from Germany (total $N=8202$), demonstrating that while most participants did not adhere to any of these beliefs, they often co-occurred. Each of these beliefs was found to independently predict support for illegal and violent protests, even when controlling for anger. The findings suggest that political authoritarianism, conspiracy beliefs, and spirituality can exhibit a high degree of alignment in Western democracies. Moreover, the study discusses the potential implications of these beliefs as a threat to the democratic system, positing that they could legitimize violent protests.

KEY WORDS

authoritarianism, conspiracy beliefs, esotericism, protests, spirituality

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Highlights

- Conspiracy beliefs, authoritarianism, and spirituality appeal to similar individuals.
- These attitudes are independently predictive of illegal and violent protests.
- Particularly, the combination of authoritarianism and spirituality is relevant for violent protests.
- Anger appears to be a motivating factor in all forms of protests, but less so for the non-normative type.

INTRODUCTION

Conspiracy beliefs can play an important role in shaping political ideologies (Sutton & Douglas, 2020), particularly anti-democratic attitudes (e.g., Papaioannou et al., 2023). This was evident in events fueled by conspiracy theories, such as the Capitol Storm in the United States in 2021 (Brenner et al., 2023) or some radicalized protests against public policies during the COVID-19 pandemic in Western democracies (Rahlf, 2023). Remarkably, these movements have united seemingly heterogeneous social groups with ostensibly disparate attitudes, potentially threatening the democratic system (Conner, 2023; Liekefett, Bürner & Becker, 2023; Rahlf, 2023).

Research indicates a strong compatibility particularly between conspiracy thinking and both authoritarianism (Abalakina-Paap et al., 1999; Dyrendal et al., 2021; Ren et al., 2022) and spirituality (Frenken et al., 2023; Jedinger & Siegers, 2024). However, the empirical relationship between spirituality and authoritarianism remains ambiguous, with studies reporting both negative (Saucier & Skrzypińska, 2006; Wink et al., 2007) and positive correlations (Björkqvist et al., 1994; Höllinger, 2004; Pelizzo & Kuzenbayev, 2023). The ambiguity gives rise to the question of whether there are either distinct subclasses of “conspiracy believers” or a significant yet often disregarded nexus between conspiracy beliefs, spirituality, and authoritarianism (Conner, 2023). While the liberal facade of spirituality (Hirsh et al., 2013) initially appears to be incompatible with authoritarianism, there may be a connection arising from their shared opposition to the perceived mainstream in Western democracies: Authoritarianism defies democratic pluralism, whereas spirituality can be seen as an alternative framework to science-based, rational worldviews. To date, research has provided limited empirical insight into the co-occurrence of these attitudes and their potential shared opposition to democratic mainstream.

One objective of the present research is to explore the compatibility and interaction among conspiracy thinking, spirituality, and authoritarianism. This is pursued through a fine-grained person-centered analysis that identifies homogeneous classes with similar response patterns. The study seeks to determine whether these three beliefs are generally intertwined or whether pertinent subtypes and “hidden” combinations exist. Another objective is to clarify the relationship between these beliefs and their combinations with an explicitly anti-democratic attitude, that is, the support of violent protests. The study employs linear models to examine whether the joint presence of these beliefs, in conjunction with the emotion of anger, can complement or even reinforce each other. A nuanced understanding of the co-occurrence of these beliefs and the underlying dynamics behind the support for politically motivated violence can facilitate the identification of vulnerable groups that are susceptible to anti-democratic content and behavior. This is particularly informative in a tense geopolitical climate in Western

countries characterized by the resurgence of authoritarian-populist parties (Norris, 2016) and amid a security and energy crisis in Europe stemming from the Russian war in Ukraine, during which the quota-based datasets for this study were collected.

Political heterogeneity

In order to comprehend the potential co-occurrence of these phenomena, it is necessary to examine the core aspects of conspiracy beliefs, spirituality, and authoritarianism. Conspiracy beliefs seek to explain major events as the result of secret plots by powerful actors (Douglas et al., 2019). This tendency is driven by a stable proclivity to perceive the world as being driven by malevolent hidden forces (Imhoff, Bertlich, & Frenken, 2022). It is more prevalent at both ends of the political left–right spectrum, yet particularly pronounced on the right (Imhoff, Zimmer, et al., 2022).

Spirituality is subject to diverse definitions (McCarroll et al., 2006; Zinnbauer et al., 1997). They primarily focus on a quest for meaning based on subjective experiences beyond conventional epistemology. It serves as a key psychological component, alongside other paranormal beliefs, within the umbrella movement of Western esotericism, which is described as “inner or hidden spiritual knowledge transmitted through Western European historical currents that in turn feed into North American and other non-European settings” (Versluis, 2007, p. 1). Spirituality is typically characterized by a liberal appearance, contrasting with the more conservative nature of organized religiosity (Hirsh et al., 2013).

The liberal and alternative appearance of spiritual beliefs may seem incompatible with the submissive principles of authoritarianism (Conner, 2023; Hirsh et al., 2013). This could suggest the potential for the existence of heterogeneous subclasses of conspiracy believers, including individuals with spiritual and authoritarian backgrounds. Authoritarianism is defined as “the desire for group conformity at the expense of personal autonomy, accompanied by a deference to in-group authority figures and a desire to punish those who violate cherished in-group norms” (Osborne et al., 2023, p. 221). Perceptions of incompatibility with liberal beliefs further arise from the additional subfacet of conventionalism—the adherence to established norms and traditions—in operationalizations of authoritarianism, which are specifically aligned with right-wing political orientation (see Altemeyer, 1981).

However, when stripping away ideological biases and focusing on core definitions, the political positioning of spirituality and authoritarianism becomes less clear. Spirituality is in fact not specifically tied to liberal ideologies; the esoteric movement has historically been associated with a range of political beliefs, including left-wing socialism and right-wing racism and nationalism, rendering it politically heterogeneous (Strube, 2019). Furthermore, the conceptualization of right-wing authoritarianism (Funke, 2005; Mavor et al., 2010) may introduce unnecessary ideological weight. Understanding authoritarianism as a group phenomenon (Stellmacher & Petzel, 2005) enables a less ideologically contaminated assessment of a tendency to comply with (submission), preserve (conventionalism), and enforce (aggression) group norms, which are not exclusively limited to right-wing ideologies. For instance, left-wing pro-environmental beliefs have been shown to be positively associated with the subdimension of submission to authority, yet negatively associated with the dimension of authoritarian aggression (Reese, 2012). Moreover, authoritarian attitudes, when operationalized without ideological bias, can also be prevalent among followers of left-wing ideologies (Conway et al., 2021; Costello et al., 2022). In summary, the presence of conspiracy beliefs, spirituality, and authoritarianism is not contingent on a specific political orientation, allowing for their theoretical co-occurrence across seemingly heterogeneous political groups.

