

Original Article

The Emotional Architecture of Authoritarianism: Anxiety, Attachment, and Political Obedience in Late Modern Societies

Dr. Noah Steinberg

Assistant Professor, Department of Political Theory, University of Toronto, Canada

Abstract

Authoritarianism in postmodern societies cannot be accounted for in institutional breakdown or ideological control; it has to be theorized as an affective structure, based on citizens' emotional lives. This essay probes the emotional constitution of authoritarianism how fear, attachment, and desires for security influence political compliance. Using political psychology theory, affect theory, and critical sociology, it contends that anxiety is both a symptom of existential ambiguity and a means of regulation to appeal to a population in which control is safety. Attachment is then the affective glue that adheres individuals to the figures of authority who give them security during times of disorder. Through comparative examination of modern authoritarian movements, the research uncovers how narrative effect of protection, belonging, and fear serves to support the legitimation of coercive power. And yet the same emotional frameworks responsible for producing obedience create dissonance, depletion, and prospects for affective breakage. The article's conclusion is that envisioning authoritarianism as an emotional architecture undoes a remaking of political agency not as rational preference-exercising, but as embodied and profoundly visceral reaction to insecurity and desire in late modern times. The approach prioritizes the ethical imperative of developing emotional literacy and resilience as democratic counterpowers.

Keywords

Authoritarianism, Political Psychology, Affect Theory, Anxiety, Attachment, Obedience, Emotional Governance, Political Subjectivity, Late Modernity, Democratic Resilience.

Article
History

Received:
12.06.2025

Accepted:
30.06.2025

Published:
10.07.2025

1. Introduction

A. Contextual Background

Late modern societies are defined by escalating social change: globalization, economic restructuring, technologically driven change, and disintegration of secure social anchors. These are accompanied not only by new possibilities but also by pervasive uncertainty disturbing occupational courses, communal bonds, and conventional identity and belonging understandings. Politics, in such a context, is a site where the control of uncertainty is as important as policy. Authoritarian leaders and movements have re-emerged in so many other institutional arenas not so much because elites have made conscious strategic decisions that they have been able to do so, but because they address and tap into people and create an affective space.

Political discourse providing certainty, moral simplification, and refuge from felt danger resonates because it addresses known, rather than merely quantifiable, vulnerabilities. Media ecologies that invoke sensationalism and binarity narratives enhance emotional salience, economic uncertainty and cultural displacement promise hopes of order as affectively desirable, and to know this context is to think through the social and the psychic as interknitting: macro-level change results in attachment needs and concerns, and those affective situations in turn structure responsiveness to authoritarian frames. This cultural setting positions the present study: rather than framing contemporary authoritarianism in institutional breakdown or ideological retreat, it has to be appreciated as arising from and responding to the emotional register of late modernity.

B. Problem Statement

Even after highly publicized consolidations of official democratic institutions and more general education and material prosperity in much of the globe, authoritarian forces persist and even expand beyond explanation by traditional institutional or economic theories. The enigma is that rational-choice and structural explanations all too often fail to investigate how emotions operate as causes, rather than as effects, in political systems. Fear, insecurity, and the sense of order are not epiphenomenal; they reverse preferences, move risk perceptions, and build moral economies that prefer obedience and conformity to deliberation and dissent. Political movements and forces ride on these affective emotions by offering protection narratives, purity, or restoration that convert diffuse anxiety into concrete political meaning. In addition, affect operates through interpersonal and symbolic media family metaphors, relations between leaders and followers, ritualized display that cannot be reduced to material incentives. The issue at the centre of discussion here, then, is explanatory and conceptual: how is scholarship to explain authoritarian formations' tenacity and popularity if their very survival seems incompatible with advance in formal socioeconomic indicators? The thesis is that to resolve this problem one must make affective dynamics specifically, anxiety and attachment constitutive process of political compliance.

C. Research Purpose

The purpose of the research is to describe the underlying affective processes of modern authoritarian compliance by close analytical focus on two interconnected affective processes: anxiety and attachment. Initially, it tries to trace the way that structural circumstances and mediated milieus engender mass and individual anxiety that makes authoritarian promises meaningful and attractive. Secondly, it examines the way that attachment processes psychological dependency, identification, and caregiving projection patterns are extended onto political leaders and institutions, thereby guaranteeing conformism.

It is multi-disciplinary: bringing together political-psychological theory, affect-theoretical understanding, and sociological accounts of emotion; linking conceptual analysis to explanatory comparative vignettes and media-discursive analyses illustrating mechanisms in operation. The study aims to map specific channels (rhetorical frames, ritualized performances of authority, design decisions for institutions) through which affect is created, amplified, and institutionalized. Lastly, the wish is not merely descriptivist: through clearly outlining such mechanisms, the paper also aims to make room for normative and practical possibilities of democratic resilience that are responsive to citizens' emotional needs rather than dismissing them as irrational.

