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Malevolent vs. benevolent dispositions and conservative political ideology in the Trump era

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ABSTRACT

Conservative political ideology is associated with social dominance orientation (SDO), right-wing authoritarianism (RWA), psychopathic propensities (PPs), and other malevolent dispositions, and reduced empathy. We examined the links between SDO, RWA, PPs and political ideology, and whether those who view Trump favorably reported higher PPs (or malevolent traits) and reduced empathy or benevolent dispositions. Two U.S. community samples were used; Sample 1 was white vs. minority status men ($N = 1000$, 32 % minority) and Sample 2 contained men and women ($N = 8,047$; 45 % male). Structural equation modeling was utilized to represent ideology in terms of right- vs. left-leaning orientation on social and economic issues, including participants' views of Trump. Malevolent (+) and benevolent (–) dispositions and empathy disturbances were significantly linked with conservative ideology.

You meet saints everywhere. They can be anywhere. They are people behaving decently in an indecent society. – Kurt Vonnegut

1. Introduction

Donald Trump has radically reshaped the nature of U.S. conservatism (Barber & Pope, 2019), moving the GOP toward authoritarianism (Knuckey & Hassan, 2022) and political unrest such as the January 6th (J6) assault at the United States Capitol (Dugan & Fisher, 2023). The J6 event was planned and targeted violence for political gain (Dugan & Fisher, 2023) with most Americans viewing Trump as responsible (Gramlich, 2022). His role in J6, a litany of business failures (Hiltzik, 2022) and legally adjudicated cases against him (Graham, 2025) would destroy most politicians, yet some people view Trump favorably. His popularity can be understood in part via the links between conservative political ideology with right-wing authoritarianism and social dominance orientation (de Oliveira Santos & Jost, 2024; Womick et al., 2019). However, the shifting sands of conservatism in the U.S. suggests that other factors may also be at play. Using a structural equation modeling (SEM) approach, we examined whether

dispositions reflecting malevolent (aversive) features and the relative absence of benevolent (affiliative) features and empathy were associated with conservative ideology and views of Trump.¹

1.1. Authoritarianism, social Dominance, and conservative ideology

Research on authoritarian attitudes has focused on individual differences in right-wing authoritarianism (RWA; Osborne et al., 2023; Vargas-Salfate et al., 2020; Fischer et al., 2012) and social dominance orientation (SDO; Fischer et al., 2012). The former involves a dangerous world view which leads to preferences for social control and conformity and the latter a competitive world view that elicits preference for social hierarchies (Perry et al., 2013). RWA and SDO are positively correlated contemporaneously and longitudinally (Osborne et al., 2021; Perry et al., 2013) and both RWA and SDO are used to explain political and prejudicial ideology (Duckitt & Sibley, 2010). Given Trump's dystopian views (PBS, 2025), it is understandable that RWA and SDO are associated with ideology favorable toward Trump (Womick et al., 2019).

Even before Trump, robust evidence documents the affinity between conservative ideology and authoritarianism, though of course, not all conservatives are authoritarians (Nilsson & Jost, 2020). Conservative

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¹ We focus on both symbolic (right-leaning) and operational (e.g., defense spending, gun access) aspects of conservative ideology (Jost, 2021), including participants' views of Trump, given the percentage of conservatives who support him (Gallup, 2025). We are not examining "Trumpism" which has been identified as a combination of right-wing populism and national conservatism, as well as illiberal, authoritarian, and fascist beliefs (Ben-Ghiat, 2023; Reich, 2023).

ideology is similarly associated with higher levels of SDO, as well as RWA (Kivikangas et al., 2021; Kugler et al., 2014; Nilsson & Jost, 2020; Wilson & Sibley, 2013), including social and economic conservatism (Azevedo et al., 2019), which are correlated (Kivikangas et al., 2021). Relatedly, RWA and SDO are associated with the “binding” moral intuitions of authority and loyalty but inversely associated with the “individualizing” moral intuitions of care and fairness (Kugler et al., 2014; Kivikangas et al., 2021).

1.2. The Importance of individual differences

Individual differences in personality play a critical role in the expression of RWA and SDO (Osborne et al., 2023). Meta-analytic and behavior genetic research reveals that low openness (e.g., low intellectual engagement, closed-mindedness) and low agreeableness (e.g., interpersonal antagonism, low trust), respectively, are associated with higher RWA and SDO (de Vries et al., 2022; Sibley & Duckitt, 2008). Also, RWA and SDO are associated with lower honesty-humility traits (de Vries et al., 2022), and higher psychopathic traits (Roy et al., 2021).

One factor that accounts for these associations is that RWA and SDO share a common genetic basis with personality, especially low honesty-humility and low openness traits (de Vries et al., 2022), and political ideology (Cichocka & Dhont, 2018; Kandler et al., 2012; Klepepesto et al., 2024a). Personality and political ideology also have a common genetic basis (Kandler et al., 2012; Verhulst et al., 2012). These findings suggest that RWA, SDO, political ideology, and specific personality dispositions have a common genetic basis. This pattern of relations of ideology with aversive social attitudes and personality highlight that ideology reflects more than political affiliations or policies. Ideology involves motivated social cognitive processes that orient individuals world views and how they interact with others in society (Jost, 2021). The literature also shows neurobiological and neurocognitive differences among those with conservative vs. liberal ideology (Cichocka & Dhont, 2018; Nam et al., 2021). Overall, there is a vast array of individual differences associated with ideology, including race and gender (Jost, 2021; Zmigrod et al., 2021, 2022).

Longitudinal research suggests that race/ethnicity may moderate the associations of RWA and SDO with conservative political behavior (Duckitt & Sibley, 2016) and gender might moderate the association between personality and conservatism with a stronger association for males than females (Kivikangas et al., 2021). These moderation effects may be due in part to the fact that RWA and SDO are linked with racism and sexism (Osborne et al., 2021; Sibley & Duckitt, 2008; Sibley et al., 2006; Roy et al., 2021; Whitley, 1999). Also worth noting, women have moved ideologically to the left since the 1970's (Dassonneville, 2021) and minority individuals predominately adopt a left-leaning ideology (Doherty & Kiley, 2020). In the era of Trump, his supporters share Trump's authoritarian targeting of women and minorities (Smith & Hanley, 2018), use of aggression to dominate out-groups (Womick et al., 2019), and as the U.S. becomes more of a majority-minority population, white individuals show a shift toward a conservative ideology (Craig & Richeson, 2014). Thus, the current study also examined whether the associations between RWA, SDO, malevolent disposition, and ideology were moderated by minority status, and similarly, whether gender moderated the associations between malevolent (or benevolent) dispositions and conservative ideology.

1.3. Psychology of ideology

Besides RWA and SDO, the psychology of ideology is useful for understanding why some persons may have a favorable view of Trump, and why such a view would covary with aspects of conservative ideology (Pew Research Center, 2024a). Jost's (2021) influential Motivated Social Cognitive theory discusses the role of dogmatic thinking and need for shared reality among those with conservative ideology. Similarly, Zmigrod (2022) proposes two components for ideologies, doctrinal and

relational. The doctrinal component entails embrace of *rigid dogma*—i.e., existence of one true explanation and solution for societal and personal conditions, including what is “good” or “evil” (p. 1075). The relational component involves *identity demarcation* for parochial altruism toward adherents vs. antagonism toward dissimilar others and thus includes *identity markers* (e.g., hats, flags, etc.). A conservative ideology that includes a positive view of Trump can be understood from these frameworks with respect to Trump's boast (USA Today, 2016), and his adherents' belief, that “he alone can fix it” (rigid dogma), their unflagging support of him no matter what he does, such as claiming he can shoot someone (NPR, 2016), without losing voters (parochial altruism), and the ever present MAGA paraphernalia (identity markers). In addition, Trump's rage about dangerous immigrants (Welker & Ainsley, 2025) can lead Trump's supporters to also embrace conservative policies such as a strong military and minimal gun regulations (Pew Research Center, 2023, 2024a, 2024b).

A political candidate who boasts about being able to shoot someone can be understood in terms of a malevolent disposition (Nai et al., 2019). We seek to understand the voters who embrace such a politician and propose that insight may be gained by examining the links between malevolent dispositions and political ideology (Blais et al., 2021, 2024).

1.4. Political ideology & Malevolent/Benevolent Dispositions: Beyond general personality

Consistent with behavior genetic research on ideology and personality, research across 33 countries found that low honesty-humility (H-H) traits were associated with conservative political ideology (Lee et al., 2018), though for the U.S. sample in this study the association was near zero ($r = -0.07$). Still, the association between H-H and ideology has been found when accounting for sample effects (Vitriol et al., 2019). At the same time, it is important to note that low H-H can be accounted for by a latent aversive (malevolent) disposition (Schreiber & Marcus, 2020). Additionally, a study of over 66,000 persons from 38 countries found that a malevolent propensity to “assign a higher weight to one's own utility above others” (i.e., socially aversive personality) accounted for both sociocultural and economic conservatism (Moshagen et al., 2024, p. 1), and that a malevolent disposition accounted for more variance than H-H in predicting ideology. In related research, malevolent (aversive) and benevolent (affiliative) dispositions, compared to general personality traits (i.e., honesty-humility), more accurately classified persons in terms of aversive versus affiliative profiles and the former was associated with intransigent political behavior among U.S. Senators (Neumann et al., 2020). Also, meta-analytic (Muris et al., 2017) and behavior genetic (Vernon et al., 2008; Veselka et al., 2011) research suggests malevolent dispositions can provide additional insight into aversive behavior beyond general personality (e.g., H-H). Taken together, we propose that more extreme (malevolent) dispositions are necessary for understanding today's modern incarnation of conservatism that includes a positive view of Trump.