Opposition as commonality

While conspiracy thinking, spirituality, and authoritarianism are not inherently linked from a political standpoint, recent studies have suggested that these attitudes can manifest together (Conner, 2023; Decker et al., 2020). A commonality among these attitudes may reside in their opposition to mainstream attitudes and the institutionalized system in Western democracies. Conspiracy thinking is particularly associated with theories that are considered implausible by the majority and contradict available evidence (Frenken et al., 2024). This form of thinking can also be seen as a driver of the rebellion against the political order (Rahlf, 2023). Spirituality, when considered as part of the esoteric movement, is understood as a break from tradition in a post-Christian context (Houtman & Aupers, 2007) and challenges the established rational and scientific consensus (Hanegraaff, 2016). Furthermore, authoritarianism is antithetical to the prevailing political order and rule of law in Western democracies (Malka et al., 2022).

The close association between conspiracy beliefs and spirituality (respectively paranormal beliefs) has been documented, especially regarding their mutual rejection of established orthodoxies and their counter-epistemic attitudes (Asprem & Dyrendal, 2015, 2018; Smallpage et al., 2023). In this context, spirituality is deemed more relevant than religiosity, which tends to have a less oppositional character due to its institutionalization and integration into the political and social system (Frenken et al., 2023). The integration of authoritarianism into this nexus of conspiracy beliefs and spirituality is a logical proposition. Authoritarian leaders frequently utilize conspiracy theories to advance their own agendas (Ren et al., 2022), and superstition has historically been linked to the authoritarian personality (Sanford et al., 1950). Empirical evidence indicates that a common factor combining conspiracy thinking and paranormal beliefs is well predictive of authoritarianism (Smallpage et al., 2023). The interplay of conspiracy beliefs, spirituality, and authoritarianism may even reinforce each other through a general opposition or by fostering other deviating attitudes or behaviors, potentially underpinned by shared psychological factors.

Connecting psychological mechanisms

During social transformations brought about by revolutions and industrialization in the 19th century, esotericism has emerged as a counter-resource, arising from sentiments of discontent and exclusion from political processes (Asprem & Dyrendal, 2018). Such sentiments of resentment can also be evident in the contemporary era, functioning as underlying motivators for the examined compensatory attitudes (Conner, 2023). These attitudes—spirituality, authoritarianism, and conspiracy beliefs—are collectively characterized as reactions to perceived threats and stressors (Conway et al., 2021; Krok, 2008; Osborne et al., 2023; van Prooijen, 2020). In the face of a perceived threat, humans tend to engage in compensatory actions (Landau et al., 2015). One such action is the adoption of ideologies that promise order and stability, such as authoritarianism (Osborne et al., 2023), particularly among those with a high need for structure (Jugert et al., 2009). Empirical evidence has indeed indicated that authoritarianism may result from the displacement of negative emotions through hostile attribution biases (Milburn et al., 2014).

A further response to threat and stress is the engagement in sense-making processes, which entails seeking causal explanations that align with the individual's worldview. By definition, individuals with high levels of conspiracy mentality and spirituality are inclined to ascribe events to the actions of powerful secret actors and supernatural principles, rather than to factors such as coincidence or unfavorable circumstances. This tendency to ascribe meaning to ambiguous or threatening situations has been documented in the context of both spirituality (Lysne & Wachholtz, 2011) and conspiracy thinking (van Prooijen, 2012). Empirical evidence

suggests that conspiracy beliefs are a reaction to threats associated with social change (Federico et al., 2018). Furthermore, feelings of social exclusion can lead to conspiracy and superstitious beliefs, mediated through the search for meaning (Graeupner & Coman, 2017).

A concurrent explanation for why individuals engage in spiritual and conspiracy beliefs that deviate from conventional doctrine is that these beliefs can address the social need to maintain a positive self-image and reinforce in-group identity. The adoption of alternative views can contribute to a sense of individualization and appeal to the need for uniqueness (Grünbacher, 2021; Imhoff & Lamberty, 2017). Adherents of spirituality are thought to engage in “self-sacralization” (Houtman & Aupers, 2007) and claim superior knowledge that transcends the boundaries of conventional rationality and scientific perspectives (Hanegraaff, 2016; von Stuckrad, 2005).

The perceptual lens of conspiracy thinking and spirituality tends to exhibit in-group–out-group dynamics, distinguishing between an “enlightened” in-group and a “sleeping” out-group (Decker et al., 2020). When these beliefs are dismissed or stigmatized by out-groups, as evidenced in the context of conspiracy beliefs (Harambam & Aupers, 2015; Lantian et al., 2018), this may contribute to the formation of a shared deviant social identity. Conspiracy and spiritual beliefs are perceived to function as identity markers (Asprem & Dyrendal, 2018), with conspiracy beliefs also serving the adherence to in-group norms (Cookson et al., 2021). Authoritarianism can fit into this intergroup identity framework as well (Stellmacher & Petzel, 2005), as individuals with authoritarian dispositions are particularly prone to commit to a social identity without conducting further exploration (Ryeng et al., 2013). Furthermore, groupthink is a central feature of authoritarianism, which inherently demands complete loyalty to the in-group while discouraging any deviation (Osborne et al., 2023).

The common ground in psychological needs, particularly under vulnerable and threatening conditions such as social or societal exclusion, may render individuals more susceptible to these beliefs. All three attitudes attract individuals who are inclined to oppose conventional wisdom in addressing epistemic and social needs, utilizing these attitudes as self-serving reactions to perceived threats. The potential co-occurrence of these attitudes and their combination may even have a reinforcing effect. For instance, while conspiracy beliefs address existential needs, they do not adequately fulfill them or restore feelings of control. In fact, these attitudes may ultimately contribute to the exacerbation of existential needs and the amplification of perceived threats due to the inherently negative and malevolent nature of the narratives in question (Liekfett, Christ, & Becker, 2023; van Prooijen, 2020). Additionally, the rejection of established knowledge and scientific findings can also increase epistemic uncertainty. Once individuals develop a sense of belonging to an opposing position or are invested in alternative beliefs as part of their social identity, other deviant attitudes and groups (with a common enemy) may become more appealing as well.

