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A Causal Map Framework to Explain Support for Strong Leaders in Politics

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ABSTRACT

The article introduces a computational theory explaining why some people support strong leaders in politics, arguing that this support sometimes arises because people view a strong leader as means to address social problems. The theory proposes that people develop a causal map concerning the consequences of the rise of a strong leader. This predicts that support for strong leaders grows when a person believes that a strong leader fosters unity within the community, that unity is needed to address social problems and that failure to address the problems is costly. These predictions are corroborated in three experimental online studies based on vignettes. The theory clarifies why support for strong leaders is often situational (e.g., it occurs only when the leader is thought to foster unity) and why it can sometimes emerge within groups (e.g., the political left and centre) that typically dislike strong leaders as such.

1 | Introduction

Around the world, various sources have documented a recent erosion of democracy at the advantage of autocratic rule. According to Freedom House (2022), for 16 years in a row the countries that have become more authoritarian have outnumbered the countries that have become less so. Even in places like the West, where democratic institutions have resisted attack, the idea that strong leaders should be allowed to overrule democratic practices has become increasingly more acceptable within larger segments of the population (e.g., Inglehart and Norris 2017; Norris and Inglehart 2019). Given the recent success of autocratic politics, therefore, it is as important as ever to understand why people encourage, or at least tolerate, the rise of strong leaders in politics.

Much of the research in this domain has focused on the construct of authoritarian personality (e.g., Adorno et al. 1950; Altemeyer 1996; Duckitt 1989; Feldman 2003; Feldman and Stenner 1997; Oesterreich 2005; Stenner 2005). This refers to a stable psychological profile whose features are a drive to conform to social norms, intolerance of differences, desire for cultural homogeneity and support for strong leadership, all aspects which, at the empirical level, are indeed substantially correlated. The research on this construct has provided invaluable insight into the question of why people support strong leaders. Yet, the concept of authoritarian personality risks ignoring some key aspects. The first concerns the question of whether support for strong leaders should be interpreted as being primarily a personality trait or, rather, as being to a substantial extent dependent on the situation (Duckitt 1989, 2001, 2013; Jost et al. 2003; Rosier and Willig 2002; Stone et al. 1993). If it is exclusively a personality trait, then a person's support for strong leaders should be relatively stable and independent of the specific context. Alternatively, the same person may advocate a strong leadership in some contexts but oppose it in others. Some theories attribute an important role to the context by viewing authoritarian tendencies as oscillating between an inhibited state and an active state triggered by the perception of threat (e.g., Duckitt 1989, 2001, 2013; Duckitt and Sibley 2009; Jost

et al. 2003; Stenner 2005). For instance, the Dual Process Theory proposed by Duckitt (see Duckitt 2001; Duckitt and Sibley 2009) and the Authoritarian Dynamic Theory advanced by Stenner (2005) both assert that threat detection is the key situational factor fuelling support for authoritarian leaders. By emphasising the modulatory role of threat perception, these and similar proposals assign some flexibility to the authoritarian personality construct.

Yet, the literature on authoritarianism neglects some key aspects regarding the role played by the context in explaining support for strong leaders. First, research on authoritarianism does not contemplate the possibility that people may simultaneously advocate the rise of a strong leader for one society (e.g., the country of birth) while opposing it for another society (e.g., the country of residence). Empirical research on whether this can occur is lacking, and theories of authoritarianism offer little guidance on how to investigate this question. Second, theories of authoritarianism focus exclusively on one contextual factor, namely, on threat perception (e.g., Duckitt 1989, 2001, 2013; Duckitt and Sibley 2009; Jost et al. 2003; Stenner 2005). For instance, a recent authoritative review (Osborne et al. 2023) has listed threat perception alone among the potential situational factors that modulate the expression of authoritarianism. The role of other potential contextual factors remains to be explored, both theoretically and empirically. Third, the literature about authoritarian personality has yet to explain the psychological mechanisms whereby contextual factors like threat perception come into play. Altogether, therefore, the issue of how the context shapes support for strong leaders remains to be analysed in a systematic fashion, and theories of authoritarianism appear to provide limited guidance on this aspect.

Given their neglect of contextual factors, theories of authoritarianism struggle to explain certain historical cases of widespread support for strong leaders. Theories of authoritarianism can easily explain the popularity of right-wing dictators like Mussolini or Hitler, because these theories assert that authoritarianism is at the core of right-wing ideologies (e.g., Altemeyer 1996; Duckitt 1989, 2001, 2013; Jost et al. 2003). In support of this claim, a large body of empirical evidence shows that the authoritarian personality is common on the far right (e.g., Altemeyer 1996; Duckitt 1989, 2001, 2013; Jost et al. 2003). The popularity of right-wing dictators, therefore, can simply be explained as deriving from the approval they receive from the numerous authoritarian individuals on the right. Theories of authoritarianism, however, struggle to explain the popularity enjoyed by left-wing dictators like Stalin or Mao when they were in power. To be sure, recent investigations have documented the existence of authoritarianism also within the political left (Costello et al. 2022). However, this seems to be a relatively rare phenomenon, which involves only a small minority of left-wing supporters. By and large, the main tenets of left-wing ideologies reveal little sympathy for authoritarian values (Freeden et al. 2013), implying that most people on the left reject these values (Altemeyer 1996; Duckitt 1989, 2001, 2013; Jost et al. 2003). Hence, it is dubious whether the popularity of left-wing dictators like Stalin or Mao can simply be explained as driven primarily by left-wing supporters who had an authoritarian personality. Theories of authoritarianism appear to be insufficient to explain why sometimes support for strong leaderships has become popular on the left.

The aim of the present article is to introduce an alternative framework to study people's support for strong leaders, a framework that can help address the issues highlighted above and thus complement research on authoritarian personality. An assumption implicit in the construct of authoritarianism is that certain people view strong leaders as desirable as such. Yet, support from strong leaders may also ensue when a person is not particularly fond of a strong leadership as such but nonetheless views the establishment of a strong leadership as *instrumental* to achieve some important social goals. In other words, it is possible to distinguish between support for strong leadership as an *end* in and of itself, which has been the focus of research on authoritarian personality, and support for strong leadership as a *means* for achieving something else. The article focuses on the latter case, as this has received little attention. To examine it, we propose to use the notion of *causal map* as developed in the cognitive science literature (Glymour 2001, 2003; Gopnik et al. 2004; Gopnik and Tenenbaum 2007; Gopnik and Wellman 2012). A causal map describes a person's beliefs about the link between causes and effects. Applied to the sociopolitical domain, it indicates which outcomes are produced by certain social and political factors.

The key idea proposed in the article is that people represent a causal map describing the consequences predicted in response to the rise of a strong leader. According to the argument, if these consequences are desirable, then a person will support a strong leader; otherwise, the person will oppose it. We note recent investigations that have pioneered an approach akin to the one proposed here (Crimston et al. 2022; Lima et al. 2021; Selvanathan et al. 2022; Sprong et al. 2019). For example, two recent articles have revealed that support for strong leaders is associated with the belief that strong leaders can reduce anomie (Crimston et al. 2022; Sprong et al. 2019), a phenomenon occurring when social norms are weakened and the social fabric is strained. Implicit in this is the notion that participants who supported a strong leader did so not much because they liked it as such, but rather because they viewed it as means to combat anomie. By generalizing these and similar findings, the article aims at offering an explicit treatment of the idea that support for strong leaders is sometimes grounded on instrumental considerations.