Autocrats manifest socially aversive personality, including malevolent traits in the Dark Triad: narcissism, psychopathy, and

Machiavellianism (Nai & Toros, 2020), and the same has been found for Trump (Hyatt et al., 2018; Nai et al., 2019). Similar results have been found for authoritarians' loyal foot soldiers (Hare et al., 2022). Critically, individuals in the general population also vary in terms of authoritarian (Adorno, 2019; Ludeke & Krueger, 2013; Napier & Jost, 2008; Vargas-Salfate et al., 2020, 2019) and malevolent (aversive) propensities (Neumann et al., 2012, 2020, 2025). Thus, it is not surprising perhaps that voters with aversive traits tend to prefer aversive political figures (Hart et al., 2018; Nai et al., 2021). As such, we expected those in favor of Trump to display a malevolent (aversive) disposition.²

A malevolent disposition reflects wishing ill will or doing harm to others, while a benevolent disposition involves intending or showing goodwill or kindness to others. This is not to suggest that persons are either good or bad. The empirical evidence documents that malevolent and benevolent dispositions are dimensional in nature (De Brito et al., 2021; Neumann et al., 2020; Vernon et al., 2008). Thus, these dispositions reflect continuums, with some persons inclined to be more *caring* and others more *calloused* (Marsh, 2019), some more *selfless* and others more *selfish* (Sonnen and Gash, 2018) with many gradations in between. A malevolent disposition is measured via aversive features of Machiavellian manipulateness, psychopathic callousness, and narcissistic self-absorption, all negatively associated with empathy and positively associated with antisocial behavior (Muris et al., 2017; Neumann et al., 2020, 2021). A benevolent disposition is assessed in terms of whether one sees the goodness of others, values the dignity and worth of humans and treats people as they are rather than as means to an end, all positively associated with empathy and prosocial behavior (Kaufman et al., 2019; Neumann et al., 2020).

Psychopathy is a prominent and virulent component of an aversive disposition (Muris et al., 2017; Neumann & Hare, 2008, 2021), given its significant link to violence and aggression (Anderson & Kiehl, 2014; De Brito et al., 2021; Olver et al., 2020). Neumann and colleagues have provided extensive support for a latent variable model of psychopathy (Neumann et al., 2015), reflecting affective (e.g., lack of remorse, callousness), interpersonal (e.g., manipulation, pathological lying), behavioral lifestyle (e.g., impulsivity, stimulus-seeking), and overt antisocial (e.g., aggression, poor behavioral control) traits and behaviors (Hare & Neumann, 2008). These four domains underpin a superordinate factor that represents the broad multifarious syndrome of psychopathy (Garofalo et al., 2020; Neumann & Hare, 2008; Neumann et al., 2007), which is dimensional in nature and thus even relatively lower levels of this pathological personality disposition are associated with a range of negative correlates, including corporate misbehavior (Babiak et al., 2010), violence (Neumann & Hare, 2008; Vitacco et al., 2014) and prejudicial attitudes towards minorities (Roy et al., 2021).

Empathy disturbances are core correlates of psychopathy, and research suggests that this involves reduced affective empathy (feeling with), but not necessarily disturbances in cognitive empathy (knowing about) (Burghart & Mier, 2022; Seara-Cardoso et al., 2020; Vachon & Lynam, 2016). Research on expanding the assessment of empathy suggests that psychopathic propensities are also linked to dissonant empathy—i.e., enjoying the suffering of others (Vachon & Lynam,

2016). We hypothesize that those supportive of Trump will report lower affective and higher dissonant empathy, as well as increased psychopathic and other malevolent traits.

In contrast to increased study of malevolent personality, only recently has research focused on benevolent or affiliative dispositions (e.g., everyday saints; Kaufman et al., 2019). In this research, three broad interrelated domains have been uncovered and are referred to as *Humanism* (i.e., valuing the dignity and worth of individuals), *Faith in Humanity* (i.e., believing in the fundamental goodness of humans), and *Kantianism* (i.e., treating people as ends in themselves). Benevolent and malevolent dispositions are not simply the converse of one another, given the two domains are inversely correlated at a low-moderate level (Kaufman et al., 2019; Ng et al., 2024). Personality traits are correlated with these dispositions, but the two domains account for additional outcomes beyond general personality (Moshagen et al., 2024; Neumann et al., 2020).

Although SDO, RWA, and malevolent propensities are conceptually distinct constructs, they are positively correlated and can account for conservatism, extremism, and prejudice (Duspara & Greitemeyer, 2017; Hodson et al., 2009; Jonason, 2014; Osborne et al., 2023; Roy et al., 2021). Though the literature is somewhat conflicting (Bartolo & Powell, 2024), research has documented a positive association between conservatism ideology with psychopathic and other malevolent dispositions (Bartolo & Powell, 2024; Blais et al., 2024; Duspara & Greitemeyer, 2017; Gay et al., 2019; Lilienfeld et al., 2014; Moshagen et al., 2024; Preston & Anestis, 2018). Conversely, little research has explored the link between benevolent dispositions and political ideology. Some recent work suggests they may play a role in political attitudes and behaviors (Neumann et al., 2020; Peterson & Palmer, 2020), though the direct association between benevolent propensities and political ideology remains unexplored.

1.5. The current study

A primary goal was to test multiple group structural equation models (MG-SEMs) designed to examine the associations between aversive/affiliative dispositions (psychopathic, malevolent, benevolent propensities) and conservative political ideology, including views of Trump, and whether minority status or gender moderated such associations. We also examined how psychopathic propensity accounted for ideology in conjunction with SDO and RWA.

Before our primary analyses, we also conducted preliminary multiple group measurement invariance (MG-MI) tests for both Sample 1 (white vs. minority status) and Sample 2 (men vs. women) using all study variables. These preliminary MG-MI tests provided evidence of strong (scalar) MI (see Participants) and confidence to move forward with the MG-SEMs. For the Sample 1 MG-SEM, we examined whether psychopathic propensities could account for conservative political ideology and views of Trump with a large diverse community sample of American men. Using a strong (scalar) invariance multiple-group (i.e., white versus minority status) SEM approach, we explored how SDO, RWA, and psychopathic propensities (PPs) predicted a latent variable which contained items reflecting conservative political ideology and view of Trump. We expected PPs to contribute above and beyond SDO and RWA, consistent with our previous research (Roy et al., 2021). However, an open question is whether the same associations would be uncovered for both white and minority-status men.

Another study goal was to test whether those who viewed Trump favorably (vs. those not) reported higher psychopathic (or malevolent) traits. Using a MG-MI approach, we tested whether those who were supportive of Trump's first presidency (vs. those not) reported higher PPs, irrespective of minority status. We used the same MG-MI approach to test for differences in empathy among those viewing Trump favorably, compared to those not favorably.

We conducted similar analyses for Sample 2, utilizing an exploratory structural equation modeling (ESEM) approach consistent with our

² Various terms are used to discuss opposing human dispositions including "dark" vs. "light" or "aversive" vs. "affiliative" or "malevolent" vs. "benevolent" (Neumann et al., 2020, 2025). Since the dark vs. light terms could potentially reflect implicit bias, we refrain from their use in this article. We recognize there is a large literature that employs the phrase "Dark Triad" (Muris et al., 2017) and note that Professor Paulhus chose the "dark" term in part simply because of the popularity of Star Wars in the 90's (Personal Communication: Monday, June 8, 2020 at 2:24:13 AM, CST). Relatedly, the Light Triad Scale (Kaufman et al., 2019) was named as such in contrast to the Dark Triad. Both scales contain items that are essential for measuring affiliative and aversive dispositions (Neumann et al., 2020, 2025). Nevertheless, we use the terms "malevolent" / "aversive" vs. "benevolent" / "affiliative" because they provide more precision than dark/light traits in describing these dispositions.

previous research on malevolent and benevolent dispositions (Neumann et al., 2025). Specifically, using a second large U.S. community sample and the same strong (scalar) invariance multiple group approach (men vs. women), we extended our examination to the role of both malevolent and benevolent dispositions in predicting the same latent variable as in Sample 1 (conservative ideology and view of Trump), and whether the associations differed by gender. Then, we tested whether those who viewed Trump favorably (vs. those not) reported higher latent malevolent and lower benevolent dispositions, providing further evidence of empathy-related disturbances. All moderation effects were formally tested using the Mplus MODEL TEST procedure. Follow-up multivariate analyses of covariance (MANCOVA) were conducted to check on the robustness of the pro-Trump analyses.

2. Methods

All methods were carried out in accordance with the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services guidelines for exempt research, such that the research posed no more than minimal risk to the subjects to the extent that the probability and magnitude of harm is no greater than what people normally experience in daily life. Individuals provided anonymous voluntary responses between 2019 (Sample 1) and 2021–2022 (Sample 2). Participant responses to attention checks and overall survey response time were used to obtain quality responses. Consistent with our ongoing research, only a small percentage (~2–3 %) of responses were questionable (Neumann et al., 2025). Each study was reviewed and approved as exempt by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of the University of North Texas, Denton Texas, USA given the anonymous nature of survey responses. Informed consent was obtained from all subjects and/or their legal guardian(s). For Sample 2, participants provided consent by agreeing with the terms of service and choosing to provide responses to the survey. The datasets used and/or analyzed during the current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

2.1. Participants and Procedures

Sample 1. Initial analyses involved Sample 1 which consisted of 1,000 male participants who were recruited in the spring of 2019 via Prolific Academic (www.Prolific.co), an online crowdsourcing platform used to recruit paid research participants. Individuals were compensated \$2.45 for completing the survey, which included passing multiple attention checks. Overall, 1,000 of 1,113 participants finished the survey (89.8 % completion). Participants were between the ages of 18–55 years old ($M_{age} = 31.74$, $SD = 8.94$), earning on average between 40–79 k/year, and all were U.S. residents. The majority had either some college or a college degree (65.9 %), or high school/vocational (17.1 %), graduate/post-graduate (17 %) education. In terms of race/ethnicity, participants reported White (67.7 %), Asian (9.8 %), Black (8.5 %), Hispanic (5.8 %), multi-racial (6.5 %) or other (1.7 %). White participants were slightly older ($M = 33.0$, $SD = 8.99$) than the minority status participants ($M = 29.1$, $SD = 8.23$) ($\eta^2 = 0.03$). However, there were no differences across five income levels between the White versus minority status groups ($\chi^2(5) = 3.63$, $p > 0.05$), and only minor differences in education level ($\eta^2 = 0.006$), due to White persons (25 %) reporting less “some college” compared to minority status persons (34 %), though slightly more “college degree” (39 %) than minority status persons (36 %). In terms of the study variables, preliminary analyses identified few significant differences between White and minority status participants, and when there were differences, they were associated with small effect sizes ($\eta^2 = 0.004$). The white and minority status groups did not differ in level of psychopathy ($F(1,999) = 0.93$, $p > 0.05$), which included a non-significant multivariate covariate effect for age and education ($F(2,999) = 1.66$, $p > 0.05$). Also, there were no differences in those with elevated psychopathic traits (SRP-SF total score ≥ 70) across the white and minority status groups ($p = 0.52$).