D. Theoretical Importance

This political psychology-international relations-affect theory-sociology of emotions interdisciplinarity is a fertile theoretical lexicon through which to rethink authoritarianism. Political psychology abstracts micro-level perception models, threat appraisal, and motivated reasoning to explain why citizens want forceful leaders in situations of perceived threat. Affect theory abstracts even further by emphasizing collective moods, circulatory affect, and performative feeling production organizing public life beyond single beliefs. Sociology of emotions, conversely, offers a way of knowing how institutional practice, cultural scripts, and organizational routines socialize emotional responses and make certain affective dispositions normative.

Combining these traditions offers a multi-scalar explanation one linking neurocognitive dispositions and family-based attachment styles to mass-mediated affective topographies and institutional imperatives. At the theoretical level, convergence eludes reason-and-emotion dualist tropes and produces a field in which emotions are structural assets to be contained, displaced, and redirected. It also renders democratic rebirth conditional: interventions must address affective infrastructures education, communicative routines, civic ritual so that they can have success.

E. Structure of the Paper

The paper is divided into seven sections. Having set the scene with this introduction, Section II sets out conceptual context, identifying what an "emotional architecture" is and tracing the key contributions of political psychology, affect theory, and sociology of emotions on which the argument relies. Section III investigates anxiety as political capital: how late modern transformation generates existential and practical insecurity, and political leaders translate these anxieties into authoritarianism support. Section IV is about attachment and explains

psychological accounts of dependency and caretaker projection, and it shows how such processes facilitate affective identification with leadership and institutions. Section V provides comparative case studies and media-discursive analysis to make theoretical mechanisms visible in new forms of political domination. Section VI breaks into the emotional cost of compliance and continues with how affect reconfigurations solidarity, hope, care can serve as an axis for enabling resistance and democratic recuperation. The final section wraps up the findings, reflects on theoretical and policy implications, and proposes directions for future research committed to developing emotional literacy and institutional environments that counter authoritarian appeals.

2. Conceptual Framework: Emotion and Power

A. Emotional Architecture

By "emotional architecture," I do not mean a loose conglomeration of public sentiment or the intermittent burst of indignation; but a consolidated, structured set of practices, stories, material infrastructures, and bodily habits that create, direct, and replicate affect in ways that shape political life. There is an emotional architecture that has elements narrative forms through which some threats become understandable, rites that form inclusion and exclusion, institutional routines that reproduce some emotional expressions, and infrastructural technologies (ranging from mass media to urban plan) that enhance or inhibit feeling. These elements do not exist alongside laws, markets, and formal institutions: they lend scaffolding to articulating who needs to be looked after, who constitutes a threat, and what types of responses are owed. From this point of view emotions become structural in the sense that they structure attention, confer moral value, and sediment patterns of deference and dissent. Emotional structures operate via repetition and normalization: rehearsals of fear or pride that are repeated in rehearsal spaces with eventual recurrence in public space produce a horizon of plausibility under which authoritarian solutions not only seem to make sense but become unavoidable. They work along various scales the domestic and school interpersonal life that socializes attachment and obedience; the politic ritualized spectacle that fetishizes protective leadership; and the technological matrices that mediate what works as feeling. To read emotion as architecture is to pay attention to channels, affordances, and rhythms at least as much as discrete attitudes, since it is the arrangement of these things that generates stable affective dispositions subject to political obedience.

B. Affect and Authority

Classical and contemporary theorists alike are united on the thesis that authority is not a chain of commands enforced by coercion, but a relation maintained through affective investments. Adorno's studies of the authoritarian personality and culture industry indicate the ways in which mass-mediation uniformity and socializing forces order character types that tend toward submission, scapegoating, and hierarchical ranking. The politics of affect in Adorno are the ways in which social fears and resentments are mobilizing into authoritarian alliances instead of being dispersed under democratic pluralism. Fromm fills out this in the context of flight logic in the mind: the liberty burden of life its uncertainty, its requirement for active self-making can lead humans to submit as an effective strategy of relief. Fromm's authoritarian character theory explains how need and desire for safety can lead to willing abdication of responsibility to an authority. Sara Ahmed refines these observations and expands them into the language of affect theory by demonstrating how emotions are economies that operate on the basis of signs, bodies, and objects: shame, fear, and hostility attach certain bodies with threat while making others legible as in need of love and protection. Ahmed's work illustrates how affect performs political work by disciplining bodies and objects into collective directions who is included and not included, and whose futures can be read. These authors collectively indicate that power is sustained more by occulted argument than manifest argument through certain forms of affective practice that produce dependency, moralism, and a sense of protection of some kind.

C. The Affective Turn

The new "affective turn" among social theory and political science redirects analytic focus from isolated beliefs and rational consideration to the pre-reflective flows of mood, tone, and bodily affect that organize political possibility. In contrast to treating emotion as an epiphenomenon to be explained away by ideology or interest, newer strands of research examine how atmospheres, viral sentiment, and ritualized performative affects fashion publics and policy. Methodologically this has involved more use of ethnography, sensory research, media and discourse studies, and cross-disciplinary discussion with psychology and neuroscience in the efforts to trace how feeling is generated and circulated. Conceptually the turn focuses on processes contagion, habituation, affective framing

demonstrating how platforms, ceremonial politics, and bureaucratic habituations habituate populations to specific moods (fear, pride, humiliation) that incline them to openness or closure. Normatively, the affect turn is double-edged: it demonstrates that citizens' emotional demands need to be met in democratic practice such that they are not excluded as irrational, but it raises challenging issues about the morality of influencing publics' emotions. And if moods are something that can be designed, then democratic renewal requires not just argument and institutional change but also the construction of emotional literacies, shared rituals of repair, and infrastructural designs that amplify capacities for collective care and resilience. In brief, the affective turn encourages us to conceive of political power as inseparable from the moods and attachments through and in which humans live and give meaning to their world.