As we shall argue, an important corollary is that instrumental considerations are not as stable and pervasive. Considering the example above, a person may believe that a strong leader can reduce anomie in her country of birth, but, given the marked cultural differences, not in her country of residence. The implication is that the same person will deem a strong leadership to be desirable for her birth country but not for her country of residence. As this example illustrates, more than research on authoritarian personality, our proposal stresses the situational nature of support for strong leaders. Moreover, the proposal can explain why support for strong leaders can sometimes emerge among groups (e.g., the left and the centre) who do not cherish strong leadership as such: For these groups, support for a strong leader is predicted to arise when a strong leader is viewed as instrumental to solve some important social problems.

To illustrate our proposal, we begin by describing it verbally in the next section. Next, we cast it in the terms of a computational model that uses the formalism of Bayesian belief networks

FIGURE 1 | Causal map proposed by the RDM. [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

(Holmes 2008; Williamson 2004). This will be followed by presenting the results of three empirical studies where the key predictions of the theory were tested empirically.

2 | The Roman Dictator Model (RDM)

The inspiration for our proposal lies in historical enquiry, specifically, in the history of ancient Rome. After expelling the last king, Tarquin Superbus, in 509 BCE, the Roman aristocracy designed a Republican system grounded on a sophisticated institutional arrangement whose major goal was to ensure that no one could concentrate enough power to become an autocrat (Lintott 1999). This was based on three key principles. First, the same office was occupied by multiple men simultaneously. For instance, two people shared the most important office, the consulship. Second, offices had limited duration, such as the 1-year tenure for the two consuls. Third, though the arrangement was far from a liberal democracy in the modern sense, offices to some extent could check and balance one another, such as the tribunes of the plebs who had extensive veto power.

On the basis of this institutional structure, it is evident that, during the Republican age, the Romans found the option of having a strong leader to be little palatable as such and even disgraceful—as also confirmed by the anti-authoritarian values expressed in the writings of the period (Arena et al. 2021). Yet, there is an apparent exception. In extraordinary times of military or internal crises, the Senate could appoint a dictator who was endowed with virtually absolute rule over all other magistracies (Golden 2013). Although this was meant to be temporary (the maximum duration of a dictatorship being 6 months), it represented a remarkable departure from the principle that strong leaders should be avoided. What was the reasoning behind the choice to appoint a dictator? We can infer three links within the causal chain that motivated senators to do so (see Figure 1). First, we suggest that senators thought that establishing a strong leader could foster unity within the community, helping its members to integrate and coordinate their actions. Second, the senators arguably thought that unity and coordination were necessary to succeed in addressing some pressing problems of the community, such as winning an ongoing war. Third, they believed that the crisis was severe and that unsuccess would have enormous cost. The causal reasoning introduced here to describe the senators' thinking is, we argue, generalizable to other times and places. The paradigmatic case where many people may rely on a similar causal chain is during severe war crises, a context where, according to empirical research, support for strong leaders typically surges (Nettle and Saxe 2021; Johnson 2015). In these contexts, many may reason as follows: If the risks of an ongoing war are severe (think of the World Wars), then avoiding such risks becomes an absolute priority. Success requires unity and coordination within the community (e.g., in terms of military, industrial and moral effort during the World Wars), and a strong leader is needed to achieve such unity and coordination. Therefore, many may conclude, the current situation requires a strong leader in power.

The idea we have just outlined has two key implications. First, people who employ the causal reasoning above may dislike a strong leadership in and of itself, and yet believe that in the current situation this is needed to avoid tremendous risks, thus ultimately believing that a strong leader is desirable. Second, the causal reasoning above implies a substantial degree of flexibility. In some contexts, a person may believe that the risks at stake are enormous, unity is needed, and that a strong leader is necessary to foster unity. In these contexts, the person is predicted to support a strong leadership. In other contexts, the same person may believe that risks are minor, unity is not needed or that a strong leadership disrupts unity. Here, the person will oppose the emergence of a strong leader.

In summary, we propose that sometimes support for strong leaders arises from a causal reasoning whereby strong leaders are deemed to be needed to foster unity, which, in turn, is necessary to succeed and thus to avoid tremendous costs for the community. Given that this idea is inspired by examining the institution of dictatorship in ancient Rome, we refer to our theory as the RDM. To further elucidate this idea, the next section casts the RDM in the form of a computational model.

3 | Computational Implementation

This section offers a computational formulation of the RDM grounded on the Bayesian belief networks formalism (Glymour 2001, 2003; Gopnik et al. 2004; Gopnik and Tenenbaum 2007; Gopnik and Wellman 2012; Holmes 2008; Williamson 2004). This further elucidates our argument, but it is not necessary to grasp the basic ideas, which have already been illustrated above. Therefore, the uninterested reader may decide to skip this section altogether.

When the Bayesian network formalism is applied to model the psychological mechanisms driving causal inference (Glymour 2001, 2003; Gopnik et al. 2004; Gopnik and Tenenbaum 2007; Gopnik and Wellman 2012; Holmes 2008; Williamson 2004), the idea is that the brain represents a set of variables alongside the causal relationships among the variables. This can be represented by a diagram where each circle refers to a variable represented by the brain, whereas each arrow indicates a probabilistic conditional dependency between two variables, that is, between cause and effect. The Bayesian network proposed to describe the RDM is illustrated in Figure 2. The first variable in the model, labelled LEAD, refers to the belief of whether the leadership is strong or weak. This is a categorical variable whose values can be LEAD = Strong or LEAD = Weak, each linked with a specific probability ($P(\text{LEAD} = \text{Strong}) = x$, $P(\text{LEAD} = \text{Weak}) = 1 - x$, with $0 < x < 1$). LEAD influences the variable labelled COMMUNITY, as the arrow projecting from the former to the latter indicates. COMMUNITY describes

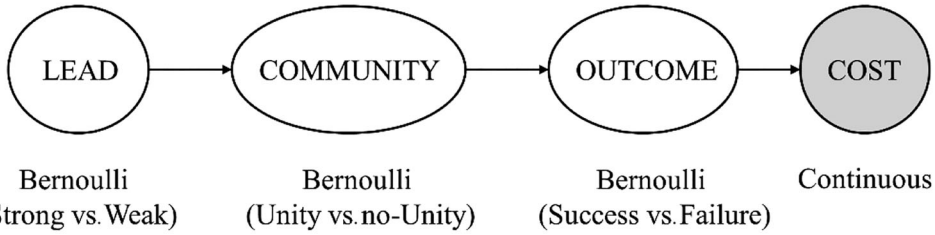

FIGURE 2 | Bayesian net model proposed by the RDM. The circle of COST is shaded to indicate that the COST variable is treated as observed to infer $P(\text{LEAD} = \text{Strong} \mid \text{COST} = 0)$.

the belief about whether people in the community are united and act in a coordinated fashion (COMMUNITY = Unity) or not (COMMUNITY = No-Unity). The influence of LEAD upon COMMUNITY is embodied by the following conditional probabilities: $P(\text{COMMUNITY} = \text{Unity} \mid \text{LEAD} = \text{Strong}) = y$; $P(\text{COMMUNITY} = \text{No-Unity} \mid \text{LEAD} = \text{Strong}) = 1 - y$; $P(\text{COMMUNITY} = \text{Unity} \mid \text{LEAD} = \text{Weak}) = z$; and $P(\text{COMMUNITY} = \text{No-Unity} \mid \text{LEAD} = \text{Weak}) = 1 - z$ (with $0.5 < y < 1$ and $0 < z < 0.5$).

The variable COMMUNITY, in turn, influences the variable OUTCOME, the latter indicating whether the major problems of the community are addressed successfully (OUTCOME = Success) or not (OUTCOME = Failure). The influence of COMMUNITY upon OUTOME is embodied by the following conditional probabilities: $P(\text{OUTCOME} = \text{Success} \mid \text{COMMUNITY} = \text{Unity}) = k$; $P(\text{OUTCOME} = \text{Failure} \mid \text{COMMUNITY} = \text{Unity}) = 1 - k$; $P(\text{OUTCOME} = \text{Success} \mid \text{COMMUNITY} = \text{No-Unity}) = j$; $P(\text{OUTCOME} = \text{Failure} \mid \text{COMMUNITY} = \text{No-Unity}) = 1 - j$ (with $0.5 < k < 1$ and $0 < j < 0.5$).