Lastly, using standard methodology (Kim et al., 2024), we conducted multiple group CFA (White vs. Minority status) with all study indicators loadings on their respective latent variables and the results provided evidence of scalar measurement invariance across the two groups (configural: CFI = 0.94; RMSEA's = 0.05 vs. scalar: CFI = 0.94; RMSEA's = 0.05; $\Delta CFI = 0.00$).

Sample 2. For Sample 2, data were collected between March 2021 and February 2022 as part of ongoing web-based research on benevolent vs. malevolent traits (Neumann et al., 2020). The website (<https://scottbarrykaufman.com/lighttriadscale/>) asks about personality and basic demographics. This sample consisted of 8,047 individuals residing in the U.S. (56 % women, 41.5 % men, 2.5 % reporting other) between the ages of 18–99 ($M_{age} = 38.81$, $SD = 14.23$). Most individuals reported white race/ethnicity (76.8 %) and the remaining of minority status (23.2 %). In terms of annual income, 32.1 % reported less than 35 k, 13.5 % between 35–49 k, 17.1 % 50–74.9 k, 12.4 % 75–99 k, and 25 % 100 k or more. Percentages for education achievement were as follows: high school (20.9 %), college (38.9 %), graduate (29.7 %), JD/MD (5.2 %), other (5.3 %).

Given that Sample 2 was used to examine how gender might influence the results, we assessed for measurement invariance across gender. Multiple-group latent variable analyses provided evidence of scalar measurement invariance for the personality and political ideology variables (configural: CFI = 0.97; RMSEA's = 0.05 vs. scalar: CFI = 0.96; RMSEA's = 0.04; $\Delta CFI = 0.01$).

2.2. Measures

RWA. The Authoritarianism-Conservative-Traditionalism Scales Short Form (ACT-SF, Duckitt et al., 2010) was used to assess self-reported Right-Wing Authoritarianism (RWA). The scale conceptualizes RWA as three interrelated factors, closely related to the original concepts of “authoritarian aggression,” “authoritarian submission,” and “conventionalism” posited by Altemeyer (1981). The ACT-SF includes 6 questions related to each facet, which are ranked on a 9-point Likert scale with responses ranging from 1 = “Very strongly disagree” to 9 = “Very strongly agree.” A preliminary item-level confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) provided adequate support for the three factors of RWA underpinning a superordinate factor in terms of incremental model fit (CFI = 0.92) and an absolute fit index (SRMR = 0.04) highlighted that the model was able to reproduce the data with precision. Research shows that RWA can be modeled as a superordinate latent variable (Roy et al. 2021) with a moderately strong genetic basis (Kleppetto et al., 2024a,b).

Social Dominance Orientation. The SDO7 Scale Short Form (Ho et al., 2015) conceptualizes Social Dominance Orientation in terms of two subdimensions, Dominance (SDO-D) and Egalitarianism (SDO-E). The scale includes 8 items. A preliminary item-level CFA indicated the four SDO domains (pro-trait and con-trait scales for egalitarianism and dominance) were accounted for by a superordinate factor (CFI = 0.96, SRMR = 0.03). These results are in line with the meta-analysis by Berry (2023) showing a strong correlation between SDO-D and SDO-E and that both share a common genetic factor (Kleppetto et al., 2024a,b).

Psychopathic Traits. Psychopathy was assessed with the Self-Report Psychopathy Scale-Short Form (SRP-SF; Paulhus et al., 2016), a 29-item measure. However, for the current study we used a super-short version with 12-items (SRP-SSV) to reduce the number of estimated parameters. The SRP-SF and SRP-SSV were correlated at $r = 0.95$ ($p < 0.001$). Each item is rated on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = “Strongly Disagree” to 5 = “Strongly Agree”). Higher scores indicate greater psychopathic propensity. Latent variable modeling studies have provided robust support for the four-factor model of psychopathy (Neumann et al., 2015), with high intercorrelations between the factors indicating evidence of an overarching psychopathy factor (Neumann & Hare, 2008; Neumann et al., 2007). The SRP-SF also has shown good construct validity in terms of associations with neurobiology and violence (Carré

et al., 2013; Neumann & Pardini, 2014) and cross-cultural validity in terms of invariance and links to empathy (Neumann et al., 2012; Seara-Cardoso et al., 2020). The SRP-SSV showed good fit via our preliminary CFA (CFI = 0.92, SRMR = 0.05), with strongly correlated factors (r 's range = 0.60 – 0.84), reflecting a superordinate psychopathy factor (Garofalo et al., 2020).

Malevolent and Benevolent Traits. The Dirty Dozen (DD) was used to assess malevolent dispositions (Jonason & Webster, 2010), given its concise nature, and acceptable convergent, discriminant, incremental, and criterion validity (Maples et al., 2014; Pechorro et al., 2021), and evidence of invariance across sex and global regions (Rogoza et al., 2021). The DD contains three scales (Machiavellianism, Psychopathy, Narcissism), each DD scale has four items. To assess benevolent dispositions, we used the Light Triad Scale (Kaufman et al., 2019), also a concise 12-item scale, with three scales (Faith in Humanity, Humanism, Kantianism). While the LTS is a relatively new scale, it has been shown

to have good convergent and discriminant construct validity (Neumann et al., 2020; Ng et al., 2024). Both scales use a 5-point scale (0 = strongly disagree to 4 = strongly agree). Preliminary ESEM of the LTS and DD scales was associated with good fit (CFI = 0.98, RMSEA = 0.08) and confirmed the expected pattern of loadings consistent with previous research (Neumann et al., 2025). That is, the benevolent factor was made up of significant LTS scale loadings, as well as a negative (cross) loading of psychopathy, while the malevolent factor had significant DD scale loadings as well as a negative loading of Kantianism.

Empathy. To assess the cognitive, affective, and dissonant domains of empathy, we used the Affective and Cognitive Empathy Measure (ACME), which has shown strong psychometric and convergent construct validity (Vachon, & Lynam, 2016). The three ACME domains reflect cognitive (e.g., “can tell when someone is afraid”), affective (e.g., “care about people feeling happy”) and dissonant affective (e.g., “enjoy seeing people cry”) empathy. The 36 ACME items are scored on a 5-point

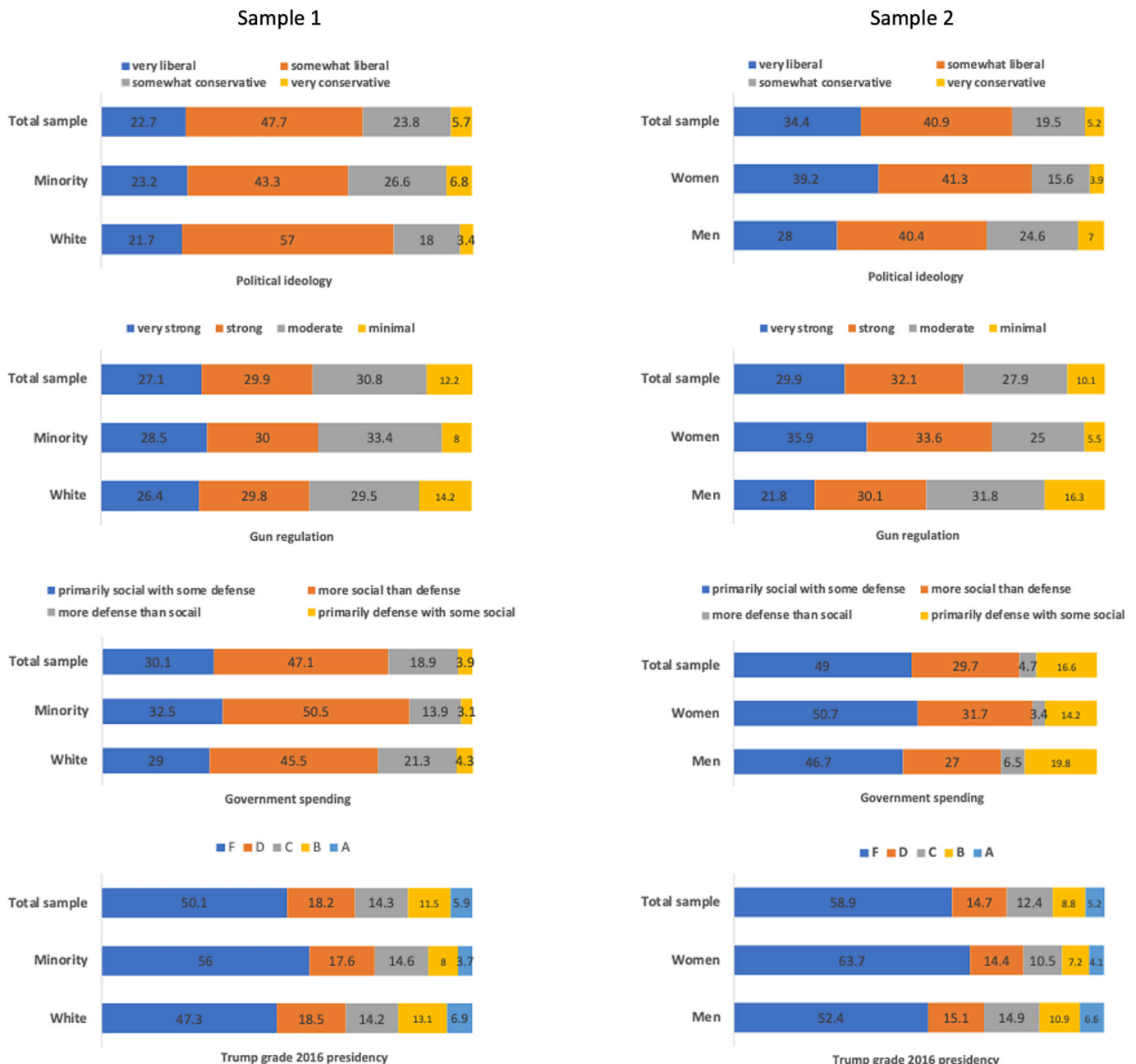


Fig. 1. Political ideology by sample.

