The voting behavior of the U.S. public in the 2016 Presidential election between Hillary Clinton and Donald J. Trump will be extensively analyzed by psychologists and political scientists to grasp the complex factors that led to a surprising election result.

Prior research suggests that individuals in the United States are sorting themselves into political parties based on personality predispositions like authoritarianism, which can be activated by perceived threat (Hetherington & Weiler, 2009). If this dynamic relationship between personality and environment is playing out in the 2016 Presidential election, this research could give further external validity to these theories.

Research has yet to explore contextual variables reflecting the environment having a possible interactive relationship with personality predispositions, like authoritarianism, on vote preference (Trump vs. Clinton) in the 2016 Presidential election.

I hypothesized the effect of personality on voting behavior will be different based on varying levels of the environment, including racial diversity or economic outcomes. For example, in areas of high racial diversity, high authoritarian will prefer Trump and low authoritarians will prefer Clinton. In areas of low racial diversity, there will be no relationship between authoritarianism and voter preference.

Methods

Participants
The participants were recruited by the Center for the Study of Political Psychology’s Presidential Election Study (CSPP-PEPS), a survey that took place over the course of the 2016 election cycle. Participants were able to take part in 4 waves of the survey, with built-in attrition. Wave 1 was July 2016, Wave 2 was September 2016, Wave 3 was October 2016, and Wave 4 was November 2016 after the election.

Procedure
STATA-Data Analysis Software was used to analyze the interaction of authoritarianism and contextual variables, that reflect the environment of the individuals taking part of the CSPP-PEPS survey, using regression models when measuring comparative candidate evaluations (CCE). Controlling for the prior Wave’s CCE score allowed the models to show the change in candidate evaluations over time, as well as relative to each other.

Measures
Waves 1, 2, and 3 used CCE as the dependent variable, which was generated by feeling thermometers that all respondents used to rate their feelings of the candidates on a scale of 0 to 100. Authoritarianism scores were generated using four child rearing questions that respondents answered in Wave 1.

Contextual variables used in interaction with authoritarianism were the county-level Gini coefficient and the zip-code level of percent below the poverty line. Both were generated using census data from 2015. All variables were recoded on a 0-1 scale.

Results

A regression analysis indicated a statistically significant interaction between authoritarianism and the county-level Gini coefficient on CCE at Wave 2 ($N = 679$; $F_{(14, 644)} = 175.45, p < 0.008$). The regression coefficients can be interpreted as percent change in CCE since all the variables are recoded on a 0-1 scale. Wave 1 CCE was controlled for in this model so the effect indicated is change in CCE between July (Wave 1) and September (Wave 2).

A separate regression analysis indicated a statistically significant interaction between authoritarianism and the zip-code level of percent below the poverty line on CCE at Wave 1 ($N = 1,267$; $F_{(4, 1257)} = 195.01, p < 0.053$).

Implications and Future Research
Although this research shows broad trends of authoritarianism and environment, the relatively small marginal differences in change of support for either candidate in the 2016 Presidential election show that further research on this topic is necessary.

Implications for this research include the possibility of an increase in the sorting of the political parties by socioeconomic class. The candidate that uses rhetoric to assuage high authoritarians in areas of high income inequality will garner more support from these individuals. Language in political campaigns that emphasizes the threat of increasing income inequality and poverty will also win support of high authoritarians.

Future research using this paradigm could help to understand the complex interactive nature of authoritarianism and other personality predispositions. Prior research showing an increase in demographic shifts, racial diversity and income inequality point to this being an important topic for the future of political discourse (Craig & Richeson, 2014; Velez & Lavine, 2017).