Finally, the variable OUTCOME affects the variable COST, the latter indicating the cost incurred by the community following failure or success. Although so far all variables are categorical, COST is instead continuous. The conditional probability $P(\text{COST} \mid \text{OUTCOME})$ corresponds to the following Gaussian distribution:

$$P(\text{COST}|\text{OUTCOME} = w) = \mathcal{N}(\mu_w, 1)$$

where every category of OUTCOME has its own associated expected cost captured by μ_w. Specifically, the cost expected if OUTCOME = Success is null ($\mu_{\text{Success}} = 0$), meaning that succeeding in addressing the community's problems is expected to avoid any cost. Meanwhile, the cost expected if OUTCOME = Failure (μ_{Failure}) is a positive number (the higher the number, the higher the cost), meaning that failing to address the community's problems is expected to be somewhat costly.

In summary, the joint probability of the Bayesian network is the following:

$$P(\text{LEAD}, \text{COMMUNITY}, \text{OUTCOME}, \text{COST})$$

$$= P(\text{LEAD})\, P(\text{COMMUNITY}|\text{LEAD})$$

$$P(\text{OUTCOME}|\text{COMMUNITY})\, P(\text{COST}|\text{OUTCOME})$$

We propose that the network is employed by a person to judge whether a strong leadership is desirable or not. This judgement is based on setting the cost variable to zero (COST = 0) and on adopting Bayesian inference to estimate the posterior probability of the LEAD variable, that is, to estimate $P(\text{LEAD} \mid \text{COST} = 0)$. This will correspond to $P(\text{LEAD} = \text{Strong} \mid \text{COST} = 0) = i$ and to $P(\text{LEAD} = \text{Weak} \mid \text{COST} = 0) = 1 - i$ (with $0 < i < 1$). If $P(\text{LEAD} = \text{Strong} \mid \text{COST} = 0) > P(\text{LEAD} = \text{Weak} \mid \text{COST} = 0)$, then the person will conclude that a strong leader is desirable (and the higher the difference, the higher the desirability). Otherwise, the conclusion will be that a strong leader is undesirable. The intuition behind this is that a person begins by assuming that costs will be minimized (by setting COST = 0). On this basis, the person establishes whether supporting a strong or weak leadership is the best option in terms of minimizing costs (by estimating $P(\text{LEAD} \mid \text{COST} = 0)$.

The implications of this proposal are explored in a set of simulations illustrated in Figures 3–8. The results of the simulations can be summarized as follows:

- When the prior probability of a strong leader ($P(\text{LEAD} = \text{Strong})$ increases, the person will be more prone to support a strong leader independent of other factors (Figure 3). This captures one's propensity to desire strong leaders as such, independent of the instrumental consequences, and can be interpreted as reflecting the essence of the authoritarian personality construct.
- When the conditional probability $P(\text{COMMUNITY} = \text{Unity} \mid \text{LEAD} = \text{Strong})$ increases, the person will be more prone to support a strong leader independent of other factors (Figure 4). Likewise, when the conditional probability $P(\text{COMMUNITY} = \text{No-Unity} \mid \text{LEAD} = \text{Weak})$ increases, the person will be more prone to support a strong leader independent of other factors (Figure 5). This captures one's propensity to desire strong leaders when they are thought to increase the chance to foster unity within a community.
- When the conditional probability $P(\text{OUTCOME} = \text{Success} \mid \text{COMMUNITY} = \text{Unity})$ increases, the person will be more prone to support a strong leader independent of other factors (Figure 6). Likewise, when the conditional probability $P(\text{OUTCOME} = \text{Failure} \mid \text{COMMUNITY} = \text{No-Unity})$ increases, the person will be more prone to support a strong leader independent of other factors (Figure 7). This captures one's propensity to desire strong leaders when unity is thought to increase the chance of succeeding in solving the community's problems.
- When the cost of failure increases, the person will be more prone to support a strong leader independent of other factors (Figure 8). This captures one's propensity to desire strong leaders when failing to address the problems faced by the community is deemed to be costly.

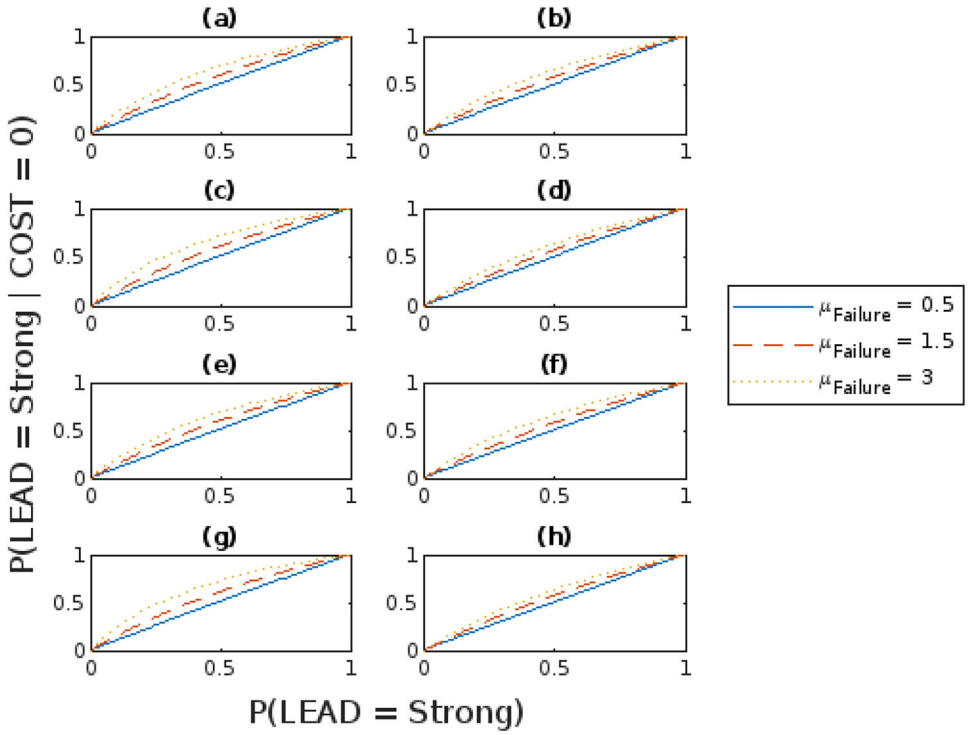

FIGURE 3 | Influence of *P*(LEAD) for different parameter sets. Default parameters are *P*(COMMUNITY = Unity | LEAD = Strong) = 0.8; *P*(COMMUNITY = No-Unity | LEAD = Weak) = 0.8; *P*(OUTCOME = Success | COMMUNITY = Unity) = 0.8; *P*(OUTCOME = Failure | COMMUNITY = No-Unity) = 0.8. In different scenarios, one of the default parameters is varied, specifically: (a) *P*(COMMUNITY = Unity | LEAD = Strong) = 0.9; (b) *P*(COMMUNITY = Unity | LEAD = Strong) = 0.7; (c) *P*(COMMUNITY = No-Unity | LEAD = Weak) = 0.9; (d) *P*(COMMUNITY = No-Unity | LEAD = Weak) = 0.7; (e) *P*(OUTCOME = Success | COMMUNITY = Unity) = 0.9; (f) *P*(OUTCOME = Success | COMMUNITY = Unity) = 0.7; (g) *P*(OUTCOME = Failure | COMMUNITY = No-Unity) = 0.9; (h) *P*(OUTCOME = Failure | COMMUNITY = No-Unity) = 0.7. [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

In summary, the RDM can be implemented in the form of a computational model on the basis of the Bayesian belief networks formalism. This approach is particularly suitable to model causal maps, which are at the core of the RDM. The network describes beliefs about whether a strong leadership fosters unity, about whether unity leads to success and about the costs of failure. According to the model, these beliefs are relied upon to infer whether a strong leadership is desirable or not. This framework implies a set of predictions concerning how the different links within the causal chain affect the desire for strong leaders. Below, these predictions will be reframed in terms of specific empirical hypotheses.