scale (1 = strongly disagree; 5 = strongly agree). Model fit for the three-factor model in the current data was good (CFI = 0.91, RMSEA = 0.07). We also ran a multiple-group latent variable analysis which indicated evidence of scalar measurement invariance across the white and minority status groups (configural: CFI = 0.93; RMSEA's = 0.07 versus scalar: CFI = 0.94; RMSEA's = 0.06; Δ CFI = 0.01).

Conservative Ideology & Views of Trump. Four questions were used to assess political ideology, with higher scores reflecting more conservative ideology and a positive view of Trump. Participants were asked about, a) their political leaning (1 = very liberal; 2 = somewhat liberal; 3 = somewhat conservative; 4 = very conservative), b) preference for government social vs. defense spending (1 = primarily social with some defense; 2 = more social than defense; 3 = more defense than social; 4 = primarily defense with some social), c) gun regulations (1 = very strong; 2 = strong; 3 = moderate; 4 = minimal), and d) grade for Trump's presidential performance in his first term (1 = F, 2 = D, 3 = C, 4 = B, 5 = A). These items accord with national opinions showing conservative-leaning individuals, compared to liberal-leaning, are more supportive of defense spending, gun availability, and Trump (Pew Research Center, 2023, 2024a, 2024b). In other words, they reflect contemporary symbolic, operational, and personological aspects of conservative ideology. Preliminary analyses indicated the items make up a latent ideology variable with strong factor loadings (mean loading = 0.73, p 's < 0.001) and excellent model fit (CFI = 1.00, RMSEA = 0.00).

The Trump grade question was also used as a grouping variable to determine participants favorable of Trump (i.e., grade "C" or higher) versus those not viewing him favorably. As shown in Fig. 1, among Sample 1 participants, 31.7 % were supportive of Trump, and for Sample 2, there were 26.4 % supportive of Trump. These proportions of participants supportive of Trump are consistent with national opinion assessed at the end of Trump's first term (Jones, 2021).

Fig. 1 provides the breakdown for all the ideology items. For the male-only Sample 1, 22.7 % reported being very liberal, 47.7 % somewhat liberal, and nearly 30 % reported somewhat/very conservative. For Sample 2 participants (women & men), 34.4 % reported being very liberal, 40.9 % somewhat liberal, and the remaining nearly 25 % reported somewhat/very conservative. Generally, these percentages regarding political ideology were in line with American political topology reported in 2021 (Pew Research Center, 2021).

2.3. Data analytic Plan

A structural equation modeling (SEM) approach was used given its methodological rigor and capacity to provide evidence of construct validity (Strauss and Smith, 2009). First, we tested the fit of the measurement models using the total sample for each sample before running multiple group analyses. Besides model fit, these analyses provided bivariate latent correlations and the calculation of each latent variables reliability (Omega). McDonald's (1999) Omega was calculated using standardized factor loadings and residual error terms for its calculation (Trizano-Hermosilla & Alvarado, 2016; Widhiarso & Ravand, 2014). Next, we conducted multiple group SEM (MG-SEM) given that it is optimal for statistically representing personality constructs and testing for measurement bias across different groups (Neumann et al., 2021; Neumann et al., 2012). In addition, MG-SEM provides precise estimation of latent means (e.g., psychopathy, dark traits) across different groups (Selig et al., 2015), as well as associations among latent variables (Hoyle, 2012). The SDO, RWA, PPs, and the malevolent, benevolent latent variables were modeled using scale scores to optimize the participants-to-free parameters ratio. Conservative ideology was modeled using the four political ideology items to examine how each one performed in representing a conservative ideology latent variable. All analyses were conducted using Mplus (Muthén & Muthén, 1998-2017) with robust weighted least squares (WLSMV) estimation. To assess model fit, a standard two-index strategy was relied on (Hu & Bentler, 1999); the incremental Comparative Fit Index (CFI) and the

absolute Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA) index. The former indicates how well the hypothesized model fits compared to an unstructured model, and the latter provides information on how well the hypothesized model reproduces the observed data, relative to model complexity. We relied on the traditional CFI > 0.90 and RMSEA < 0.08 as indicative of acceptable model fit to avoid falsely rejecting viable latent variable models, since model complexity increases the difficulty of achieving conventional fit (West, Taylor, & Wu, 2012).

Before valid comparison of groups can be carried out, it is critical to formally test for evidence of bias (Kim et al., 2024; Neumann et al., 2025; Ngo et al., 2024). Specifically, it must be shown that trait parameters discriminate similarly across groups of people who vary on a latent trait (e.g., differentiating people in terms of benevolent propensities), and at the same level of the latent trait (i.e., similar response or extremity/threshold parameters; Reise, 1999). To ensure measurement equivalence of RWA, SDO, PPs and the benevolent and malevolent dispositions across groups of individuals (white vs. minority; male vs. female; pro-trump vs. not pro-trump), a strong (scalar) measurement invariance approach was employed (e.g., Bellamy et al., 2024; Kim et al., 2024; Neumann et al., 2021; Ngo et al., 2024). For the MG-CFAs with Sample 1, all scales were set to load on their respective factors, and discrimination (factor loadings) and extremity (intercept) parameters were constrained to be equal across the white vs. minority or the Trump groups. A MG-CFA was also run with the 36 empathy (ACME) items for the Trump groups. Our Sample 2 analyses were informed by our previous modeling research on the malevolent and benevolent domains that includes item cross-loadings (Neumann et al., 2025) which accord with our research on moral judgements (Ng et al., 2024). All trait indicators were allowed to load onto two factors (benevolent, malevolent,) in a MG-ESEM with discrimination (factor loadings) and extremity (intercept) parameters constrained to be equal across males and females, and similarly for the second MG-ESEM for the two trump groups. Each constrained (scalar) model was compared to an unconstrained (configural) model where the estimated parameters were free to vary across individuals in the specific groups.

To compare the configural and scalar models, we did not rely on the traditional chi-square difference test since large N 's produce significant chi-square values even when the discrepancies between the two models are trivial (West et al., 2012). West et al. suggest using guidelines offered by Cheung and Rensvold (2002) to assess statistical differences in model fit. If the incremental change in the comparative fit index (Δ CFI) between the unconstrained and a (nested) more-constrained model is ≤ 0.01 , then the two models do not differ in statistical fit, and therefore evidence for the scalar model (strong invariance) is obtained.

Finally, for our MG-SEMs, we continued to use a strong (scalar) invariance approach (white vs. minority status; men vs. women). For Sample 1, we utilized the same strict CFA-based model with the SDO, RWA, and PP latent variables set to predict political ideology, and for Sample 2, the ESEM was specified for the benevolent and malevolent latent variables to predict the political ideology latent variable. To test if minority status or gender moderated the MG-SEM results, we relied on a straightforward approach consistent with our previous research (Walsh et al., 2019). That is, the regression parameters for the two respective MG-SEMs were formally tested (e.g., if the RWA, SDO, PP LVs differentially predicted the ideology LV for white vs. minority status men). In this way, given equivalence of measurement, we could confidently test for differences in structural parameters (i.e., factor regression beta weights) between groups (Chou & Bentler, 2002; Chou & Huh, 2012). To test if the structural parameters between the white vs. minority men (Sample 1) and similarly men vs. women (Sample 2) differed significantly, we used the MODEL TEST procedure available in Mplus. This procedure provides a Wald test, a backward model modification approach, which is ideal for identifying potentially more parsimonious models in a well-fitting model (Chou & Bentler, 2002) and is more efficient than the traditional chi-square difference test (Chou & Huh, 2012). Our goal was to specifically test whether the structural links

between the latent RWA/SDO and disposition domains (psychopathic, malevolent, benevolent) with the ideology latent variable were similar or differed between the respective groups for Samples 1 and 2.

3. Results

3.1. Sample 1 CFA: Total sample model fit

As hypothesized, the SDO, RWA, PP scales and ideology items loaded significantly (p 's < 0.001) on their respective factors and the measurement model was associated with acceptable fit (CFI = 0.93, RMSEA = 0.07). Table 1 shows bivariate latent correlations and Omega reliability for each latent variable.