3. Anxiousness and Ordering Desire

A. Societal Insecurity: Economic precarity, digital surveillance, and existential uncertainty in late modernity

Late modern existence is defined by a sequence of structural variations which collectively generate diffuse, low-grade insecurity: labour markets more flexible and riskier, housing and retirement futures uncertain for great parts of the population, and accelerated technological change constantly re-arranges daily rhythms and skills. These material instabilities are compounded by intangible but equally powerful sources of unease climate anxieties, the disintegration of once-stable civic institutions, and the sense that familiar narrative support structures for meaning and identity are no longer tenable in relation to experience. Concurrently, heightened digital monitoring and platform intermediation reshape exposure and social judgment, creating the perception that private spaces are limited and reputations may be threatened in an instant; this produces increased alertness and fragile social trust. Taken collectively, these states do not produce a single effect but a stable affective environment in which anticipatory anxiety is a normal way of being: people live their lives revolving around risk calculation, live for fleeting stability and not long-term projects, and seek social arrangements that provide predictability. Most importantly, such insecurity is not simply a pathology of the self; it is institutionally made and socially disseminated, and hence legible and exploitable in political cultures. The hum of doubt thus provides the psychic terrain on which desires for order and surety can take hold.

B. Anxiety as Political Resource: How fear and uncertainty are mobilized to legitimize authoritarian power

Anxiety is politicized when it is named, defined, and mobilized when political agents appropriate inchoate fear and translate it into an overt list of threats that only they can eliminate. It typically takes the shape of threat construction: social issues are made into personalized and moralized issues, dangers are contained within specific enemies or agents of dislocation, and the ability of current institutions to deal with them is declared to the public to be insufficient. Fear appeals and securitizing narratives then justify exceptional measures, the concentration of power, and the derogation of civil liberties in the interest of necessity. Politicians and movements exchange rhetorically for mental shortcuts: threatened, citizens want tidy hierarchies, authoritative action, and symbolic evidence of mastery commodities readily delivered by authoritarian forms. Political value is also dependent on feedback mechanisms: crisis interventions pursued to re-establish equilibrium have the effect of producing fresh grievance or institutional obscurity, which enhance sense perception of exposure and justify additional power concentration. Media ecologies and social media push the cycle by speeding up sensational charges and rewarding affective messages, such that fear not only mobilizes electorates but becomes structural to policy-making. Generally, then, anxiety is not merely an occurrence sentiment but a resource mobilizable, manufacturable, and politically productive of obedience.

C. Cultural Narratives of Protection: The affective discourse of safety and national citizenship

Protective cultural stories operate at the intersection of rhetoric, ritual, and symbolic imagination; they redescribe politics as a moral economy of care in which the key political question is who will protect us and who will be barred from attempting it. These narratives most often mobilize family metaphors positioning the leader as parent or guardian and the polity as family whose honour is to be protected which translate political duty into affective devotion and normalize subservience as care. Nostalgic discourses of restoration of lost certainties and appeal to collective purity or moral renewal also restrict emotional ties of citizen to power through the offering of restitution of status and dignity. Ceremonies of public space, media spectacle, and pedagogic scripts all assist in scripting safety: flags, memorials, and choreographed displays of force aid the production of a sensory world where security is made

visible and emotionally intelligible. Characteristically, the rhetoric of protection is twofold: it confers security and home to the like-minded who share its need, yet in doing so, it draws boundaries between insiders and outsiders and rationalizes exclusionary acts border militarization, policing augmentation, or cultural purification under cover of care. Therefore, protection narratives naturalize authoritarian responses to insecurity by guaranteeing recognition of abstract insecurity in the vocabulary of moral duties to obey, protect, and preserve a demarcated sense of community.

4. Attachment and Obedience

A. Psychological Foundations: Attachment Theory and Political Behaviour

Attachment theory, initially developed to explain infant-caregiver relationships, is a helpful heuristic for explaining how patterns of interpersonal relating become blueprints for politics. John Bowlby's insight that early life creates "internal working models" enduring expectations about whether others will be available, predictable, and reliable means that people come into social worlds with somatic expectations about safety and dependency. Mary Ainsworth's secure, anxious-ambivalent, and avoidant types and Mary Main's follow-up disorganized attachment studies map the variation in affective tone for these patterns: secure attachments should produce confidence and stress flexibility; anxious attachments increase threat sensitivity and hunger for reassurance; avoidant attachments enhance emotional independence and fear of intimacy. Carried over into the political domain, such orientations shape the ways citizens measure threats, the guardians they believe in, and the type of authority they will accept. Political behaviour research increasingly approaches conceptualizing attachment as not a bounded clinical construct but as a dispositional template: the same dispositions that incline a child toward a caring caregiver will incline an adult toward a charismatic leader who provides order, or toward separation from common life when institutions are seen as untrustworthy. In short, attachment structures mediate between subjective perceptions of care and public sentiment regarding power.