4 | Empirical Predictions

From the RDM, it is possible to derive a set of key empirical hypotheses:

H1. *If, by experimental manipulation, the belief that strong leaders foster unity and coordination within the community (leader/unity) is strengthened, then support for strong leaders will grow.*

H2. *If, by experimental manipulation, the belief that unity and coordination are needed to address social problems (unity/success) is strengthened, then support for strong leaders will grow.*

H3. *If, by experimental manipulation, the belief that failing to address social problems entails huge costs (failure/cost) is strengthened, then support for strong leaders will grow.*

These hypotheses are all causal. Moreover, the predicted effects are all independent of a person's ideological orientation; namely, they imply no interaction with one's ideology. Below, we report the results of three experimental studies where these hypotheses were tested in turn.

Before presenting the empirical studies, a clarification on the computational version of the RDM is necessary. The purpose of developing a computational implementation of the RDM is to formalize the logic of the theory, with the aim of making it clearer and less ambiguous. It is not to provide a model that can be fitted to the empirical data. So, when analysing the empirical studies below, we will not use the computational model to fit the data. We will simply use standard statistical methods to test the three hypotheses that we have derived from the RDM (H1, H2 and H3).

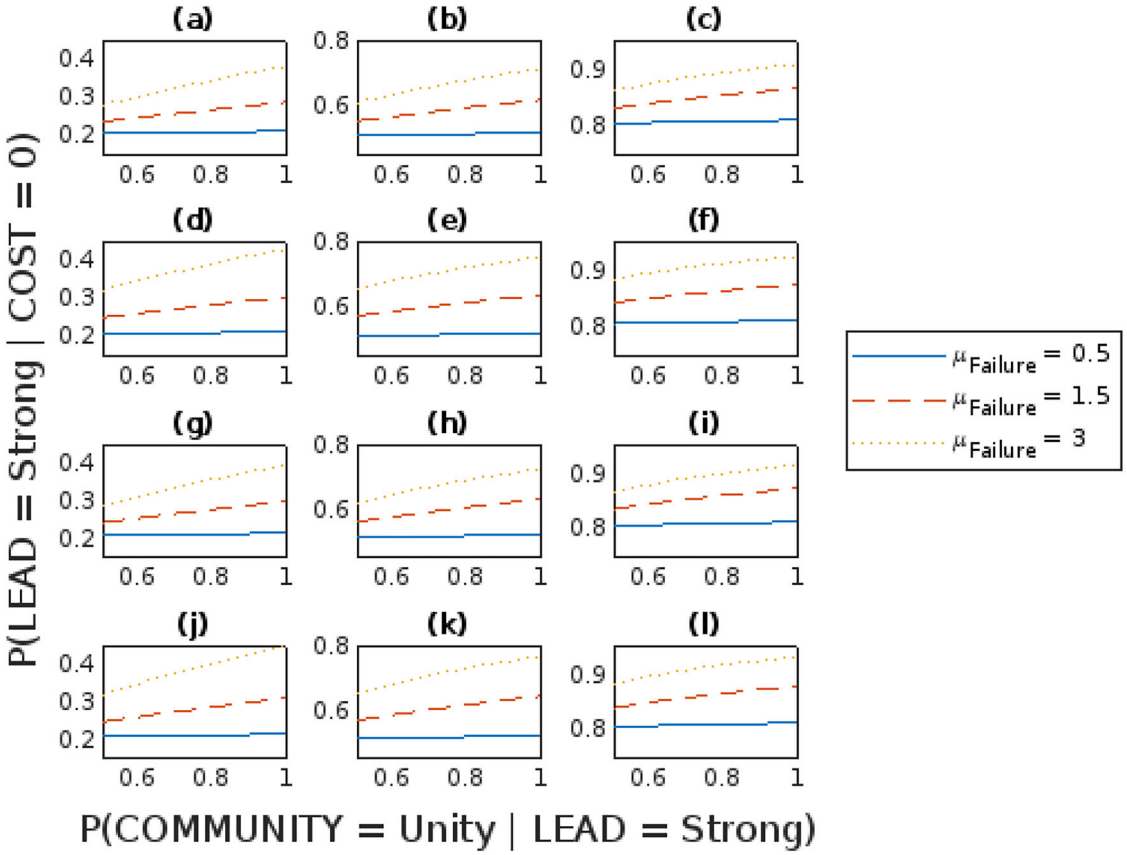

FIGURE 4 | Influence of P(COMMUNITY = Unity | LEAD = Strong) for different parameter sets. P(LEAD = Strong) = 0.2 for (a), (d), (g) and (j); P(LEAD = Strong) = 0.5 for (b), (e), (h) and (k); P(LEAD = Strong) = 0.8 for (c), (f), (e) and (l). Default parameters are P(COMMUNITY = No-Unity | LEAD = Weak) = 0.8; P(OUTCOME = Success | COMMUNITY = Unity) = 0.8; P(OUTCOME = Failure | COMMUNITY = No-Unity) = 0.8. In some scenarios, one default parameter is varied, specifically: (d–f) P(COMMUNITY = No-Unity | LEAD = Weak) = 0.9; (g–i) P(OUTCOME = Success | COMMUNITY = Unity) = 0.9; (j–l) P(OUTCOME = Failure | COMMUNITY = No-Unity) = 0.9. [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

5 | Study 1

Study 1 focused on the first link of the causal chain (H1 above), the one concerning the effect of strong leadership on unity. Specifically, the prediction is that support for a strong leader grows when a person believes that a strong leader fosters unity within the community. To test this prediction, we employed a within-subject design where participants were presented with vignettes in which a strong leader was described as fostering unity (Unity condition), and we compared these against vignettes in which a strong leader was described as not fostering unity (No-Unity condition). We predicted that support for the leader was higher in the former compared to the latter condition. Moreover, we predicted that this effect emerged among right-wing participants as well as among left-wing participants.

5.1 | Participants

A sample of 100 British participants (age: mean = 43.14, SD = 15.37; 50 females) was recruited online from the Prolific website (no data were excluded). The sample size was established a priori employing the G-power software (Faul et al. 2009) applied to a paired sample t-test and assuming effect size $d_z = 0.05$, statistical power $1 - \beta = 0.95$, and probability of Type I error $\alpha = 0.05$. This requires 53 participants, which was increased to 100. The pre-screening system offered by Prolific was employed in such a way that half of the participants had previously reported a right-wing ideology, and half had reported a left-wing ideology.

All studies, measures, manipulations and data/participant exclusions are reported in the manuscript. Data were analysed using IBM SPSS, and the model simulations were run in Matlab. The design and analysis of this and of the following studies were not preregistered.

5.2 | Measures and Procedure

Participants were presented with three pairs of vignettes—all vignettes are reported in Table 1. One vignette of the first pair was the following:

> Consider the following hypothetical scenario. The land of Bamboolia has been unexpectedly attacked by a much stronger country. To deal with the war, Bamboolia's citizens have decided to give their president absolute power. During the war, the president fosters unity, cohesion, and coordination within the country.