3.2. Sample 1 MG-SEM Results: Predicting conservative ideology & view of Trump

Fig. 2 displays the standardized parameters for the white and minority status groups with the SDO, RWA, and PP latent variables specified to predict political ideology. Model fit for MG-SEM was good (CFI = 0.94, RMSEA = 0.06). For white men, SDO ($\beta = 0.19, p < 0.001$), RWA ($\beta = 0.71, p < 0.001$), and PPs ($\beta = 0.13, p < 0.01$) were all significant predictors of conservative ideology, including positive views of Trump. For minority men, both SDO ($\beta = 0.26, p < 0.001$) and RWA ($\beta = 0.59, p < 0.001$) significantly predicted conservative ideology, but PPs did not ($\beta = 0.02, p > 0.05$). For both groups, the latent variables accounted for substantial variance in conservative ideology (r^2 's = 61 – 77 %). Note that age was included in this SEM given slight age differences between the two groups, however, it provided little contribution (white: $\beta = 0.04$; minority $\beta = -0.02$). The MODEL TEST procedure indicated that the structural parameters significantly differed between the two groups (Wald = 14.18, $p = 0.003$), providing evidence that minority status moderated the results.

3.3. Sample 1 latent mean psychopathy differences: Favorable/Not favorable to Trump

Next, we tested via MG-CFA if those who viewed Trump favorably displayed higher psychopathic propensities (PPs), compared to those not favorable of Trump. Fig. 3 (Panel A) displays the psychopathic trait domains with the standardized parameters for both groups. Model fit was good for the scalar model (CFI = 0.93, RMSEA = 0.08), and better than the configural model (CFI = 0.92, RMSEA = 0.11), providing evidence of strong (scalar) invariance. Examination of the latent means indicated that those who viewed Trump favorably (vs. those not set to zero for statistical comparison) reported significantly higher calloused affect (0.42, $p < 0.001$), impulsive lifestyle (0.14, $p < 0.05$) and overt

antisocial (0.18, $p < 0.05$) traits (see Fig. 3, Panel B). Effect sizes for these latent means were in the moderate to low-moderate range.

3.4. Sample 1 latent mean empathy (ACME) differences: Favorable/Not favorable to Trump

We also tested whether those who viewed Trump favorably (vs. those not) displayed differences in empathy (Fig. 4). We specified a model whereby the 36 ACME items loaded on one of the three respective empathy factors, and then tested a strong (scalar) invariance MG-CFA to determine whether those who favored Trump displayed differences in latent ACME mean scores. The latent means were set to zero for those not favorable to Trump for statistical comparison. Model fit was good for the scalar model (CFI = 0.92, RMSEA = 0.06), and slightly better than the configural model (CFI = 0.91, RMSEA = 0.07), providing evidence of strong (scalar) invariance. Examination of the latent empathy means indicated that those who viewed Trump favorably reported significantly lower affective empathy ($-0.34, p < 0.001$) and higher dissonant empathy toward others (0.22, $p < 0.01$), indicative of moderate effect sizes. In other words, those who favored Trump reported less empathy for others and enjoyed the suffering of others more than those not in favor of Trump.

3.5. Sample 1 robustness analyses

To check on the robustness of the findings regarding those who viewed Trump favorably versus not, we conducted follow-up MANCOVAs to check that differences between the Trump groups remained for psychopathic traits and empathy while controlling for age, education, and minority status. For the first MANCOVA, the multivariate covariate effect was significant, $F(12,2624.88) = 3.25, p < 0.001, \eta^2 = 0.01$, as was the main effect for Trump favorability group, $F(4,992) = 5.65, p < 0.001, \eta^2 = 0.02$, indicating that those who viewed Trump favorably displayed significantly higher psychopathic traits, while accounting for the covariates. For the empathy scales, a similar set of results was found with a significant multivariate covariate effect, $F(9,2416.85) = 3.16, p < 0.001, \eta^2 = 0.001$, and a main effect for Trump group, $F(3,993) = 5.80, p < 0.001, \eta^2 = 0.02$, indicating that those who viewed Trump favorably displayed significantly lower affective empathy and higher dissonant empathy, while accounting for minority status, age, and education.

3.6. Sample 2 ESEM: Total sample model fit

As hypothesized, the benevolent and malevolent scales and ideology items loaded significantly (p 's < 0.001) on their respective factors, and the measurement model was associated with acceptable fit (CFI = 0.99, RMSEA = 0.04). Table 1 shows bivariate latent correlations and Omega reliability for each latent variable.

3.7. Sample 2 SEM Results: Predicting conservative ideology & view of Trump

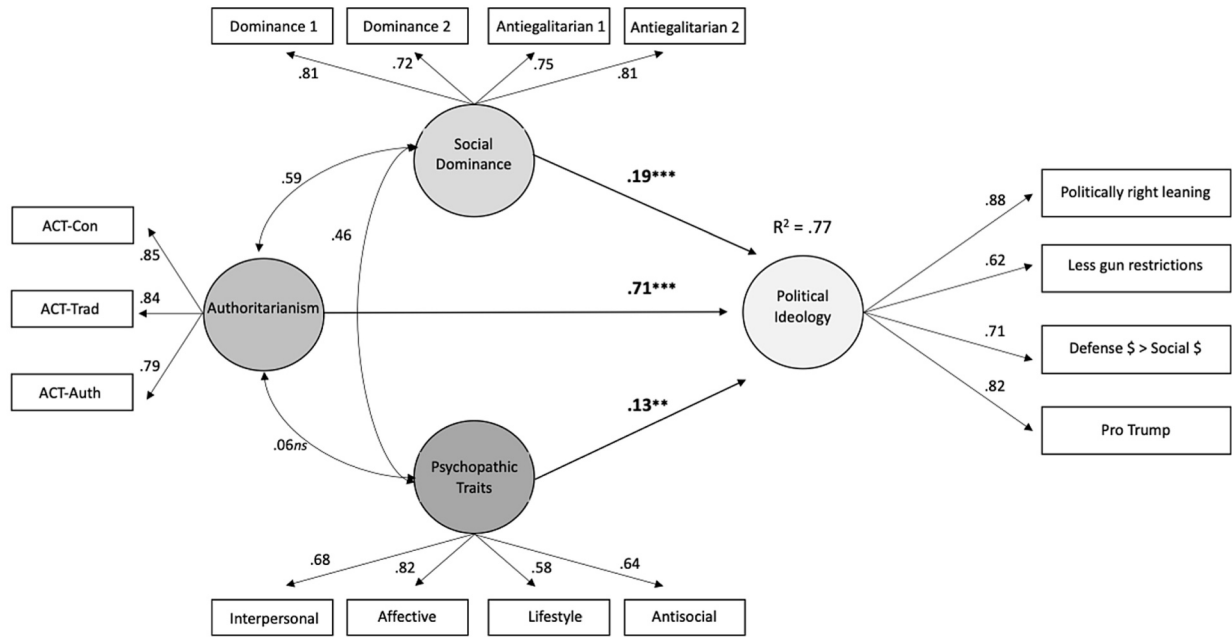
Fig. 5 displays the standardized parameters for the MG-ESEM across gender, with the benevolent and malevolent latent variables specified to predict political ideology. Model fit was good (CFI = 0.97, RMSEA = 0.05). For men, benevolent disposition negatively predicted ($\beta = -0.27, p < 0.001$) and malevolent disposition positively predicted ($\beta = 0.12, p < 0.001$) conservative ideology, accounting for 11 % of the variance (~moderate effect size). Similarly, for women, benevolent disposition negatively predicted ($\beta = -0.14, p < 0.001$), and malevolent disposition modestly positively predicted ($\beta = 0.06, p < 0.05$) conservative ideology, though it accounted for less variance in ideology (3 %, small effect size). The MODEL TEST procedure indicated that the structural parameters significantly differed between the two groups (Wald = 25.95, $p = 0.000$), providing evidence that gender moderated the results. Still,

Table 1
Latent variable correlations and Omega reliability.

Sample 1				
	SDO	RWA	PP	Ideology
SDO	0.85	0.59	0.42	0.66
RWA		0.86	0.05 ^{ns}	0.80
PP			0.78	0.22
Ideology				0.83
Sample 2				
		Malevolent	Benevolent	Ideology
Malevolent		0.75	-0.46	0.20
Benevolent			0.75	-0.27
Ideology				0.80

Note. All latent correlations significant at $p < 0.001$ unless indicated otherwise. The ideology latent variable scaled such that higher scores indicate more conservative political ideology, and lower scores indicative of liberal ideology. Bolded values are Omega reliability. SDO = Social Dominance Orientation; RWA = Authoritarianism-Conservative-Traditionalism; PP = Psychopathy (SRP-SF).