B. Developmental Origins of Political Attachment

Home, school, faith communities, and neighbourhood networks are the initial politico-psychological labs. As mundane practices as conversation during dinner, discipline strategies, and parental sensitivity create voice, obedience, and moral entitlement expectations. Children parented reliably and contingently acquire an ethical grammar of mutual respect and ambiguity; children parented in a history of neglect, unpredictability, or control learn safety is only by submission or hypercompliant compliance. Mass social dislocations forced displacement, communal violence, protracted economic insecurity can cut short developmental pathways, leaving cohorts whose default mode is security, not agency. Maybe most of all, developmental origins are not fixed determinacies but likelihoods in interaction with later socialization: civic institutions, peer culture, and media ecologies can reinforce, rework, or reverse early attachment styles. Civic attachment needs to be interpreted in consequence from a life-course perspective marking off the inscription, magnification, or unravelling of affective lessons from infancy in adult political terrain.

C. Attachment Styles and Political Behaviour

Attachment orientations shape typical reactions to political stimulation. They are more tolerant of dissent, more prone to trust plural institutions, and more reflective brokering of policy trade-offs: they possess the inner sense of security to endure uncertainty short of panicking or relapsing into authoritarianism. In contrast, anxious types are more threat-sensitive and long for order and tidy hierarchies; on this foundation, authoritarian promises are affectively engaging insofar as they offer immediate reassurance and bounded belonging. Avoidant attachments produce a recognisable political character: ambivalence toward dependence can lead to distrust of paternalistic leaders, but enthusiasm for self-sufficiency can also lead to political indifference or pragmatic adjustment under conditions of pressure for survival. Observe that these tendencies are more probability than requirement: political communications of care, dignity, and competence chime differently because they are sounding from against existing attachment templates. The explanatory power of attachment comes from mapping micro-level affective orientation onto meso-level political choices whom to trust as a leader, which policies are tolerated, and what forms of protest or obedience are tolerated.

D. Authority as Caregiver: Projection, Dependence, and the Internalization of Obedience

One of the most significant ways in which attachment makes politics is the projection of caregiver identities onto political leaders. These leaders activate caregiving scripts offering paternal metaphors, being explicitly solicitous of citizens' needs, or taking tutelary concern that promote the transference of dependency that originally aimed at intimate caregivers. This psycho-emotional transference is not symbolic or even necessarily rhetorical: it reconstructs moral economies in which obedience is a measure of relational security. When leadership is experienced as dependable provider and safeguard, individuals are able to internalize obedience as regulative habit; deferral is interpreted as exchange surrender of agency for guaranteed nurturance. Psychoanalytic theory through idealization and splitting explains how catastrophic policy breakdowns are re-cast into effect-congruent narratives: the leader is either omni-nurturing or, threatened, object of displaced resentment. This building of relationship also accounts for the way in which punitive or paternalistic rule could be simultaneously present alongside popular affection the logic of feeling protected trumps reason because the ruler is fulfilling a role that addresses deep-seated emotional requirements.

(a) Projection and Transfer of Trust

Transfer of trust to leaders is an active process of sense-making. Citizens apply selectively early attachment-based expectations to public authorities when the latter issue familiar cues: a comforting voice in times of trouble when in distress, parental cadence of government in tone of speech, or concrete displays of concern like welfare policies and relief in case of disaster. This spillover happens when institutions mimic household economies patronage networks, clientelist transfers, and personalized rule all ring a familiar sound to household dynamics, thus making polity-level transactions intimate-like relations. The epistemic economy of projection is facilitated: rather than evaluating impersonal bureaucracies, citizens evaluate interpersonal trustworthiness and create more legible yet more susceptible to manipulative performances of attachment heuristics.

(b) Institutional Care and Paternalism

Aside from single leaders, institutions themselves can serve as spaces of caregiving logics that foster compliance. Paternalist welfare regimes wherein benefits hinge on deference or norm conformity socialize recipients to norms of hierarchies; security apparatuses that privilege protectional framed accounts internalize the assumption that safety is delegated to a protective centre. These institutional frameworks mirror habituated dependence: the more institutions create a linear life of merit for deference, the more citizens accept obedience as a normalized route to material and existential security. Institutional care is actually both disciplining and emancipatory robust social protections can enable civic agency, but when paired with paternalistic surveillance, they can also solidify asymmetrical power relations that value compliance over democratic action.

E. Ritual, Performance, and the Lexical Economies of Care

Political caregiving is performed in ritual and speech acts doing intimacy at scale. Televised family-type oratory, ceremonial pilgrimages, ritualized distribution ceremonies, and scripted enactments of vulnerability are all performative strategies that generate feeling proximity between leaders and publics. Discourse is at centre: family, fatherland, and guardianship metaphors animate political rhetoric, transforming contractual obligations into moral ones. These performative registers do not just transmit policy; they create affective states, such that obedience is a voluntary manifestation of gratitude and belonging, rather than one coerced into submission.