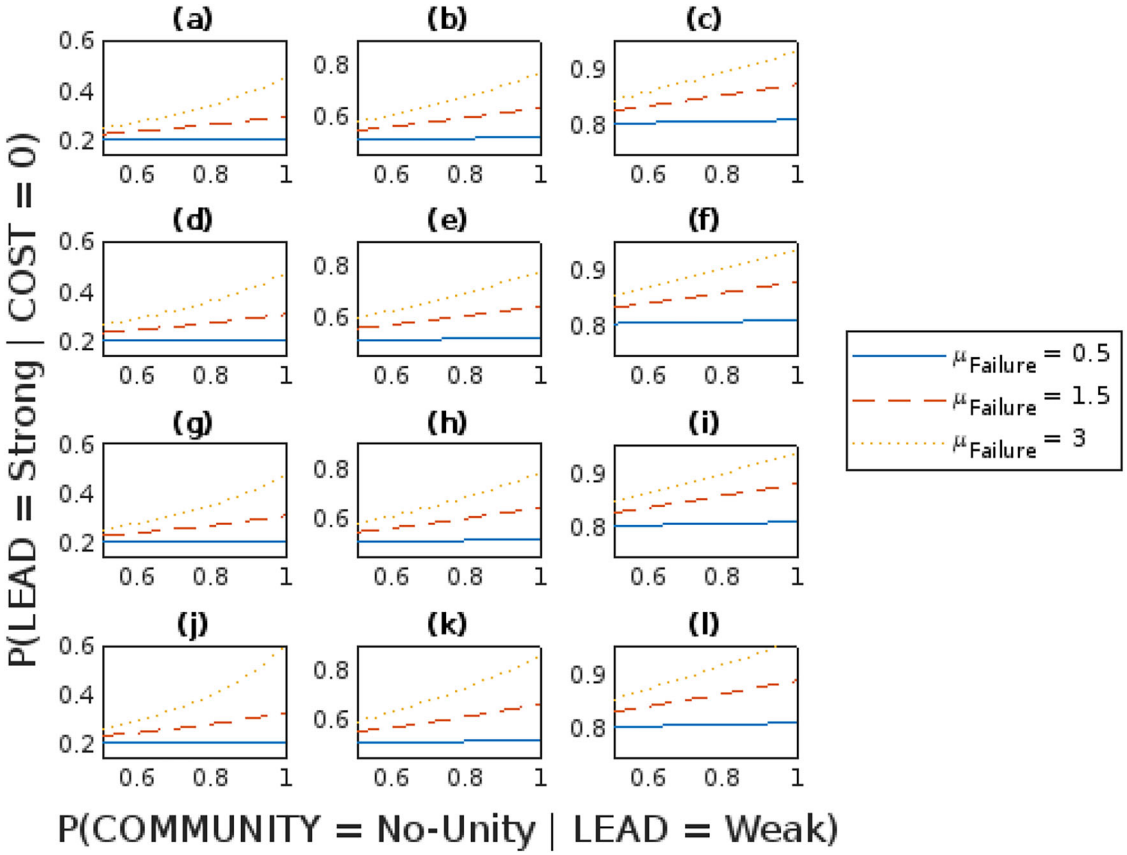

FIGURE 5 | Influence of *P*(COMMUNITY = No-Unity | LEAD = Weak) for different parameter sets. *P*(LEAD = Strong) = 0.2 for (a), (d), (g) and (j); *P*(LEAD = Strong) = 0.5 for (b), (e), (h) and (k); *P*(LEAD = Strong) = 0.8 for (c), (f), (e) and (l). Default parameters are *P*(COMMUNITY = Unity | LEAD = Strong) = 0.8; *P*(OUTCOME = Success | COMMUNITY = Unity) = 0.8; *P*(OUTCOME = Failure | COMMUNITY = No-Unity) = 0.8. In some scenarios, one default parameter is varied, specifically: (d–f) *P*(COMMUNITY = Unity | LEAD = Strong) = 0.9; (g–i) *P*(OUTCOME = Success | COMMUNITY = Unity) = 0.9; (j–l) *P*(OUTCOME = Failure | COMMUNITY = No-Unity) = 0.9. [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

> Do you think that the citizens' decision to give absolute power to the president was good or bad?

Participants could select 'Very bad' (1), 'Bad' (2), 'Neither good nor bad' (3), 'Good' (4) or 'Very good' (5) as options. The other vignette of the same pair was equivalent except that the fourth sentence was replaced with '*During the war, the president ensures that everyone can act in an autonomous and independent way*'. The first vignette belongs to the Unity condition, the second belongs to the No-Unity condition. The order of the vignettes was randomized across participants. The other pairs also included one Unity and one No-Unity condition—multiple pairs were included to ensure that any effect was not restricted to a particular scenario. The Unity score was derived by summing across Unity vignettes; the No-Unity score was derived by summing across No-Unity vignettes (note that, for each condition, the total score could range between 3 and 15). We also assessed participants' ideological orientation with the item 'Please indicate whether your political ideas fit more with the right or with the left', with options being 'Right' (1), 'Moderate right' (2), 'Centre' (3), 'Moderate left' (4) and 'Left' (5).

Data collection was carried out online using the software Qualtrics. Answering the questions took approximately 3 min and was paid £0.3.

5.3 | Statistical Analyses

For this and for the following studies, we analysed the data by running a set of paired-sample *t*-tests and ANOVAs. Paired-sample *t*-tests require that the difference between the paired observations should be approximately normally distributed. We evaluated this by assessing the skewness and kurtosis of the distribution of the difference—we employed this approach because it does not depend on the sample size, and it is therefore preferable when sample sizes are large, like in our case (Kline 2023). Following standard guidelines, we used a cut-off of |Skewness| > 2 and |Kurtosis| > 7 to identify deviations from normality (Kline 2023). In all cases, the values for skewness and kurtosis were within the limits, implying that the assumptions of the paired-sample *t*-tests were satisfied.

We also ran a set of two-by-two mixed ANOVAs. This method requires assessing two assumptions (note that the assumption of sphericity is not applicable to two-by-two ANOVA). The first is that the residuals for each combination of the between-subjects factor and the within-subjects factor are normally distributed. We assessed this by using again the cut-off of |Skewness| > 2 and |Kurtosis| > 7. The second assumption is that the variance of the dependent variable should be homogeneous across between-subjects factors. This was assessed using the