Support for illegal and violent protests

The endorsement of deviant or unsubstantiated beliefs may be relevant in the context of illegal and violent protests. While protests are generally considered a legitimate form of expression in democracies, their violent and illegal counterparts can pose a threat to the democratic system. One of the primary motivating factors in collective protests is anger, which protests can provide a cathartic outlet for (Jasper, 2014; Stürmer & Simon, 2009). Individuals tend to feel anger when they perceive an event as unfavorable, particularly against their own interest (Lazarus, 1991), and believe it was intentionally brought about (Schnakenberg & Wayne, 2024). While anger may serve as a general motivator for various types of protests, the decision to support either normative or non-normative protests can also be influenced by a range of psychological factors, including feelings of efficacy (Becker & Tausch, 2017).

The attitudes examined in the present study may also bolster the support for violent and antidemocratic protests. Although conspiracy theories are not inherently antidemocratic, they have the potential to jeopardize democratic systems when they denigrate social groups or fundamentally subvert democratic institutions or outcomes (Albertson & Guiler, 2020). Research indicates that individuals with a conspiratorial mindset are more inclined to endorse non-normative and illegal political actions (Imhoff et al., 2021). Furthermore, this mindset has been identified as a catalyst for violent extremist intentions (Rahlf, 2023; Rottweiler & Gill, 2022), with violent extremist groups being more likely to propagate conspiracy theories compared to non-violent or moderate groups (Rousis et al., 2022). Authoritarian values are, by their very nature, antidemocratic and have been linked to illegal protests, although this relationship may exhibit a curvilinear pattern when controlled for other variables (Inguanzo et al., 2022). Empirical evidence concerning the role of spirituality in illegal or violent protests is scarce; nevertheless, studies have identified a positive correlation between legal forms of political engagement and spirituality (Kucinskas & Stewart, 2022).

Given the central role of anger in mobilizing protests, it remains uncertain whether conspiracy beliefs, spirituality, and authoritarianism interact with anger to channel its power toward violence, or whether they can incite violent protests independent of anger. The previously mentioned countercultural stance of these three attitudes, encompassed by feelings of exclusion or discrimination by mainstream narratives, aligns with the perception that mainstream actors are intentionally working against one's own interests, thus fueling feelings of anger. In the presence of countercultural attitudes and their limited commitment to the prevailing system, support for using anti-democratic violence to address perceived grievances is likely to increase. Therefore, it can be argued that anger serves as a motivating emotional force for protests, while conspiracy beliefs, spirituality, and authoritarianism provide attitudes that may legitimize even violent outcomes (see van Prooijen, 2022). Additionally, an open question remains as to how these three attitudes, under the assumption of potential co-occurrence, may interact with one another in the mobilization of violent protests.

The present study

The objective of this study is twofold: First, to investigate the co-occurrence of conspiracy beliefs, spirituality, and political authoritarianism; and second, to analyze how these attitudes, in conjunction with anger, relate to support for illegal protests. To address the first research question (H1), we employed Latent Profile Analysis (LPA) as the primary analytical technique. This approach enables the simultaneous analysis of the levels of the three attitudes from a person-centered perspective, thereby facilitating the identification of patterns that may be overlooked in traditional correlational analyses. For instance, it is conceivable that individuals who endorse authoritarian political leaders may concurrently subscribe to conspiracy beliefs while expressing discomfort with “hippie” spiritual beliefs. Likewise, culturally liberal conspiracy believers and practitioners of spirituality may experience only little affinity for authoritarian law-and-order positions. While the existence of different subtypes of believers due to their political heterogeneity is a possibility, there is also a robust theoretical foundation for positing that these attitudes may co-occur due to their shared countercultural or counterfactual stance, as well as their responses to corresponding psychological needs. We thus started with the goal of identifying relevant subclasses (or latent profiles; see pre-registration) but remained open to the possibility that such profiles might not exist. The LPA can uncover these patterns, though it does not provide a strong base for hypothesis testing in a strict sense. We therefore consider it as a primarily exploratory approach for uncovering patterns, ideally observed consistently across independent samples.

To ascertain the role of the attitudes in supporting illegal protests, a series of moderated regression analyses were conducted. It was hypothesized that the emotion of anger may serve as a driving force for protests in general, with the direction of this force toward stronger support for illegal protests being influenced by conspiracy beliefs, political authoritarianism, and spirituality (H2, moderation hypothesis). This hypothesis is primarily based on empirical findings about the relevance of conspiracy beliefs and authoritarian attitudes in the context of violent protests, where their complementary or moderating role, alongside the driving emotion anger, has not been examined yet. Additionally, the role of spirituality in this context is underrepresented in the empirical literature. The interplay of these attitudes in relation to different types of protests was also examined in an exploratory manner, as prior research and theories did not provide a clear basis for statistical predictions about complementary or interacting effects.

The present study is a secondary data analysis based on extensive cross-sectional datasets collected in four consecutive studies by the think tank *CeMAS*, which kindly made the data available to us. The data were collected amid the Russian war in Ukraine, which represented a highly politicized situation in Europe characterized by security and energy concerns. This tense climate is particularly informative due to the presence of real threats, including emerging conspiracy theories and authoritarian-populist actors attempting to use the situation for their agendas. The quota-based nature of data collection ensures the representation of diverse social and political groups, thereby facilitating the derivation of unbiased results. This is of particular importance when interpreting the prevalence of subgroups resulting from LPA.

The study employed an exploratory–confirmatory approach. The analytical strategy was developed without prior pre-registration on the initially collected data (October 2022), prior to the availability of the other studies. Based on the results of the exploratory analyses, we set up a preregistration (https://aspredicted.org/JRS_8MB) that detailed the analyses to be conducted on all subsequent studies, thereby facilitating the adaptation of hypotheses based on the data and subsequent validation with limited degrees of freedom.