F. Affective Identification: Leader, Nation, Self Blur

Affective identification describes how individual identity is inescapably interwoven with collective or leader-based identities. This convergence is beyond cognitive congruence; it is an affective conflation wherein the destiny of the state or leader is perceived as self-relevant and existentially resonant. People employ repetitive ritual, symbolic sacralization, and morality-infused narrative to make political duties questions of personal honour and moral identity. This erasure of political and personal boundaries makes strong loyalties that can survive counter-evidence: criticism of the leader is felt as personal betrayal, opposition as moral failure. The political citizen thus becomes a vector of collective affect, fighting not policies in themselves, but the emotional integrity of imagined kin.

G. Symbolic Merging and Narrative Embodiment

Symbolic membership occurs when narratives cause something to become a leader or nation the lived space of common goodness. State myths, ritual memory, and cultural scripts build a sense of collective remembrance that becomes internalized; people believe personal integrity is tied to health of the polity. Leaders who manage to inhabit these stories are experienced as extensions of the self-protectors whose health is infused with personal flourishing. Narrative embodiment turns fidelity into a moral tic since the narrative that lends meaning to one's life has invested in the leader's figure.

H. Moralization and Sacralization of Leadership

Political power is no longer within the domain of practical calculation but moves into the sphere of moral belief when leadership is sacralised. Ritual prohibitions against criticism, praise liturgies, and quasi-religious apotheoses of leaders turn politics into an ethic of devotion. Moralization limits the scope of challenge: policy conflicts are constituted as heresy and dissent is delegitimated on affective, as opposed to rational or other, grounds. The process of sacralization reinforces obedience because it locates compliance not only as good but morally required for the preservation of a transcendent social order.

I. Feedback Loops: Reinforcement and Escalation of Obedience

Attachment-induced obedience is sustained by feedback loops where compliance is socially reinforced and transgression is emotionally punished. Public demonstrations of loyalty can be rewarded with material reward, social acceptance, or affective belonging, and opposition can be rewarded with ostracism, insecurity, or affective estrangement. These contingencies have a tendency to consolidate authoritarian ties: obedience is instrumentally expedient and affectively desirable. With time, the circuit seeks to make itself durable as institutions grow to reward loyalists and punish challengers, making political compliance increasingly indistinguishable from affective survival strategy.

J. Mediating Mechanisms: Media, Habits de la Vie, and Rituals Sociaux

Media ecologies and habits de la vie mediate the attachment representation as political obedience. Affectively charged content priority algorithms, social network policing for peer conformity, and organizational cultures that script political signalling as rewards are all daily affective congruence mechanisms. Daily practices displaying symbols, visiting commemorations, chanting in the bazaar habituate emotional response cumulatively and make political affiliation familiar and inescapable. It is that they are so quotidian that they are so powerful: they operate below the threshold of explicit calculation, creating habits of compliance and belonging through repetition rather than by coercion in its most obvious forms.

K. Limits, Ambivalences, and Possibilities for Rupture

Obedience is not brought about by attachment in a determinist manner, but to tendencies which can be reinforced, subverted, or diverted. Secure attachments and robust civic institutions can provide a "secure base" in which citizens are able to deflect authoritarian advances, reinforced by affective resources for critical activism. Ambivalence loving a leader but having moral aversion at what they do can be sufficient to cause cognitive dissonance that leaves room to think and to change. In addition, the same abilities that generate obedience can also be sites of breakdown: moments of violated trust, bare hypocrisy, or habitual moral violence can unleash affective realignment and political insurgency or revolt. Bringing these ambivalences into focus is significant both analytically and politically: interventions that build relational trust, cultivate intersubjective sympathy, and secure institutional accountability can reshape attachment dynamics from a site of submission into sites of democratic strength.

Table 1: Limits, Ambivalences, and Possibilities for Rupture in Attachment-Based Obedience

| Analytical Dimension | Key Idea | Political / Ethical Implication |
|-------------------------------|--|---|
| Non-Determinism of Attachment | Attachment does not mechanically produce obedience | Obedience can be resisted or redirected |
| Secure Attachment | Strong civic bonds and institutions | Enables critical thinking and democratic resilience |
| Ambivalence | Coexistence of loyalty and moral discomfort | Creates space for doubt and political change |

| | | |
|-------------------------|---|--|
| Cognitive Dissonance | Tension between belief and ethical judgment | Potential trigger for disengagement from authority |
| Breakdown of Trust | Hypocrisy, betrayal, moral violence | Can catalyze affective realignment or revolt |
| Democratic Intervention | Trust-building and accountability | Transforms attachment from submission to participation |

Interpretive note: Attachment operates as a double-edged affective structure—capable of sustaining authoritarian obedience, yet equally capable of enabling rupture, resistance, and democratic renewal.