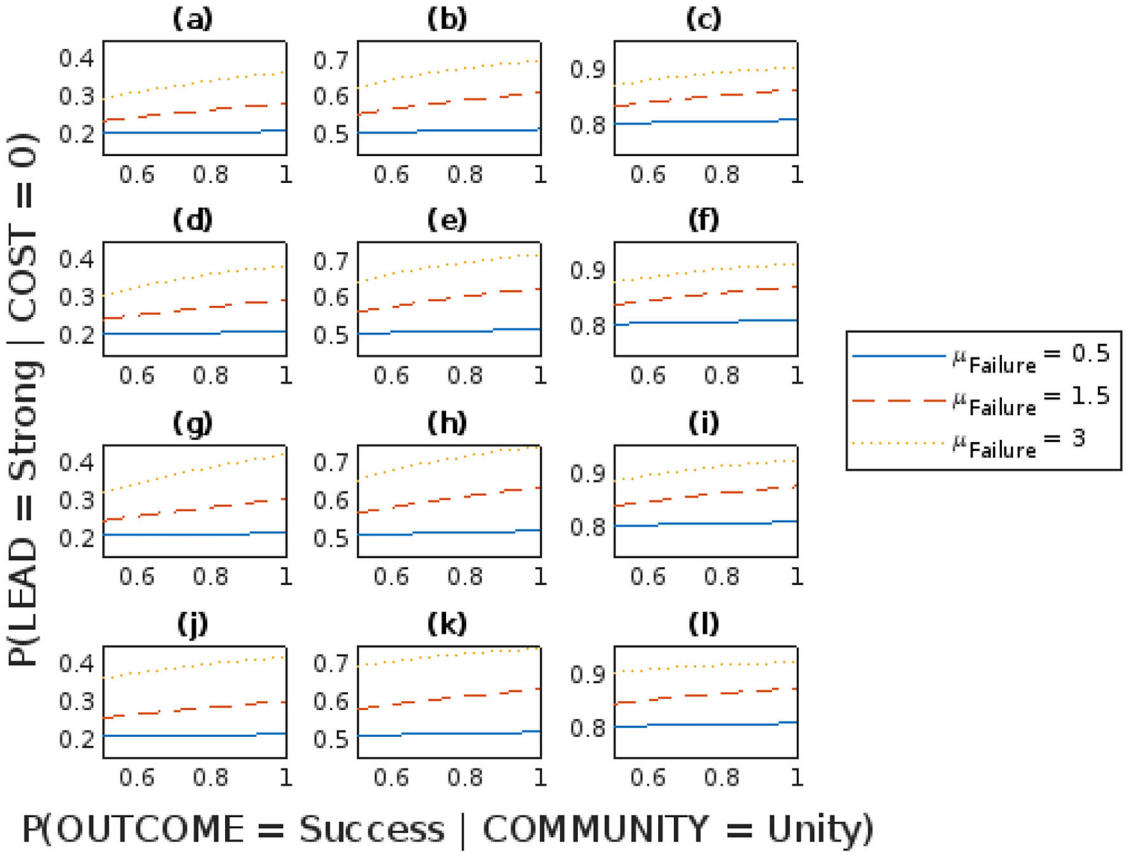

FIGURE 6 | Influence of P(OUTCOME = Success | COMMUNITY = Unity) for different parameter sets. P(LEAD = Strong) = 0.2 for (a), (d), (g) and (j); P(LEAD = Strong) = 0.5 for (b), (e), (h) and (k); P(LEAD = Strong) = 0.8 for (c), (f), (e) and (l). Default parameters are P(COMMUNITY = Unity | LEAD = Strong) = 0.8; P(COMMUNITY = No-Unity | LEAD = Weak) = 0.8; P(OUTCOME = Failure | COMMUNITY = No-Unity) = 0.8. In some scenarios, one default parameter is varied, specifically: (d–f) P(COMMUNITY = Unity | LEAD = Strong) = 0.9; (g–i) P(COMMUNITY = No-Unity | LEAD = Weak) = 0.9; (j–l) P(OUTCOME = Failure | COMMUNITY = No-Unity) = 0.9. [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

Levene's test. Both assumptions of the ANOVAs were never violated.

Finally, when looking at the distribution of the variables included in the analyses, we found no outliers, further supporting the conclusion that the results of the *t*-tests and ANOVAs are robust.

5.4 | Results

The Unity score was on average 11.09 (SD = 2.51, skewness = −0.92, kurtosis = 1.18), and the No-Unity score was on average 8.36 (SD = 2.56, skewness = 0.07, kurtosis = −0.57). The difference between the two conditions was statistically significant ($t(99) = 8.37$, $p < 0.001$, $d = 0.84$, 95% CI [0.61, 1.06]).

To assess whether the effect emerged on both sides of the ideological spectrum, we separated left-wing participants (those reporting 'Left' or 'Moderately left') from right-wing participants (those reporting 'Right' or 'Moderately right'). The Unity score was significantly higher than the No-Unity score in both left-wing ($t(49) = 5.86$, $p < 0.001$, $d = 0.83$, 95% CI for d [0.50, 1.15]) and right-wing participants ($t(45) = 5.53$, $p < 0.001$, $d = 0.82$, 95% CI for d [0.48, 1.15]). To establish whether the effect differs across ideologies, we ran a mixed ANOVA having Unity versus No-Unity as within-subjects factor and ideology (left vs. right) as between-subjects factor (Figure 9). This analysis revealed a significant effect for Unity versus No-Unity ($F(1,94) = 64.90$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta_P^2 = 0.408$) alongside a non-significant effect for ideology ($F(1,94) = 2.76$, $p = 0.100$, $\eta_P^2 = 0.029$), with no interaction between the two factors ($F(1,97) = 0.09$, $p = 0.762$, $\eta_P^2 = 0.001$).

Altogether, these observations corroborate the hypothesis that support for a strong leader surges when people believe that the leader fosters unity and cohesion within a community. Furthermore, the data demonstrate that this effect is not restricted to a specific political orientation, because it emerges both on the right and on the left. These observations are also consistent with recent correlational and experimental evidence showing that support for a strong leader grows when people believe that the leader's actions can diminish anomie (Crimston et al. 2022; Sprong et al. 2019). In line with our findings, a diminished level of anomie can be interpreted as an example of greater unity and cohesion.

6 | Study 2

The purpose of Study 2 was to test causality regarding the next link of the causal chain (H2 above), the one concerning the effect of social unity upon success. The RDM predicts that support for a