A



B

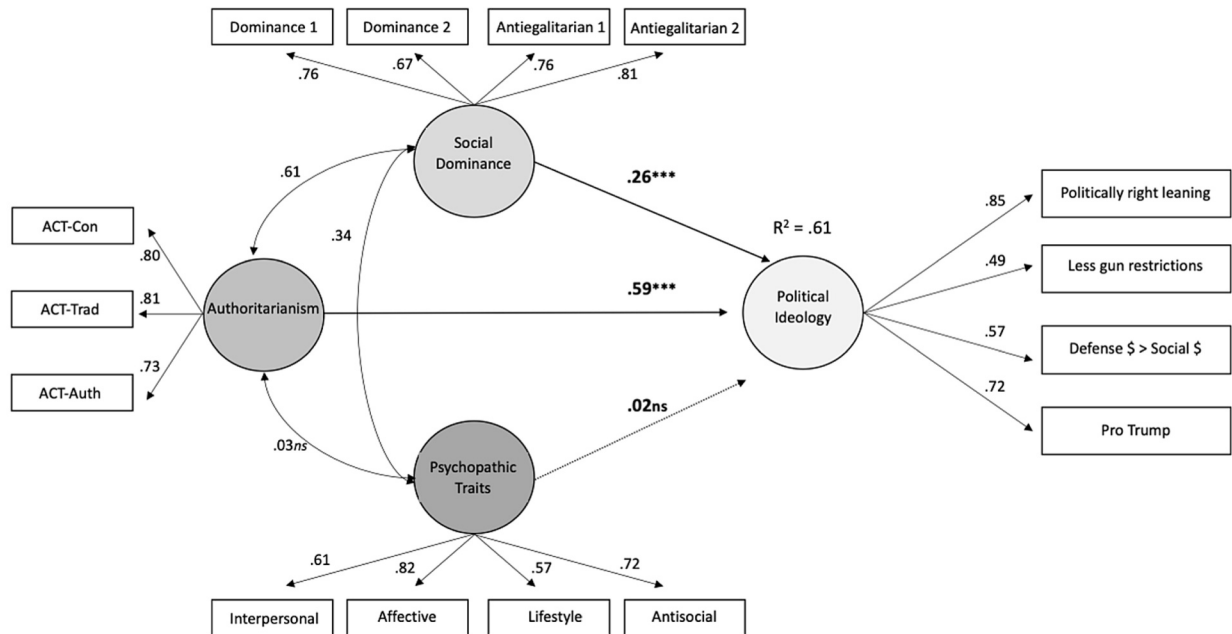


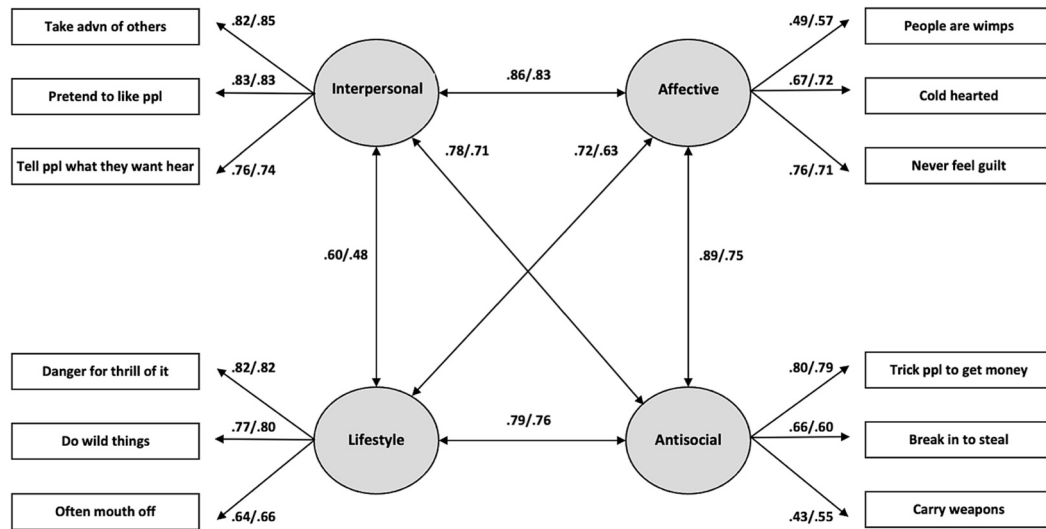
Fig. 2. Structural equation modeling results: white participants (Panel A) versus minority group members (Panel B). All loadings and correlations significant (p 's < 0.001).

despite differences in parameter strength, for both men and women, benevolent disposition was inversely associated, and malevolent disposition positively linked with endorsement of conservative ideology, including a positive view of Trump. Thus, for both men and women, an affiliative (benevolent) disposition was associated with a non-conservative ideology (i.e., liberal leaning ideology) and less favorable views of Trump. In contrast, a malevolent (aversive) disposition was associated with endorsement of conservative ideology and a positive view of Trump.

3.8. Sample 2: Latent mean malevolent/benevolent differences: Favorable/Not favorable to Trump

Fig. 6 (Panel A) displays the standardized parameters for the two-factor benevolent/malevolent model for the Trump groups (pro-Trump parameters on the left side of the slash). Model fit was excellent for the scalar model (CFI = 0.98, RMSEA = 0.07), and better than the configural model (CFI = 0.97, RMSEA = 0.08), providing evidence of strong (scalar) invariance. Fig. 6 (Panel B) displays the benevolent and malevolent latent means and shows that those who viewed Trump favorably had significantly lower benevolent disposition (-0.33 , $p < 0.001$) and higher malevolent disposition (0.26 , $p < 0.001$), compared to those not favorable to Trump (whose latent means set to zero for statistical

A



B

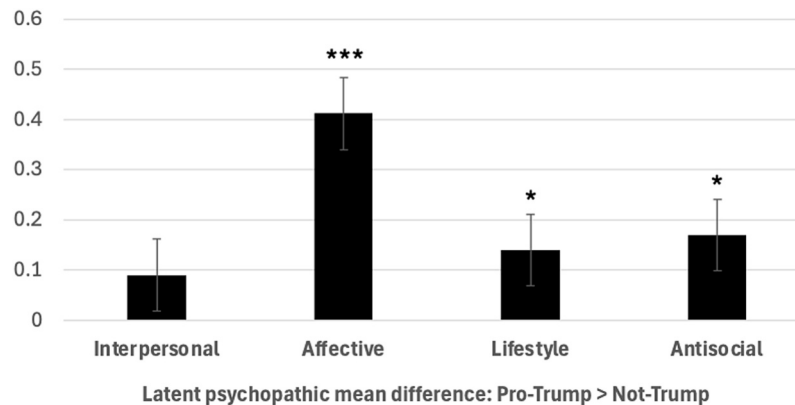


Fig. 3. Panel A: Psychopathic traits multi-group confirmatory factor analysis results. Standardized parameters for pro-Trump (left of slash) vs. not supportive of Trump (p 's < 0.001). Panel B: Psychopathic trait latent mean differences of pro-Trump versus those not supportive of trump (set to zero for statistical comparison). Results highlight that pro-Trump individuals reported higher psychopathic propensities, particularly calloused affect, compared to not Trump individuals.

comparison). In other words, those who favored Trump had lower affiliative and higher aversive dispositions.

3.9. Sample 2 robustness analyses

To check on the robustness of the findings regarding those who viewed Trump favorably versus not, we conducted a follow-up MANCOVA to check that differences between the Trump groups remained for the full set of benevolent and malevolent disposition scales as dependent variables with age, gender, minority status, education, and income as covariates. The MANCOVA had a significant multivariate covariate effect, $F(30,21062) = 31.11$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta^2 = 0.03$, as well as a significant main effect for Trump group, $F(6,5256) = 35.18$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta^2 = 0.04$, indicating that those who viewed Trump favorably (vs. not) displayed significantly lower benevolent and higher malevolent disposition, while accounting for the covariates.

4. Discussion

Structural equation modeling was employed to represent a latent variable that reflected conservative political ideology including views of Trump. Both symbolic and operational political ideology items were

utilized as indicators of a continuous quantitative latent variable in line with Jost's (2021) discussion of ideology as opposed to a single left–right item (Costello et al., 2023). Among the four items serving as indicators for this latent variable, the (pro)Trump items and politically right-leaning items showed the strongest loadings across both samples, indicating that they provided the most statistical information for discriminating among participants who varied in conservative political ideology. These results are in line with the findings from Barber and Pope (2019), highlighting that conservatism in the Trump era is heavily focused on symbolic vs. operational ideology. Still, all four items played a role in the context of Jost's (2021) and Zmigrod's (2022) ideology frameworks. The “Trump” and “right-leaning” items tap a relational (identity demarcation) component, while the “defense spending” and “less gun control” items represent specific doctrinal (rigid dogma) components (e. g., solution[s] to existing societal conditions). At the same time, the “Trump” item, in the context of his claim (“I alone can fix it”), also reflects rigid dogma. These and the other results are bolstered by the utilization of a strong (scalar) measurement invariance approach.

As expected, authoritarianism (RWA) and social dominance orientation (SDO) were strongly predictive of conservative ideology, regardless of minority status, consistent with another study on conservatism associated with Trump (Womick et al., 2019). More broadly, the

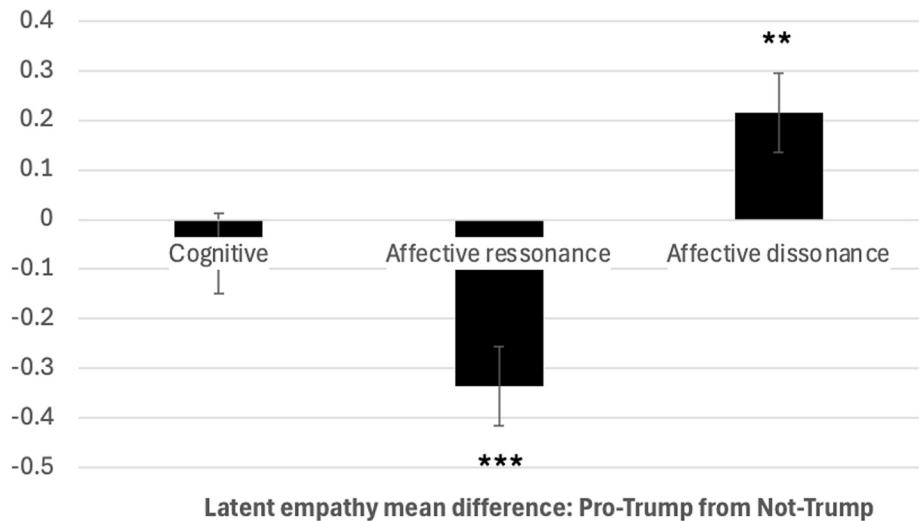


Fig. 4. Differences in empathy (ACME) latent means for pro-Trump participants, compared to those not supportive of Trump (whose latent means set to zero for comparison). Results highlight that pro-Trump individuals have less affective empathy (i.e., feel less for others suffering), and higher empathic dissonance (i.e., enjoy knowing others are suffering), compared to not Trump individuals.