METHODS

Participants

For each study, participants were sampled according to quotas that reflect the distribution of the place of residence at the federal state level in Germany and the age distribution of the adult German population without any overlap between studies. Specifically, 17% of the participants were between the ages of 18 and 29, 14% were between the ages of 30 and 39, 20% were between the ages of 40 and 49, 17% were between the ages of 50 and 59, and 32% were 60 years of age or older (see [Appendix A](#)). In addition, the quota was gender balanced (50/50; the response option “other” was not selected). Data were collected by the panel provider *Bilendi & respondi* in October (Study 1, $N=2199$, $M_{\text{age}}=49.27$, $SD_{\text{age}}=16.57$), November (Study 2, $N=2005$, $M_{\text{age}}=48.84$, $SD_{\text{age}}=16.76$), December 2022 (Study 3, $N=1999$, $M_{\text{age}}=49.25$, $SD_{\text{age}}=16.71$), and January 2023 (Study 4, $N=1999$, $M_{\text{age}}=49.23$, $SD_{\text{age}}=16.93$). Correlation analyses with 1999 participants are sensitive to effects of $r=.063$, respectively $r=.060$ with 2199 participants (80% power, $\alpha=.05$, two-tailed; according to *G*Power*, Faul et al., 2007).

Measures

All items were measured on a 1–5 Likert scale, ranging from “Does not apply at all” to “Completely true”. Participants were asked for their personal opinion on various statements (see [Appendix B](#)).

Conspiracy beliefs

The conspiracy beliefs scale was employed to ascertain the mean level of self-reported support for four different conspiracy theories concerning the Russian war in Ukraine (reliability $\alpha = .83-.85$; high intercorrelations, see [Appendix C](#)). Among these conspiracy theories was the claim that “Putin is taking action against a global elite that is pulling the strings in the background.” Given that the war was a prominent news topic during the data collection period, these specific items may have provoked stronger reactions compared to more general conspiracy items, making them particularly relevant for the second research question concerning support for illegal protests. Although the items were specifically focused on this event, the findings may have broader implications as a large part of the variance in the endorsement of a specific conspiracy theory reflects a stable interindividual tendency to endorse (any) conspiracy theories (Imhoff, Bertlich, & Frenken, 2022). The relatively low mean scores on the scale indicate that these conspiracy theories were generally considered to be rather implausible (see [Table 4](#)), thus contradicting current mainstream attitudes.

Political authoritarianism

Political authoritarianism was measured with two items tapping into the preference for centralized authoritarian governance and the willingness to submit to a strong political authority (Spearman-Brown coefficient $r = .63-.72$). One of the items stated, “We should have a leader who rules Germany with a strong hand for the good of all.” In contrast to right-wing authoritarianism, the assessment exclusively focused on submissiveness, excluding the dimension of conventionalism. The latter may be more ideologically biased, given the political right's greater appreciation for traditions and lesser openness to change (Jost et al., 2003).

Spirituality

The operationalization of spirituality incorporated spiritual and magical thinking as core elements. One of the two items (Spearman-Brown coefficient $r = .80-.84$) to measure this construct stated, “Spiritual or magical powers have a strong influence on my life.”

Anger/contempt for current politics

The assessment of anger combined with contempt was conducted using a single item, namely, “I have nothing but anger and contempt for current politics.” While multi-item measures are typically preferred for their psychometric robustness (Fisher et al., 2016; Sarstedt & Wilczynski, 2009), single-item assessments can still yield reliable and valid results (Allen et al., 2022; Ang & Eisend, 2018), even for broad constructs such as the one examined in this study (Matthews et al., 2022). Single-item measures offer an economical alternative for collecting large-scale panel data at the national level, as employed in this research.

Support for illegal protests

Two items were employed as indicators of support for illegal and violent protests against democratic representatives or their actions (Spearman-Brown coefficient $r = .69-.72$). One of the items stated, “Some politicians deserve it when the anger against them turns into violence.”

Support for protests in general

The general support for anti-government protests was measured with two items (Spearman–Brown coefficient $r = .79-.83$), for example, “I believe that everyone should demonstrate against the government at the moment, regardless of their political orientation.”

Analyses

Latent profile analyses

In order to examine the potential for various subtypes of conspiracy believers with respect to authoritarianism and spirituality, such as spiritual conspiracy believers and authoritarian conspiracy believers (H1), latent profile analyses were employed to partition the sample into homogeneous latent classes and assign participants to their most likely class based on their mean scores on three indicator variables: conspiracy beliefs, spirituality, and political authoritarianism. The procedure was based on probability functions and involved 10,000 starting values, of which 2500 were selected for 500 iterations of maximum likelihood using the software *MPlus* (version 7.3, Muthén & Muthén, 2017). Four models were tested, each with different constraints on the variance–covariance between classes, and the best-fitting model was selected (Johnson, 2021). The model with equal variances and covariances fixed at zero was identified as the most parsimonious model for the Study 1 data according to the lowest Bayesian information criterion (BIC; see Nylund et al., 2007). For purposes of comparison, we also report the results with the same model restrictions for the other three studies.¹ The goodness-of-fit indices for all models and the model settings are presented in [Appendix D](#).

Moderated regressions

To test the hypothesis that anger, along with the other mentioned attitudes, and particularly their pre-registered interaction, is associated with violent protests (H2), moderated regressions were conducted to predict support for illegal protests. In the analysis, anger and each of the attitudes (conspiracy beliefs, spirituality, and political authoritarianism) served as predictors. This process was repeated for all four studies using *RStudio* (version 2023.12.1, RStudio Team, 2020). Additionally, mixed linear models were employed for exploratory purposes, incorporating data from all studies to predict both support for illegal protests and support for protests in general (*lme4* package version 1.1.35, Bates et al., 2015).

RESULTS

Latent profile analyses (H1)

The first objective was to examine the compatibility of conspiracy beliefs, political authoritarianism, and spirituality. As illustrated in [Figure 1](#), the attitudes of conspiracy beliefs, spirituality, and political authoritarianism predominantly co-occurred consistently across datasets. The vast majority of respondents were assigned to classes whose lines did

¹For the Studies 3 and 4, the equal variances and equal covariances model provided a better model fit than the model presented here.