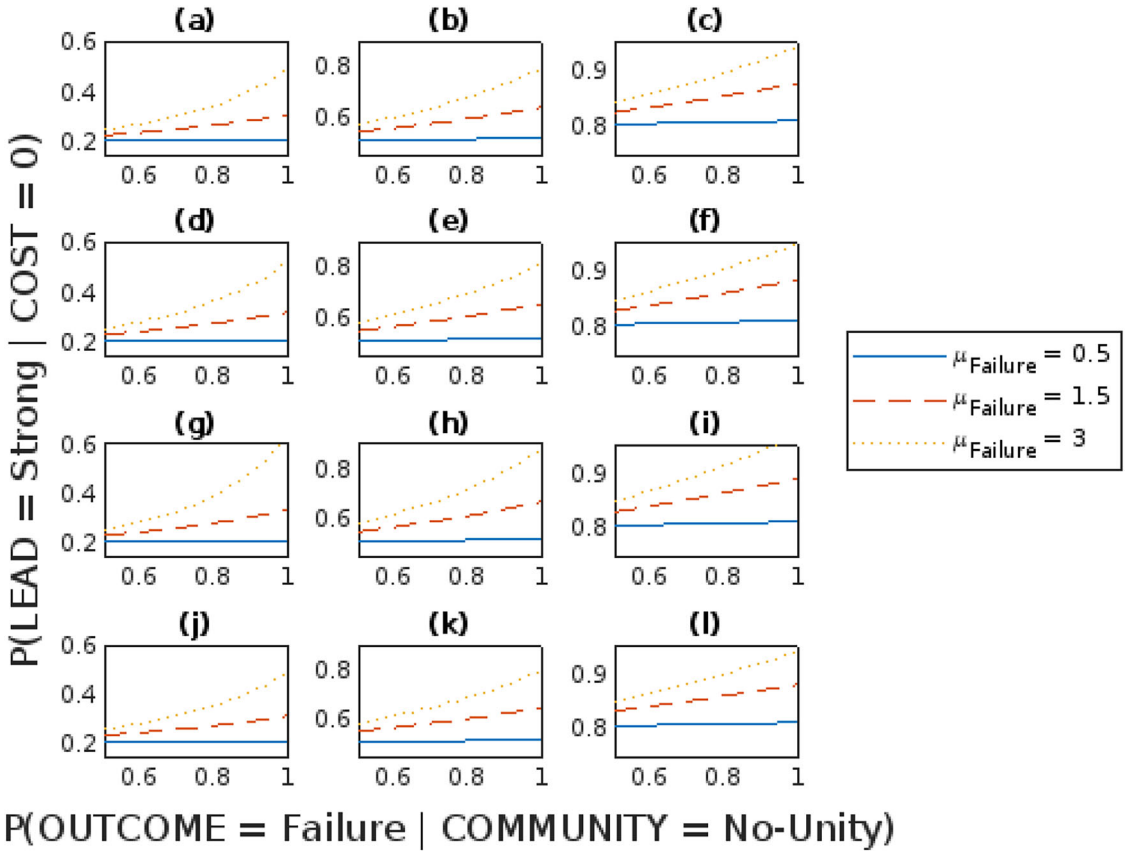

FIGURE 7 | Influence of P(OUTCOME = Failure | COMMUNITY = No-Unity) for different parameter sets. P(LEAD = Strong) = 0.2 for (a), (d), (g) and (j); P(LEAD = Strong) = 0.5 for (b), (e), (h) and (k); P(LEAD = Strong) = 0.8 for (c), (f), (e) and (l). Default parameters are P(COMMUNITY = Unity | LEAD = Strong) = 0.8; P(COMMUNITY = No-Unity | LEAD = Weak) = 0.8; P(OUTCOME = Success | COMMUNITY = Unity) = 0.8. In some scenarios, one default parameter is varied, specifically: (d–f) P(COMMUNITY = Unity | LEAD = Strong) = 0.9; (g–i) P(COMMUNITY = No-Unity | LEAD = Weak) = 0.9; (j–l) P(OUTCOME = Success | COMMUNITY = Unity) = 0.9. [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

strong leader grows when a person believes that unity within the community leads to success. To test this prediction, we employed a within-subject design where participants were presented with a vignette in which social unity was described as necessary for success (Unity condition), and we compared this against a vignette in which personal autonomy, and not social unity, was described as necessary for success (Autonomy condition). We predicted that support for a strong leader was higher in the former compared to the latter condition. Moreover, we predicted that this effect emerged among right-wing participants as well as among left-wing participants.

6.1 | Participants

A new sample of 100 British participants (age: mean = 46.28, SD = 15.33; 47 females) was recruited online from the Prolific website (no data were excluded). The sample size was established a priori employing the G-power software (Faul et al. 2009) applied to a paired sample t-test and assuming effect size $d_z = 0.05$, statistical power $1 - \beta = 0.95$, and probability of Type I error $\alpha = 0.05$. This requires 53 participants, which was increased to 100. The pre-screening system offered by Prolific was employed in such a way that half of the participants had previously reported a right-wing ideology, and half had reported a left-wing ideology.

6.2 | Measures and Procedure

Participants were presented with two vignettes whose order was randomized across participants. The vignette associated with the Unity condition was the following:

> Consider the following hypothetical scenario. The country of Bamboolia is facing some challenges. To meet these challenges, it is necessary that the population is unite, cohesive, and coordinated. To deal with these challenges, Bamboolia's citizens have decided to give their president absolute power. Do you think that the citizens' decision to give absolute power to the president was good or bad?

Participants could select 'Very bad' (1), 'Bad' (2), 'Neither good nor bad' (3), 'Good' (4) or 'Very good' (5) as options. The vignette associated with the Autonomy condition was the following (participants could select among the same options as for the other vignette):

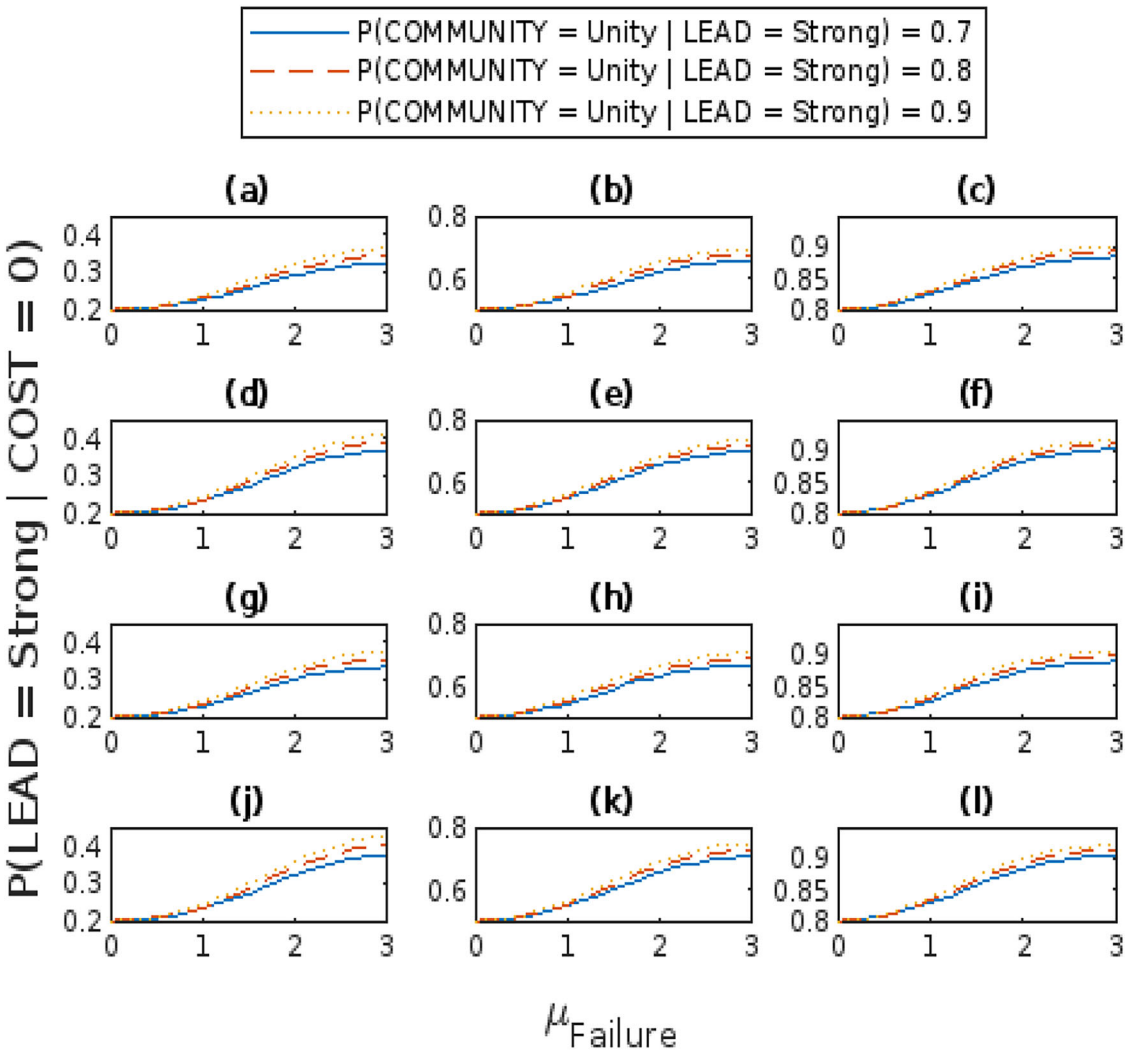

FIGURE 8 | Influence of $\mu_{Failure}$ for different parameter sets. P(LEAD = Strong) = 0.2 for (a), (d), (g) and (j); P(LEAD = Strong) = 0.5 for (b), (e), (h) and (k); P(LEAD = Strong) = 0.8 for (c), (f), (e) and (l). Default parameters are P(COMMUNITY = No-Unity | LEAD = Weak) = 0.8; P(OUTCOME = Success | COMMUNITY = Unity) = 0.8; P(OUTCOME = Failure | COMMUNITY = No-Unity) = 0.8. In some scenarios, one default parameter is varied, specifically: (d–f) P(COMMUNITY = No-Unity | LEAD = Weak) = 0.9; (g–i) P(OUTCOME = Success | COMMUNITY = Unity) = 0.9; (j–l) P(OUTCOME = Failure | COMMUNITY = No-Unity) = 0.9. [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

> Consider the following hypothetical scenario. The country of Bamboolia is facing some challenges. To meet these challenges, it is necessary that each individual person finds her/his unique solution and acts autonomously. To deal with these challenges, Bamboolia's citizens have decided to give their president absolute power. Do you think that the citizens' decision to give absolute power to the president was good or bad?