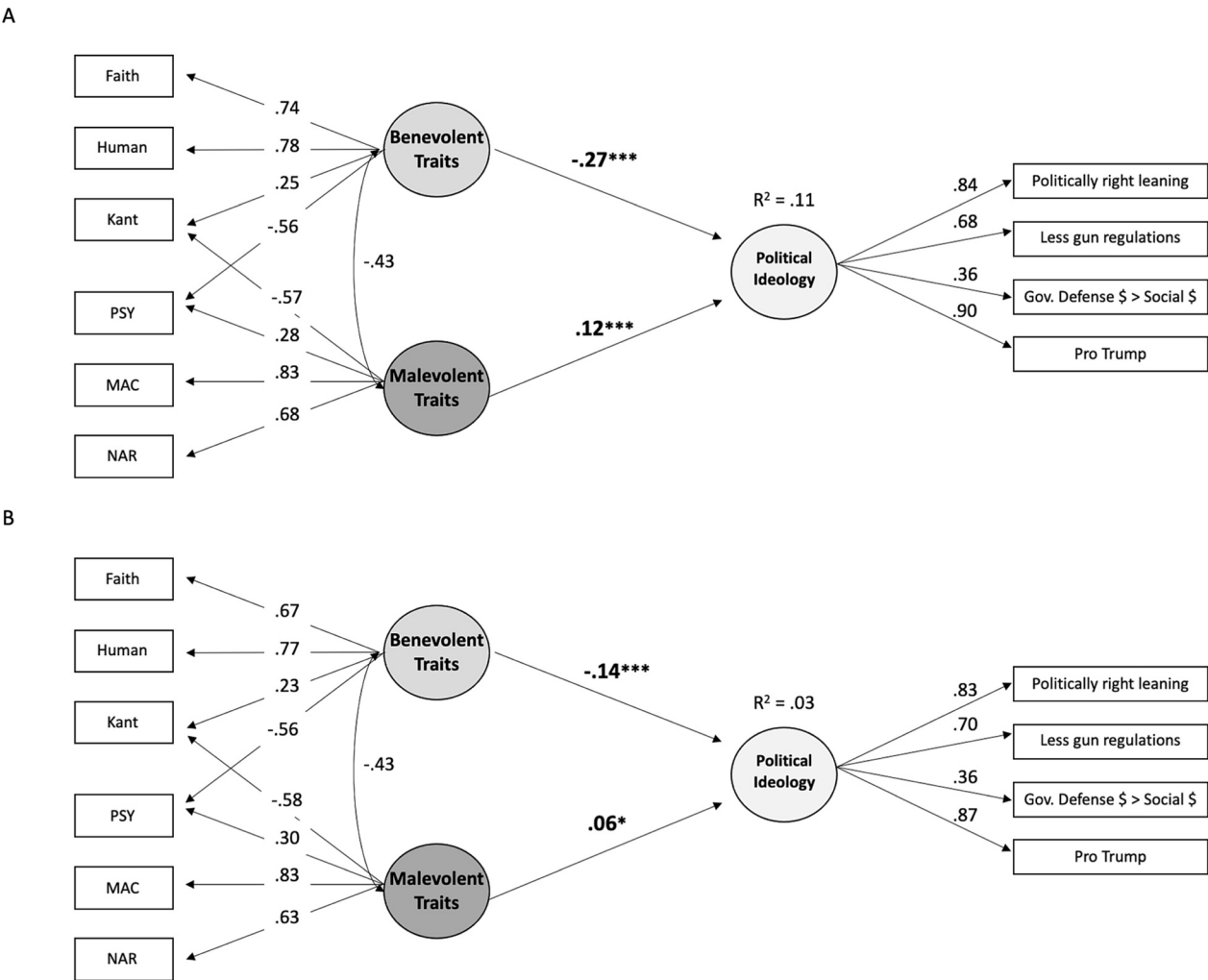


Fig. 5. Benevolent and malevolent dispositions predicting Trumpian conservative ideology for men (Panel A) and women (Panel B). Note. Latent means for women were significantly higher for benevolent (0.54) dispositions and lower for malevolent (−0.38) dispositions, compared to men (set to zero for statistical comparison). Note. Faith = faith in humanity; Human = humanism; Kant = Kantianism. Psy = psychopathic; Mac = Machiavellian; Nar = narcissism.

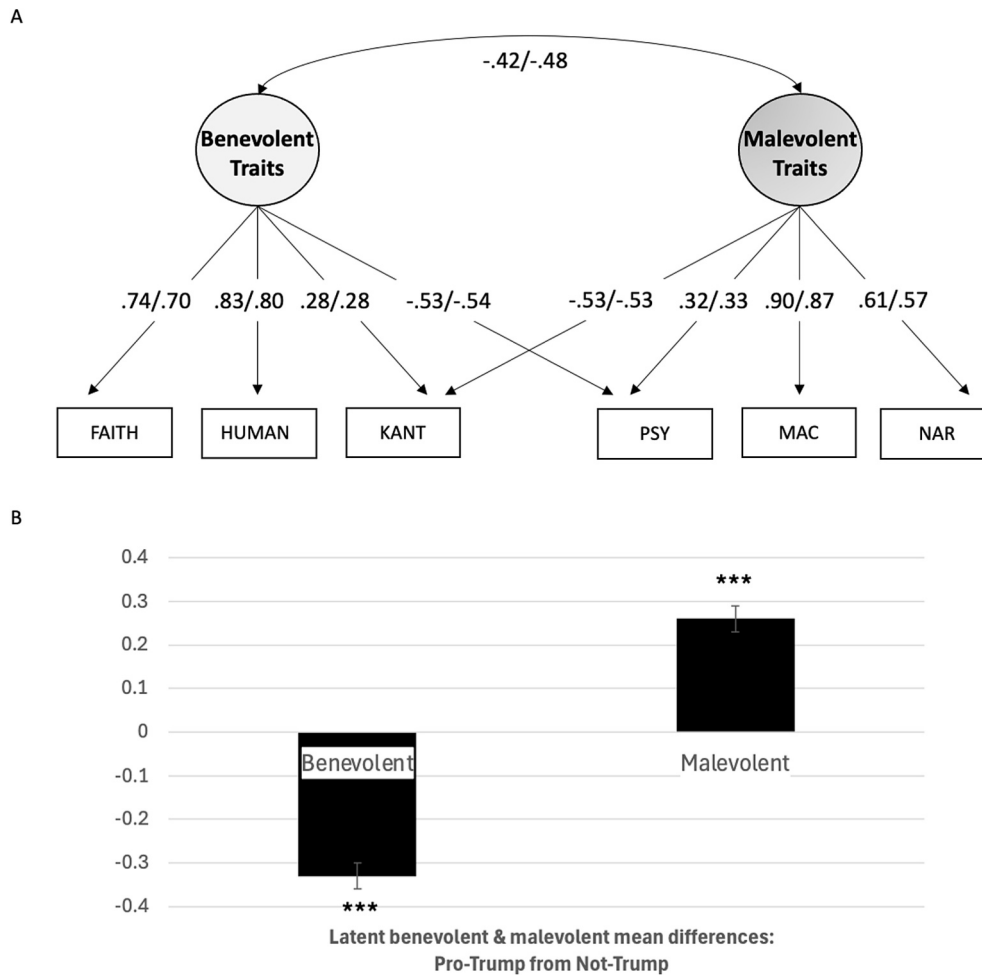


Fig. 6. Panel A: Benevolent and malevolent multi-group ESEM results (Pro-trump/not-trump). Standardized parameters for pro-Trump (left of slash) vs. not supportive of Trump (p 's < 0.001). Panel B: Benevolent and malevolent latent mean differences of pro-Trump versus those not supportive of Trump (the latter set to zero for statistical comparisons). Results highlight that pro-Trump individuals have lower benevolent and higher malevolent dispositions compared to not Trump individuals. Note. Faith = faith in humanity; Human = humanism; Kant = Kantianism. Psy = psychopathic; Mac = Machiavellian; Nar = narcissism.

results are in line with the well-established literature on the links between RWA, SDO and conservative ideology (Nilsson & Jost, 2020; Osborne et al., 2023; Wilson & Sibley, 2013). As reviewed, there is a common genetic basis for RWA, SDO, personality, and political ideology. Interestingly, new research finds genetic covariance between RWA/SDO and decreased trust, altruism for others, providing additional context for our results (Kleppesto et al., 2024b). Yet, genetic factors cannot be the whole story, given that psychopathic propensities predicted support for Trump and conservative ideology, above and beyond SDO and RWA, only for white participants. Thus, sociocultural factors must be at play as well.

Across two different samples, we found a positive association between conservative ideology/positive view of Trump and malevolent disposition. For white men, psychopathic propensities predicted conservative ideology/positive view of Trump. Further, the Sample 2 results replicated and extended these findings by uncovering a positive association between malevolent disposition and conservative ideology/positive view of Trump for men and women. Thus, the current results add to a growing literature on a link between malevolent (aversive) dispositions and conservative ideology (Blais et al., 2024; Duspara & Greitemeyer, 2017; Gay et al., 2019; Lilienfeld et al., 2014; Moshagen et al., 2024; Preston & Anestis, 2018). Moreover, our results are in line with Barber and Pope (2019) who found those tied to a Trumpian symbolic ideology were most inclined to be uncivil to others.

The link between conservative ideology/positive view of Trump and

malevolent dispositions was further demonstrated by multiple-group latent variable analyses. The results from both samples found that latent psychopathic and malevolent disposition means were significantly elevated among individuals who viewed Trump favorably. There is a robustness to these findings given that data for each sample were collected at different time periods when views of Trump could have changed (i.e., prior to vs. during the COVID pandemic). Taken together, the results are in accordance with research that finds voters with malevolent dispositions support candidates who share their malevolent tendencies (Hart et al., 2018; Nai et al., 2021).