5. Case Illustrations

A. Comparative Glances: Types of Authoritarian Populism

Comparative observation also reveals that contemporary authoritarian populisms come in institutional and cultural forms but with the same affective logics: in some, they centralize power by hijacking the law and constitution, in others by individuating charisma and staging lawlessness, and in others by combining religious identity with state coercion. In Central Europe, for example, like Hungary's Fidesz and Poland's Law and Justice parties, an institution-restructuring approach stacking judiciaries upon stacks of each other, remaking the control of media, and rebuilding the political centre so that democratic competition is structurally disadvantaged; these are all examples of "illiberal" rule maintaining discourses of national renewal and moral protection. And in Asia we have a plural series of permutations: on one hand, leaders who couple majoritarian nationalism with managerial authoritarianism (as can be seen in some currents of Indian politics), and on the other, leaders who hawk personal machismo and extrajudicial assurances of order (like Rodrigo Duterte's Philippines), mobilizing every time on threats of crime, corruption, or cultural displacement to legitimate exceptional action. In the Americas, populist-authoritarian rhetoric has typically been based on charismatic personalism and politics of grievance individuals who present themselves as redemptive outsiders or caudillos, proposing quick solutions to complex problems and resting in part on spectacle and performance in generating loyalty. Across these lands the affective universality is the condensation of diffuse insecurity into personal relationships of dependence and moral obligation to a party or leader that provides defence; the institutional arrangements, though, vary as between different historical inheritances, party organization, and constitutional choice.

B. Europe: Institutional Capture and the Emotional Framing of Renewal

In all parts of Europe affective architecture of authoritarian consolidation is impossible to delink from legal and bureaucratic restructuring: while reconfiguring courts, public media, and administrative surveillance, ruling parties consolidate dissent at a higher cost and rhetorically redefine such activities as a necessary renovation to a stagnant or corrupt order. This institutional borrowing is joined by powerful emotion frames nostalgia for fantasy past, moral indignation against suspected elites, and dreams of renewed dignity that convert legalistic reform into a redemption narrative. The iterability of these frames across state-mediated media and ceremonial politics embeds the new political grammar in which obedience is felt as restoration and not surrender and in which civic protest is refigured as disloyalty or treason against the nation

C. Asia: Majoritarianism, Performance, and Civilizational Appeals

Asia's careers show how authoritarian affect is paired with civilizational or majoritarian appeals that make protection a matter of cultural survival. Leaders who present a civilizational horizon of reference ruling in defence of an immemorial way of being convert oppositions into existential threats and mobilize adherents on the basis of a shared sense of threatened being. Simultaneously, performative hardness dramatized displays of law-and-order, rough rhetorical denunciations of opponents, and exhibitioner punishments translate fear into faith in a leader's capacity to deliver, at least at the expense of liberal standards. These tactics have special power in periods in which rapid-paced social change and unbalanced development have disrupted conventional markers of status and membership, making emotionally charged appeals to cultural restoration more plausible.

D. The Americas: Charisma, Grievance, and Digital Mobilization

The emotional foundations of authoritarian-populist leadership in the Americas are generally founded on the presence of charismatic leaders who channel resentment against elites and institutions into personalized loyalty.

Political communication in these conditions intensifies grievance in savage polarities “us vs. them,” rotten insiders vs. real people and then offers a demagogic leader who promises to function beyond crippling institutions. Social media and mass protests are affecting motors: they allow leaders to perform scandal, demonstrate devotion, and convert critics into public villains, thereby transmogrifying performative bravado into resistant political coalition. This trend fosters robust attachments that can survive even when policy outcomes are not certain, as a sense of belonging is reinforced and transgression punished by an emotional economy.

E. Cross-Regional Patterns and Institutional Variation

Whether or not the local colour is different, repetition occurs in some processes: existential threats fabricated, political power affectively personified, and emotion institutionalized through law and administrative restructuring. To what extent affective politics underlies long-term authoritarian rule or short-term populist ascendancy is a function of intervening factors such as constitutional safeguards, density of civil society, heterogeneity of media environments, and organizational strength of the opposition. Where institutional boundaries are weak and no media pluralism exists, affective messages ride an easy path to long-term dominance; where civic infrastructures remain robust, emotional mobilization can mobilize protest, counter-narratives, and restorative political cycles. This comparative analysis highlights that emotions are required but insufficient for authoritarian consolidation their political efficacy depends on the extent of their overlap with institutional and organizational organization.

F. Media and Emotion: Producing Affective Resonance

(a) Spectacle and Political Theatre

Political spectacle mass protest, scripted ritual, crisis melodrama is staged emotion it generates public sensory worlds in which feelings are lived in preference to being told. Spectacle condenses complexity into rich sensory data (chants, signs, choreographed gestures) that makes membership legible and fright or shame visible; spectacle also allows leaders to enact care, resolution, or threat in ways immune to deliberative evaluation. Since spectacle is a bodily experience, it can transfer fleeting pleasures to the brittleness of commitments, especially when cycled through repetition in rituals to which audiences grow accustomed to particular emotional scripts.

(b) Slogans and Affective Shorthand Slogans abbreviate ideological packages into affective shorthand

A three- or four-word slogan can recall nostalgia, moral indignation, or existential threat and thus direct collective attention onto a condensed emotional schema. By incorporating policy into moral call to action security, purity, revival slogans induce instantaneous, gut responses that override discussion. Their potency is located in repetition and overexposure in spaces of media where they are made into mnemonic markers of duty and identity; interiorized, they inform the way citizens interpret subsequent action through the affective lens the slogan creates.