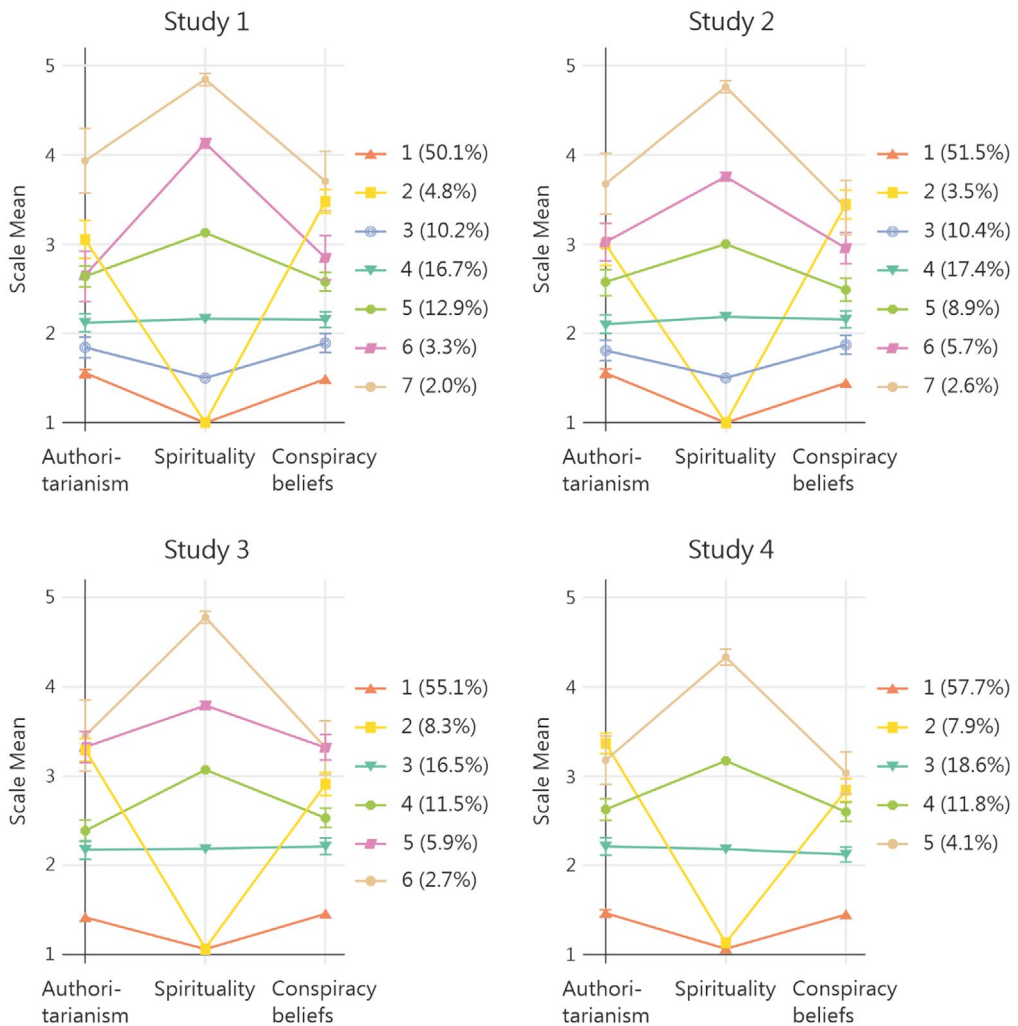


FIGURE 1 Means (and 95% CI) of the Latent Profile classes on the authoritarianism, spirituality, and conspiracy beliefs variables.

not cross, indicating that individuals scored in relative terms consistently high, medium, or low on all three variables. However, a small subset, constituting between 3.5% (Study 2) and 8.3% (Study 3) of the sample, deviated from this pattern. This subset exhibited a relatively high endorsement of authoritarian attitudes and conspiracy beliefs, devoid of any discernible spiritual inclinations (class 2, “authoritarian conspiracy believers”). Conversely, high levels of spirituality were found to be consistently accompanied by comparatively elevated levels of conspiracy beliefs and political authoritarianism; thus, we did not observe a class of *non-authoritarian spiritualist* in any of the datasets.

It is noteworthy that most participants in the quota-based samples demonstrated minimal support for either of these beliefs. In each study, more than 50% of participants (class 1) expressed minimal agreement to these beliefs, and few classes exceeded the midpoint of the scale that indicates varying levels of support rather than dissent. As another relevant note, the findings from the LPA were remarkably consistent across studies, highlighting the robustness of the identified pattern.

TABLE 1 Regression estimates for the predictors anger and conspiracy beliefs on support for illegal protests.

	Study 1	Study 2	Study 3	Study 4
(Intercept)	-.019 [-.05; .02]	-.026 [-.06; .01]	.019 [-.02; .06]	-.017 [-.06; .02]
Anger	.301** [.26; .34]	.286** [.25; .32]	.258** [.22; .30]	.230** [.19; .27]
Conspiracy beliefs	.453** [.41; .49]	.473** [.43; .51]	.501** [.46; .54]	.479** [.44; .52]
Anger* Conspiracy beliefs	.035* [<.01; .07]	.053** [.02; .09]	-.036* [-.07; <.01]	.033 [> -.01; .07]
Adjusted R^2	.457**	.465**	.440	.412**

Note: See [Appendix F](#) for exact p -values. Confidence intervals (95%) in brackets.

** $p < .01$; * $p < .05$.

TABLE 2 Regression estimates for the predictors anger and spirituality on support for illegal protests.

	Study 1	Study 2	Study 3	Study 4
(Intercept)	-.012 [-.04; .02]	-.005 [-.04; .03]	<-.001 [-.04; .04]	-.013 [-.05; .02]
Anger	.470** [.44; .50]	.423** [.39; .46]	.410** [.37; .45]	.394** [.36; .43]
Spirituality	.330** [.29; .37]	.373** [.34; .41]	.391** [.35; .43]	.361** [.32; .40]
Anger* Spirituality	.049** [.02; .08]	.019 [-.02; .06]	<.001 [-.04; .04]	.052** [.02; .09]
Adjusted R^2	.415**	.411**	.411**	.372**

Note: See [Appendix F](#) for exact p -values. Confidence intervals (95%) in brackets.