The connection between empathy and political ideology is complex (Decety, 2021), yet the 2025 political agenda being led by conservatives to cut Medicaid and Medicare does suggest some lack of empathy toward vulnerable people (NBC News 2025), and in fact, reduced empathy is now articulated as a goal for many with conservative ideology and supportive of Trump (French, 2025; McCammon, 2025). Moreover, there is research that documents conservatives report less empathy than liberals (Hasson et al., 2018; Morris, 2020; Strupp-Levitsky et al., 2020). Finally, recent research found that psychopathic callousness (i.e., reduced empathy) was associated with conservative ideology in a large Canadian general population sample (Blais et al., 2024). Consistent with these diverse sources of information, we found that those who viewed Trump favorably (vs. those not) reported *less* affective empathy for others, and *more* enjoyment from the suffering of others. This pattern is consistent with research that finds psychopathy and other aversive

dispositions are associated with lower affective and higher dissonant empathy (Neumann et al., 2020; Vachon & Lynam, 2016). The current study also found that there was no difference between groups in cognitive empathy, suggesting that those who view Trump favorably know how others are feeling but do not care. These results are in line with research that shows persons with psychopathic propensities display a pattern of 'inverted' social reward in which being cruel is enjoyable and being kind is not (Foulkes et al., 2014). Relatedly, Strupp-Levitsky et al. (2020) found that the moral intuitions of care and fairness are positively associated with empathy, and meta-analytic research shows that these moral intuitions are associated with a liberal ideology (Kivikangas et al., 2021). Taken together, empathy disturbances help to understand the association between malevolent personality and conservative ideology/positive view of Trump.

The results suggest that the link between personality and conservative political ideology can also be understood with respect to the absence of affiliative (benevolent) dispositions (Kaufman et al., 2019; Neumann et al., 2020; Waller et al., 2021). A novel contribution of the current study is that affiliative (benevolent) propensities negatively predicted conservative ideology/positive view of Trump. In other words, a benevolent disposition predicted a liberal—non-conservative—political ideology. Moreover, individuals who did not view Trump favorably had significantly higher benevolent features, as well as lower malevolent (aversive) disposition, irrespective of age, gender, income, or minority status. And of course, the opposite pattern was found for those viewing Trump favorably (lower benevolent, higher malevolent dispositions). Thus, the balance of affiliative vs. aversive propensities may be informative for understanding the association between personality, empathy, and political ideology. Specifically, in other research we have found that a personality profile reflecting elevated benevolent in conjunction with reduced malevolent disposition was linked with higher empathy, as well as a host of other psychological factors (e.g., positive self-image, life satisfaction). This same research found that U.S. Senators with such profiles co-sponsored more legislative bills, though those with a profile of higher malevolent and lower benevolent disposition had longer tenures (Neumann et al., 2020).

As shown in Fig. 6, a benevolent disposition reflects both the presence of affiliative and the absence of aversive (psychopathic callousness) propensities. In contrast, a malevolent disposition reflects increased aversive but also reduced affiliative propensities involving moral interactions with others (Kantianism). Generally, one disposition reflects the presence of prosocial and absence of antisocial propensities, and the other the reverse. In this broader sense, the current findings align with the thinking of the renowned primatologist De Waal (2006), that human nature can be understood in part through our two closest cousins, bonobos, and chimps, where one uses primarily prosocial and the other antisocial means in social interactions—e.g., one uses sex to settle instances of aggression and the other aggression to settle matters of sex. Similarly, Marsh (2019) suggests that prosocial and antisocial tendencies have been shaped by our evolutionary history such that some individuals are inclined to be more caring (benevolent) and others more callous (malevolent) due to the integrity of a care-based neurohormonal system. And finally, Sonne and Gash (2018, p. 1) discuss benevolent versus malevolent human dispositions with respect to the “neuroplasticity and the dopaminergic reward systems in forming and reforming neural circuitry in response to personal experience and cultural influences in determining behavior in the selfish–selfless spectrum.” For all humans, there is the potential for expression of benevolent versus malevolent dispositions (Neumann et al., 2020), and aligning with a specific political ideology may reinforce such dispositions.

Clearly, political ideology is tied to a host of correlates, including personality dispositions (Verhulst et al., 2012), psychological, cognitive processes (Jost, 2021; Zmigrod et al., 2021), and genetic, neurobiological differences (Cichocka & Dhont, 2018; Nam et al., 2021). However, Jost (2021) and Chomsky (1972) have posed another consideration regarding ideologies and that is, what needs do they serve? With the

current state of extreme political sectarianism (Finkel et al., 2020), an ideology can serve as a “poisonous cocktail of othering, aversion, and moralization” (p.533) which can be used to dominate the “abhorrent” out-group (Zmigrod, 2022), and if necessary, use of political violence (Bartusevicius et al., 2020; Womick et al., 2019). Consistent with our results, research finds that malevolent propensities are linked with a need to dominate others (Foulkes et al., 2013; Glenn et al., 2017; Palmen et al., 2021). Also, individuals with these dispositions desire image enhancement and financial success (Foulkes et al., 2013).

A critical question is what can be done when malevolent propensities and social dominance lead to violent behavior? To the extent that the law becomes irrelevant for those engaging in such violence (Richer & Kunzelman, 2025), another potential brake is moral norms. However, research documents that malevolent propensities are linked with decreased sensitivity to moral norms (Luke et al., 2022; Ng et al., 2024), while a benevolent disposition is positively associated (Ng et al., 2024). People can reduce sensitivity to moral norms, especially those with malevolent dispositions, through moral disengagement (Ogunfowora et al., 2022; Travis et al., 2024). One way to do this is to attend less to moral considerations and instead focus on cherished ideological figures (Hyatt et al., 2018), and if needed, behave with malice toward significant others (AP News, 2025). Further, it appears that white Americans who perceive themselves in “last place” in the racial status hierarchy are most drawn to alt-right extremism (Cooley et al., 2024). Relatedly, we have found that psychopathic traits contribute to the prediction of anti-minority sentiments, above and beyond RWA and SDO (Roy et al., 2021). These latter findings help explain our results showing that psychopathic traits among white men were predictive of conservative ideology/positive view of Trump, beyond authoritarian and social dominance attitudes.

In this context, it is perhaps not surprising that our results were moderated by race/ethnicity. Our results, and those reported by Duckitt and Sibley (2016), indicate that the association between political ideology and RWA is stronger among the majority (white/European) persons, than among minorities. Also, among women, we found that a malevolent disposition had a much weaker effect in predicting political ideology, which may be related to the well-documented fact that on average women are lower on such features, compared to men on average (Muris et al., 2017; Neumann et al., 2012), though women tend to be higher on benevolent propensities (Neumann et al., 2020). Taken together these results suggest that dispositional and sociocultural factors play a role in the personality-ideology connection. To this point, Talaifar and colleagues found that regions in the U.S. that voted for Trump in 2016 and 2020 had high levels of neuroticism and economic deprivation, and low ethnic diversity (Talaifar et al., 2022). Also, a study of over 30,000 persons across major world regions found that lower GDP, lower progressive sex-role ideology, greater pathogen levels and higher cultural masculinity were linked to higher person-level expression of psychopathic traits (Neumann et al., 2012).

Findings of psychopathic propensities among those with a conservative ideology/positive view of Trump cannot be used to infer that they are “psychopaths”. Such a diagnosis can only be considered after extensive clinical assessment (Hare & Neumann, 2008). Critically, harsh conditions are also associated with increased levels of malevolent dispositions (Neumann et al., 2012) and related traits (de Vries et al., 2011). Perhaps it is understandable that a conservative ideology with positive view of Trump plus a dystopic view of America (PBS, 2025) is associated with a malevolent disposition. Improving sociocultural and economic status may help reduce malevolent propensities (Neumann et al., 2025).

Limitations. Our cross-sectional findings are limited to the extent that we asked about Trump's performance during his first term. His second term has opened with a salvo of norm rule-breaking, if not unconstitutional acts, and thus new research on ideology and dispositional factors of Trump supporters will be helpful. Also, it is unclear whether the conservative ideology latent variable we employed is specific to Trump,

or whether it reflects other malevolent actors more broadly. Future work might examine ideology-malevolent associations for other conservative leaders, including samples outside the U.S. We had reasonable proportions of persons with right-leaning ideologies, yet our findings are limited to the extent that our samples represented the full range of ideologies in the U.S. Our survey methodology may be seen as a limitation, though a strong (scalar) invariance approach helps to add confidence in the findings. The strategy of collecting personality data online has been successfully employed previously (de Vries et al., 2011; Rentfrow, 2010), and helps advance psychological science on real-world issues (Gosling & Mason, 2015). Also, the validity of self-reports of personality, and political ideology, via web-based assessment is methodologically sound and generalizable (Clifford et al., 2015; Vitriol et al., 2019) and comparable to face-to-face methodology (Zager Kocjan et al., 2023).

4.1. Conclusions & Implications

We examined the associations between broad dispositions with political ideology that included views of Trump. Malevolent (+) and benevolent (−) dispositions predicted this ideology. In aggregate, those favorable to Trump reported greater malevolent and lower benevolent propensities, less empathy, and more enjoyment of others suffering. Understanding the ideology that people embrace is critical (Jost, 2021), especially if it is linked with malevolence toward others. Zmigrod (2025) suggests that “repetitions of ideological rules and rituals cascades into our cells” (p. 10). In other words, ideologies may wire people’s brains differently (Hopp et al., 2023). Thus, can repetitions and rituals of a Trump-infused ideology account in part for our results? They certainly align with the political sectarianism in the U.S., one that seeks to dominate the “abhorrent” supporters of the opposing party (Finkel et al., 2020, p. 533). We hope our study can contribute to further understanding of the psychological basis of the ideological divisions in the U.S.

Data availability

The datasets used and/or analyzed during the current study available from the corresponding author on reasonable request. While this study was not preregistered, all analyses were preplanned before formal analyses.

Authors contribution

CSN originated the manuscript, conducted all analyses, and wrote the initial draft. DN and CSN edited and conducted final review.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Craig Neumann: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Visualization, Supervision, Methodology, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Darlene Ngo:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Conceptualization.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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