(c) Algorithmic Amplification and Digital Echo Chambers Digital media facilitate emotion in typical ways

Algorithms reinforce repeat content that elicits interaction, and affective content outrage, fear, moral disgusts far more likely to receive much more interaction than careful examination. This intrinsic bias produces spaces where content that reinforces an individual's views is amplified and quick circles of emotional contagion are facilitated, making viral moral panics and extended polarity possible. Although the degree to which insulated "echo chambers" are common is debated, evidence indicates platform architecture and social network settings continue to facilitate gated choice communities, selective exposure, and affective frame polarization that drive users to polarized emotions. Such processes accelerate the translation of private concern into public political demand and enable leaders to rally affective coalitions rapidly and efficiently.

G. Micro-Mechanisms

Emotional Contagion and Social Validation At the micro level, routine social actions reposting, endorsing comment, appearing in person at a rally form feedback loops whereby emotional expression is socially validated and thus reinforced. Emotional contagion from networks accumulates individual affective states into collective moods; social validation (likes, retweets, applause) stamps normalcy on some emotions and deviance on others. These micro mechanisms build over time and create meso-level affective climates that constitute political behaviour and institutional expectation, making emotion a lived reality and an organizational fact.

H. Platform Governance and the Ethics of Emotional Engineering

Because platform design choices always decide what kinds of content spreads, moderation patterns, recommendation algorithms, and monetization architecture are all sides of the political and ethical dimensions of the engineering of affect: they decide whether publics are steered toward fear or deliberative discussion. This is normative in the sense that it is raising questions of responsibility and regulation: responsible for affective harms undermining democratic discourse, and how is policy to be constructed to protect free speech values yet shelter against manipulative emotional manipulation? These are questions that societies need to be grappling with if they wish to de-activate the political efficacy of mobilization through fear.

6. The Emotional Costs of Obedience

A. Emotional Exhaustion

(a) Collective Fatigue, Moral Dissonance, and Depersonalization

The psychic price of living under authoritarian regimes is greater than political repression it is a chronic psychic fatigue which pervades the social body. Systematic exposure to fear speech, surveillance, and theorized allegiance generates a state of chronic emotional hypervigilance. Individuals are required to constantly monitor not just what they utter but also how they feel, fostering a disjunction between internal affect and public display. This state of emotional censorship generates moral dissonance a bifurcated conscience in which individuals go through the motions externally while seething with doubt or indignation internally. Ultimately, this kind of dissonance generates collective depersonalization: the loss of authentic emotional reaction and the anaesthesia of empathy. Authoritarian obedience thus requires a psychic economy of repression; people internalize a need for control until it is self-regulation. This resulting exhaustion is not merely psychological but moral tiredness brought on by habitual betrayal of one's ethical senses in the cause of survival or social adjustment. Thus, obedience as emotional labour: a tired performance of commitment to stay in an atmosphere of fear.

B. Resistance and Affective Transformation

Hope, Care, and Solidarity Even in authoritarian regimes, though, the field of emotions is not fully colonized. Resistance begins as affective transformation re-turning of feeling from fear to hope, from loneliness to fraternity. Cares, tendering, and reciprocally shared empathies are counter-political forces because they resist the regime's imposition of sameness of emotions. Mutual aid actions, hidden cultural actions, or communitarian grief are where counter-grammars of feeling are acquired. These seemingly small gestures aggregate into what Raymond Williams could call a structure of feeling pre-political reservoir of shared feeling which, in turn, solidifies into outright resistance. Hope, in this context, is neither hopelessly optimistic but is instead a tactical feeling: a politicized act of refusal to let despair define the terms of political possibility. It becomes an affective space for courage, where individuals can imagine and achieve futures beyond compliance.

C. The Emotional Rebirth of the Political Self

Resistance, in short, is less a matter of political consciousness than of emotional rebirth. Retrieving one's feelings from the propaganda machine and fear is a radical political rebirth. When individuals begin to feel differently when outrage supplants indifference, sympathy for suspicion they perceive differently. The affective remembering generated through acts of resistance is the remaking of the political self. It restores the virtues of sympathy, conversation, and shared responsibility virtues that are continually unmade through authoritarianism. Thus, the cost of compliance is also emotionally charged with the seeds of reward: precisely the same exhaustion that marks submissiveness can ultimately be transformed into the restlessness that can stimulate change.

7. Conclusion

A. Synthesis of Findings

Emotional Architecture as Scaffolding and Achilles' Heel of Authoritarianism The discussion above has shown that emotion is not a performative phenomenon of politics but an active organisational construct shaping the power dynamics and compliance. Authoritarianism, in its turn, is not based on coercion and ideology alone but relies on an unawed emotional architecture built using fear, attachment, and nostalgia for order. Anxiety produces compliance, attachment produces loyalty, and spectacle compresses identification into something concrete but all these very same

very affects also carry seeds of inherent vulnerabilities. Ironically, emotional regimes can never be permanent because emotions are dynamic, relational, and reversible. Fear, if habituated, turns to resentment; attachment, if broken, turns to disillusionment. Thus, the effect infrastructure of authoritarian domination itself carries its flaw: the inevitable possibility of affect depletion and ultimate recombination of moral sentiment. Here is where the crisis of feeling typically comes prior to the breakdown of authoritarianism when citizens no longer feel those sentiments they have learned to simulate.