** $p < .01$.

Regression results (H2)

The second objective was to test whether conspiracy beliefs, political authoritarianism, and spirituality moderate the association of anger with the support for politically motivated violence—or if these factors are associated with such support irrespective of anger. The analysis yielded that anger, conspiracy beliefs, spirituality, and political authoritarianism individually predicted the level of support for violent protests (see [Tables 1–3](#)). Furthermore, evidence was found for the preregistered interaction effects between anger and each of these attitudes. However, these interactions were weak and did not reach statistical significance across all four studies, with one instance even showing inconsistent directionality. Consequently, the data provided less support for the moderation hypothesis and more support for individual associations.

An alternative approach to examine these main effects in the same data is to consider the classes that scored highly on all indicator items in the LPA. These classes exhibited the strongest support for illegal protests (e.g., $M = 3.07$ – 3.83 , $SD = 1.21$ – 1.35 , for class 7, respectively, 6 or 5 in Studies 3 and 4) compared to those scoring low on the indicator items (e.g., $M = 1.34$ – 1.44 , $SD = .62$ – $.76$, for class 1; see [Appendix E](#)).

TABLE 3 Regression estimates for the predictors anger and authoritarianism on support for illegal protests.

	Study 1	Study 2	Study 3	Study 4
(Intercept)	−.018 [−.05; .02]	−.022 [−.06; .01]	−.012 [−.05; .02]	−.015 [−.05; .02]
Anger	.348** [.31; .38]	.347** [.31; .38]	.308** [.27; .35]	.285** [.25; .32]
Authoritarianism	.435** [.40; .47]	.404** [.36; .44]	.451** [.41; .49]	.436** [.40; .48]
Anger* Authoritarianism	.040* [.01; .07]	.052** [.02; .09]	.026 [−.01; .06]	.033 [>−.01; .07]
Adjusted R^2	.462**	.426**	.438**	.394**

Note: See Appendix F for exact p -values. Confidence intervals (95%) in brackets.

** $p < .01$; * $p < .05$.

TABLE 4 Table of meta-analytic correlations.

	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5
(1) Protest support	2.87	1.21	–				
(2) Illegal protest support	1.83	1.03	.515** [.50; .53]	–			
(3) Anger	2.74	1.33	.726** [.72; .73]	.519** [.49; .54]	–		
(4) Conspiracy beliefs	1.94	.94	.538** [.52; .56]	.625** [.62; .63]	.519** [.50; .53]	–	
(5) Spirituality	1.70	.99	.228** [.21; .24]	.486** [.46; .51]	.261** [.24; .28]	.487** [.46; .52]	–
(6) Authoritarianism	1.97	1.05	.394** [.39; .40]	.590** [.57; .61]	.451** [.44; .46]	.548** [.53; .56]	.433** [.41; .46]

Note: All correlations were significant with p -values $< .001$ (**). Confidence intervals (95%) in brackets, $N = 8202$, M = mean, SD = standard deviation.

Exploratory results

Overall model

The data from all four studies were aggregated for exploratory purposes. The meta-analytic correlations (see Table 4), using the *metafor* package (version 4.6.0, Viechtbauer, 2010), demonstrated that all correlations between variables were significant with high effect sizes.

The primary exploratory research question was whether the combination of conspiracy beliefs, political authoritarianism, and spirituality can reinforce each other with regard to the support for violent protests. To this end, a mixed linear model analysis was performed to predict support for illegal protests, nested within studies (see Table 5). The highest effect sizes were identified for the main effects of all four predictors (anger, conspiracy beliefs, spirituality, and political authoritarianism), as well as for the interaction between spirituality and authoritarianism. This interaction indicated that the correlation between spirituality and support for illegal protests was particularly strong when authoritarianism was significantly pronounced (see Figure 2). Other (significant) interaction effects with small effect sizes are illustrated in Appendix G. These smaller two-way interactions primarily supported the notion that the joint presence of these attitudes was associated with elevated levels of support for violent protests,

TABLE 5 Mixed linear model results predicting the support for illegal protests across the four studies.

	Estimate	CI	t	p
(Intercept)	−.085	[−.10; −.07]	−8.79	<.001
Anger	.250	[.23; .27]	24.87	<.001
Conspiracy beliefs	.264	[.24; .29]	22.48	<.001
Spirituality	.168	[.15; .19]	15.49	<.001
Authoritarianism	.257	[.24; .28]	23.40	<.001
Anger* Conspiracy beliefs	.036	[.02; .06]	3.64	<.001
Anger* Spirituality	−.038	[−.06; −.02]	−3.44	.001
Conspiracy beliefs* Spirituality	.035	[.01; .06]	2.99	.003
Anger* Authoritarianism	.017	[>−.01; .04]	1.72	.086
Conspiracy beliefs* Authoritarianism	.043	[.02; .07]	3.59	<.001
Spirituality* Authoritarianism	.103	[.08; .13]	9.18	<.001
Anger* Conspiracy beliefs* Spirituality	−.015	[−.04; <.01]	−1.52	.128
Anger* Conspiracy beliefs* Authoritarianism	−.036	[−.05; −.02]	−3.99	<.001
Anger* Spirituality* Authoritarianism	−.026	[−.04; −.01]	−2.80	.005
Conspiracy beliefs* Spirituality* Authoritarianism	−.029	[−.05; −.01]	−3.28	.001
Anger* Conspiracy beliefs* Spirituality* Authoritarianism	.010	[>−.01; .02]	1.70	.088

Note: $R^2 = .543^{**}$, $N = 8202$, CI = 95% Confidence intervals.

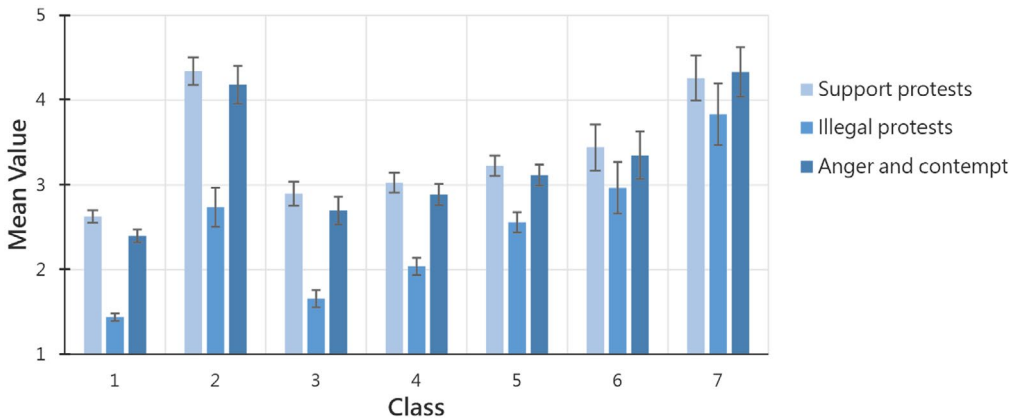


FIGURE 2 Means and 95% CI of the variables support for general protest, support for illegal protests, and anger across classes (Study 1, similar pattern in the other studies).

while the three-way interaction was associated with slightly lower levels of support for violence. Specifically, the interaction between authoritarianism and spirituality was more pronounced when conspiracy beliefs were low. Furthermore, negative three-way interactions involving anger suggested that two-way interactions tended to be stronger when anger levels were low.