B. Future Directions

Towards an Affective Ethics of Democratic Renewal If authoritarianism is sustained by the exploitation of feeling, then democracy needs to be renewed by the cultivation of affective ethics. Future policy and research need to consider that democratic resilience is not only a matter of institutional design but also one of emotional education. Civil society requires emotional literacy the capacity to distinguish when fear is being engineered, when sympathy is being suppressed, and when belonging is being weaponized. Political pedagogy needs to appeal, therefore, not merely to reason, but to the ethical education of feeling: teaching citizens to value vulnerability, diversity, and empathy as political virtues. Emotional ethics cannot be reduced to sloppy sentimentalism; it is a pragmatic foundation for democratic resilience. Only when societies can feel democratically so that they can maintain sympathy in times of conflict and hope in times of uncertainty can they withstand the ongoing temptations of authoritarian ease.

C. Reclaiming the Emotional Commons

The task of modern societies is to reclaim the emotional commons the shared affective spaces that make possible trust, communication, and collective imagination. This reclamation will take institutional courage and cultural imagination: artists, educators, journalists, and social movement activists will need to collaborate to regain the affective bases of democratic life. To achieve that, they will need to struggle with the long-term histories of fear that persist even when political regimes fall, and make emotional memory a source of solidarity rather than conflict. The price of obedience in feeling, once understood, can then be the ethical base upon which renewed democratic feeling is built.

8. References

- [1] Osborne, D., Costello, T. H., Duckitt, J., & Sibley, C. G. (2023). The psychological causes and societal consequences of authoritarianism. *Nature Reviews Psychology*, 2(4), 220–232. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s44159-023-00161-4>
- [2] Roccato, M., & Russo, S. (2017). Right-wing authoritarianism, societal threat to safety, and psychological distress. *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 47(5), 600–610. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ejsp.2236>
- [3] Veit, S., Hirsch, M., Giebler, H., Gründl, J., & Schürmann, B. (2024). Submission or Rebellion? Disentangling the relationships of anxiety, attitudes toward authorities, and right-wing populist party support. *Political Behavior*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00027642241240717>
- [4] Stempel, K. E. (2025). A state of the art on emotions in the context of public policymaking. *Statistics, Politics and Policy*, 16(2). <https://doi.org/10.1515/spp-2025-0021>
- [5] Demertzis, N. (Ed.). (2013). *Emotions in Politics: The Affect Dimension in Political Tension*. Palgrave Studies in Political Psychology. Palgrave Macmillan.
- [6] Gormley, B., & Lopez, F. G. (2010). Authoritarian and homophobic attitudes: Gender and adult attachment style differences. *Journal of Homosexuality*, 57(4), 525–538. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00918361003608715>
- [7] Gaziano, C. (2017). Adult attachment style and political ideology. *SAGE Open*, 7(3). <https://doi.org/10.1177/2158244017724493>
- [8] Parent, J., Nix, R. L., Shelton, T. L., Hinojosa, C., & Bacchini, D. (2020). Parenting, temperament, and attachment security as antecedents of political orientation: Longitudinal evidence from early childhood to age 26. *Developmental Psychology*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1037/dev0001006>
- [9] Onraet, E., & Van Hiel, A. (2014). Are right-wing adherents mentally troubled? Recent insights on the relationship of right-wing attitudes with threat and psychological ill-being. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 23(1), 27–32. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0963721413514249>
- [10] Roccato, M., Russo, S., & others. (2017). Right-wing authoritarianism, societal threat to safety, and psychological distress. *European Journal of Social Psychology*.

- [11] Falkenberg, M., Zollo, F., Quattrociochi, J., Pfeffer, J., & Baronchelli, A. (2023). Affective and interactional polarization align across countries. Preprint. <https://arxiv.org/abs/2311.18535>
- [12] Ellefsen, R., & Sandberg, S. (2022). Black Lives Matter: The role of emotions in political engagement. *Sociology*, 56(1), 60-78. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00380385221081385>
- [13] Van Hiel, A., Onraet, E., & others (2014). See [9].
- [14] Study on authoritarian attitudes and autonomic reactivity: Authoritarian attitudes are associated with higher autonomic reactivity to stress and lower recovery. (Authors: ...) *Psychophysiology*, Year. (You will need to add full author list once you access the article.)
- [15] The existential function of right-wing authoritarianism. *Journal of Personality*. Year, Volume (Issue), Pages. (Author: ...)
- [16] [16] Clarifying the structure and nature of left-wing authoritarianism. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, etc. (Authors: ...) (2022).
- [17] "Purity, politics, and polarization: Political ideology moderates' threat-induced shifts in moral purity beliefs." *British Journal of Social Psychology*, 2023. bpspsychub.onlinelibrary.wiley.com
- [18] Duschinsky, R., Greco, M., & Solomon, J. (2015). The Politics of Attachment: Lines of Flight with Bowlby, Deleuze and Guattari. *Theory, Culture & Society*, 32(7-8), 173-195. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276415605577>