An important exception to the observed pattern was the negative two-way interaction between anger and spirituality, which further highlights the benefits of the additional LPA. The regression analysis revealed that the relationship between violent protest support and

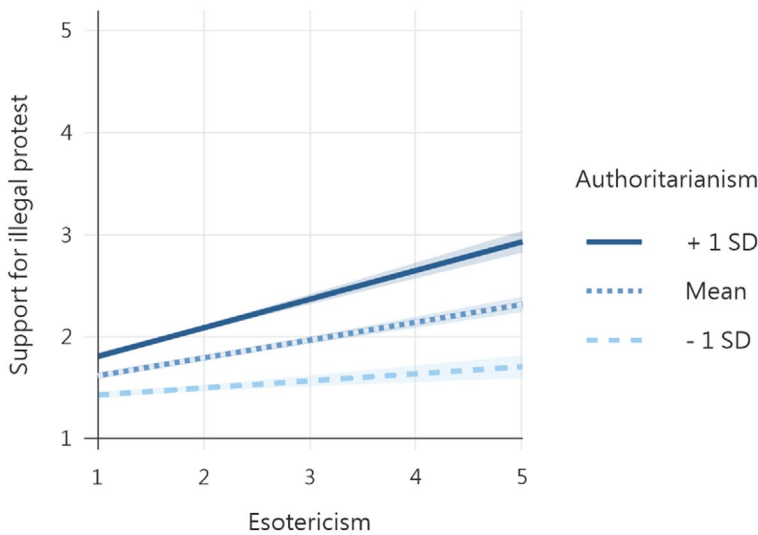


FIGURE 3 Interaction effect between spirituality and authoritarianism (note 95% CI).

spirituality was less pronounced when anger levels were high. As illustrated by the LPA (see Figure 3), this effect was primarily driven by a single class: the non-spiritual authoritarian conspiracy believers (class 2). Participants in this class exhibited comparably high levels of authoritarianism, conspiracy beliefs, and anger, similar to the class that scored highest on all variables (including spirituality, class 7), but showed markedly lower support for violent protests.

General support for protests

To estimate which associations were specific to support for politically motivated violence as an antidemocratic behavior, compared to general support for protests, a mixed linear model was conducted. The model used the same parameters as in the previous analysis, but this time with general protest support as the outcome variable. Contrary to the findings related to illegal violent protests, general support for protests was found to be more strongly associated with anger, while no significant or even negative associations were observed with spirituality and political authoritarianism (see Table 6). Few interaction effects were statistically significant, and none of these effects were of substantial magnitude. The partial correlations between these attitudes and support for illegal protests remained high even when general protest support was included as an additional predictor (see Appendix H). The association of conspiracy beliefs with both violent and general forms of protest was similar. In summary, the observed patterns in the preceding analysis appear to be specific to politically motivated violence.

DISCUSSION

The present study examined the co-occurrence of political authoritarianism, conspiracy beliefs, and spirituality and how these attitudes are related to the support for illegal and violent protests in four large German quota-based samples. The results of latent profile analyses indicated that these three attitudes mostly co-occur in the identified classes. In particular,

TABLE 6 Mixed linear model results predicting the support for protests in general across the four studies.

	Estimate	CI	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
(Intercept)	.063	[.04; .08]	6.70	<.001
Anger	.591	[.57; .61]	60.96	<.001
Conspiracy beliefs	.260	[.24; .28]	22.90	<.001
Spirituality	−.022	[−.04; 0]	−2.06	.040
Authoritarianism	.012	[−.01; .03]	1.09	.274
Anger* Conspiracy beliefs	−.042	[−.06; −.02]	−4.39	<.001
Anger* Spirituality	−.039	[−.06; −.02]	−3.66	<.001
Conspiracy beliefs* Spirituality	−.037	[−.06; −.02]	−3.30	.001
Anger* Authoritarianism	−.005	[−.02; .01]	−.57	.570
Conspiracy beliefs* Authoritarianism	−.019	[−.04; 0]	−1.66	.097
Spirituality* Authoritarianism	−.032	[−.05; −.01]	−2.97	.003
Anger* Conspiracy beliefs* Spirituality	.005	[−.01; .02]	.55	.582
Anger* Conspiracy beliefs* Authoritarianism	.005	[−.01; .02]	.60	.552
Anger* Spirituality* Authoritarianism	−.024	[−.04; −.01]	−2.61	.009
Conspiracy beliefs* Spirituality* Authoritarianism	.029	[.01; .05]	3.42	.001
Anger* Conspiracy beliefs* Spirituality* Authoritarianism	.007	[−.01; .02]	1.10	.271

Note: $R^2 = .574^{**}$, $N = 8202$, CI = 95% Confidence intervals.

higher expressions of spirituality were consistently related to the tendency to support political authoritarianism and to endorse conspiracy theories about the war in Ukraine.

The study offers empirical quantitative evidence that corroborates the assertion made in existing literature that these attitudes tend to complement each other well within Western democracies (e.g., Conner, 2023). These stigmatized and countercultural forms of knowledge, which challenge the mainstream in liberal democracies, appear to be intertwined and appeal to similar individuals. The beliefs in higher powers and authoritarian figures may serve to address the need for control and understanding of their environment. Moreover, individuals may adopt these attitudes as a means of differentiating themselves from the mainstream, seeking to achieve a sense of uniqueness. Once an individual has embraced alternative beliefs that challenge common sense, they may find other alternative beliefs to be more appealing as well. However, a small subset of participants exhibited pronounced authoritarianism and conspiracy beliefs, devoid of a corresponding inclination toward spirituality.

These attitudes are also pertinent in supporting illegal and violent protests. Contrary to predictions outlined in the pre-registered analyses, the interaction between these attitudes and anger was only a minor correlate of support for violent protests. As indicated by exploratory analyses, the individual effects and interactions among these attitudes, independent of anger, were substantial predictors of the endorsement of violent protests. While anger and conspiracy beliefs emerged as important predictors of support for protests in general, the inclination toward specifically violent forms of protests was additionally predicted by political authoritarianism and spiritual beliefs. Furthermore, the interaction of spirituality and authoritarianism was found to be particularly relevant for violent protests, in addition to their individual effects. This indicates that spirituality is then a primary predictor of violent protests when authoritarian attitudes are present, as also reflected in the descriptive latent profile analysis results. Notably, this interaction may be somewhat diminished in contexts marked by high levels of

anger or conspiracy beliefs. Hence, there are no reinforcing (but rather slightly undermining) interaction effects from the simultaneous presence of *all* these attitudes or emotions; instead, the presence of just two of them is sufficient to show such a reinforcing effect. In summary, anger appears to be a pervasive motivating factor in protests, with other attitudes determining whether the protests adhere to lawful norms or resort to illegal methods. Exploratory analyses further suggest that the combination of conspiracy beliefs, spirituality, and political authoritarianism could exert such a redirecting effect relevant to politically motivated violence primarily on a complementary basis, with some smaller reinforcing effects of their joint presence.

Consequently, these attitudes may be regarded as anti-democratic, potentially originating from a shift away from democratically legitimized actors and institutions to engage in alternative perspectives that contravene mainstream knowledge. This intertwining may have been fostered during the COVID-19 pandemic, where spirituality—relevant for individual health decisions—and conspiracy theories—addressing epistemic and existential needs—played an important role (Pickel et al., 2022). This antagonistic positioning may also account for the pronounced positive correlation between spirituality and political authoritarianism observed in this study. This finding contrasts with the negative correlation reported in some other research (e.g., Wink et al., 2007). These studies assessed the multifaceted right-wing authoritarianism construct, which also encompasses conventionalism as a subdimension. Conventionalism may be more antithetical to spirituality, which is often characterized by a rather unconventional approach (in Western contexts). The measures of political authoritarianism employed in the present study focused on the subdimension of authoritarian submission, free from ideological contamination. Other research has also reported higher levels of authoritarianism among spiritual individuals (Björkqvist et al., 1994; Höllinger, 2004; Pelizzo & Kuzenbayev, 2023) when authoritarianism is primarily operationalized in terms of submission to a strong leader.

Authoritarianism as part of a countercultural identity calls for further investigation. Exploratory analyses (see [Appendices I and J](#)) provide some insights into the dialectics of political authoritarianism. It revealed a strong positive correlation between anger about current politics and the concern that current politics are akin to a dictatorship among those who self-declared a preference for authoritarian political leadership. This is despite the logic that the support for authoritarian politics should not align with anger about their actual manifestation. It may be the case that authoritarians are not interested in a strong leader per se, but only one that thinks exactly like they do. This would suggest that the preference for a specific system is not the primary factor; rather, it is about seeking an agentic and powerful figure who can act in their particularistic (countercultural) interest.

The findings of the present study contribute to our understanding of societal and political movements and partially antidemocratic behaviors. These insights are pertinent for addressing the aforementioned issues and may inform the development of political education programs by identifying relevant attitudes and their combinations. From a methodological perspective, this study underscores the significance of replication studies, including internal replications. It is noteworthy that certain minor interaction effects were detected in a single study but were not substantiated in a subsequent study conducted one month later. It should be noted, however, that the study is not without limitations.

Limitations and future research

It is important to acknowledge the constraints associated with the measurement of variables. The present study focused on specific conspiracy beliefs related to the Russian war in Ukraine, which were generally regarded as implausible by most participants. These beliefs were linked to the authoritarianism variable due to the subject matter, which involved actions of the Russian dictatorship. This content-specific association may have been less pronounced in a more

general measure of the conspiracy mindset (Imhoff, Bertlich, & Frenken, 2022). However, it is our contention that this topic dominated the survey period, eliciting stronger reactions and opinions than general items, and was therefore more relevant for the second research question regarding the support of illegal protests.

Furthermore, we only analyzed a single item regarding anger about current politics. The item was also framed in a way that elicited contempt, although it is important to note that anger and contempt can have differential effects on normative versus non-normative political action (Tausch et al., 2011).

The findings of this study are limited to the context of Western democracies. The concept of spirituality specifically refers to Western esotericism and its roots in stigmatized knowledge. For instance, it is challenging to apply the results of this study directly to a non-democratic country (e.g., Russia) where conspiracy beliefs and spirituality may not be established as an explicit deviation from mainstream rationality. Conspiracy theories are a fundamental element of the authoritarian regime there (Bogatyreva, 2024), and as a result, conspiracy beliefs and authoritarian attitudes are officially propagated rather than stigmatized. However, the attitudes examined in this study may still align when they become mainstream (see also Barkun, 2015) or under autocratic regimes, given the commonality that authoritarianism, (implausible) conspiracy beliefs, and spirituality contradict the values upheld by liberal democracies (including emphasizing scientific principles). Research in non-Western contexts with different forms of counterculture or political systems would be valuable for further clarification.

Another limitation of the study is the cross-sectional nature of the data, which precludes any definitive conclusions regarding causality or the direction of pathways. It would be of interest to observe the direction of effects in longitudinal data if these attitudes indeed facilitate the support of illegal and violent protests. An experimental design could also provide insights into whether these attitudes are causally related to the support for such protests, although experimental manipulations may be challenging given the stability of these belief systems.

CONCLUSION

Despite their conceptual distinctness, the study revealed that countercultural attitudes—such as conspiracy beliefs, spirituality, and political authoritarianism—that contradict common knowledge or democratic norms can coexist within the same group of individuals. These attitudes may be interconnected through common psychological mechanisms that serve as responses to negative experiences. Understanding the coexistence of these attitudes is crucial, particularly because they are relevant to antidemocratic behavior, specifically the endorsement of politically motivated violence. The simultaneous presence of these attitudes can have complementary and synergistic effects.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The Appendix, open data, and open code are accessible on an online repository (<https://osf.io/4ys3e/>).

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