We also measured ideological orientation as in Study 1. Data collection was carried out online using the software Qualtrics. Answering the questions took approximately 3 min and was paid £0.3.

6.3 | Results

The Unity score was on average 2.37 (SD = 1.18, skewness = 0.41, kurtosis = −1.09), and the Autonomy score was on average 2.05 (SD = 0.94, skewness = 0.73, kurtosis = −0.21). The difference between the two conditions was statistically significant ($t(99) = 3.93$, $p < 0.001$, $d = 0.39$, 95% CI [0.19, 0.60]).

To assess whether the effect emerged on both sides of the ideological spectrum, we separated left-wing participants (those reporting 'Left' or 'Moderately left') from right-wing participants (those reporting 'Right' or 'Moderately right'). The Unity score was significantly higher than the Autonomy score in both left-wing ($t(49) = 2.53$, $p = 0.015$, $d = 0.36$, 95% CI for d [0.7, 0.64] and right-wing participants ($t(49) = 3.02$, $p = 0.004$, $d = 0.43$, 95% CI for d [0.13, 0.71]). To establish whether the effect differs

TABLE 1 | Vignettes employed in Study 1.

Vignette	Condition
Consider the following hypothetical scenario. The land of Bamboolia has been unexpectedly attacked by a much stronger country. To deal with the war, Bamboolia's citizens have decided to give their president absolute power. During the war, the president fosters unity, cohesion and coordination within the country. Do you think that the citizens' decision to give absolute power to the president was good or bad?	Unity
Consider the following hypothetical scenario. The land of Bamboolia has been unexpectedly attacked by a much stronger country. To deal with the war, Bamboolia's citizens have decided to give their president absolute power. During the war, the president ensures that everyone can act in an autonomous and independent way. Do you think that the citizens' decision to give absolute power to the president was good or bad?	No-Unity
Consider the following hypothetical scenario. There is a tremendous pandemic outbreak in the land of Bamboolia. To deal with the pandemic, Bamboolia's citizens have decided to give their president absolute power. During the pandemic, the president fosters unity, cohesion and coordination within the country. Do you think that the citizens' decision to give absolute power to the president was good or bad?	Unity
Consider the following hypothetical scenario. There is a tremendous pandemic outbreak in the land of Bamboolia. To deal with the pandemic, Bamboolia's citizens have decided to give their president absolute power. During the pandemic, the president ensures that everyone can act in an autonomous and independent way. Do you think that the citizens' decision to give absolute power to the president was good or bad?	No-Unity
Consider the following hypothetical scenario. The land of Bamboolia has been hit by a tremendous tsunami. To deal with the disaster, Bamboolia's citizens have decided to give their president absolute power. During this time, the president fosters unity, cohesion and coordination within the country. Do you think that the citizens' decision to give absolute power to the president was good or bad?	Unity
Consider the following hypothetical scenario. The land of Bamboolia has been hit by a tremendous tsunami. To deal with the disaster, Bamboolia's citizens have decided to give their president absolute power. During this time, the president ensures that everyone can act in an autonomous and independent way. Do you think that the citizens' decision to give absolute power to the president was good or bad?	No-Unity

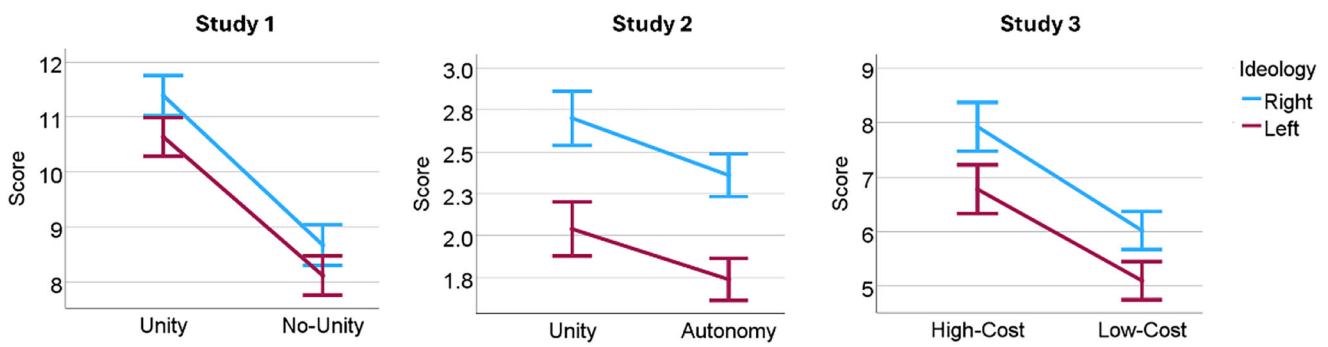

FIGURE 9 | Results of Studies 1, 2 and 3. Error bars represent standard errors. [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

across ideologies, we ran a mixed ANOVA having Unity versus Autonomy as within-subjects factor and ideology (left vs. right) as between-subjects factor (Figure 9). Although this analysis revealed a main effect for Unity versus Autonomy ($F(1,98) = 15.27$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta_P^2 = 0.135$) and for ideology ($F(1,98) = 11.76$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta_P^2 = 0.107$), no interaction between the two factors emerged ($F(1,98) = 0.06$, $p = 0.808$, $\eta_P^2 = 0.001$).

Altogether, these observations corroborate the hypothesis that support for a strong leader surges when people believe that unity within the community leads to success. Furthermore, the data demonstrate that this effect is not restricted to a specific political orientation, as it emerges both on the right and on the left.

7 | Study 3

Study 3 aimed at testing the last link of the causal chain (H3 above), the one concerning the effect of the cost associated with failing to address social problems. The RDM predicts that support for strong leaders grows when a person believes that failure is linked with high costs. To understand the specific nature of this prediction, it is instructive to consider it vis-à-vis theories of authoritarian personality. These assert that authoritarian tendencies are aroused when a person feels threatened. In support of this, correlational studies have documented a link between threat perception and authoritarian attitudes (e.g., Altemeyer 1996; Duckitt 2001; Jost et al. 2003: Peterson et al. 1993). Meanwhile, experimental research has demonstrated that author-

itarian tendencies are magnified when a person feels threatened (e.g., Duckitt and Fisher 2003; Jugert and Duckitt 2009; Sales and Friend 1973). There is an evident similarity between the notion that support for strong leaders grows when a person feels threatened (as proposed by theories of authoritarian personality) and the notion that support for strong leaders surges when failure is costly (as advanced by the RDM). This is because, typically, the costs of failure increase when a person feels threatened. Yet, this is not always the case: Sometimes, the cost of failure may be high even if a person is not directly threatened. As an example, consider a case where a person is asked to judge whether a strong leader is desirable for a hypothetical society facing a severe threat in comparison with a hypothetical society facing a mild threat. Being the scenario entirely fictitious, here the person is not threatened directly. Will the person deem a strong leader to be more desirable for the hypothetical society facing severe threat compared to the society facing mild threat? As the person does not feel directly threatened in either, theories of authoritarian personality predict no difference concerning support for strong leader. By contrast, as the cost of failure is higher for the hypothetical society facing severe threat, the RDM predicts that support for a strong leader will be larger for this hypothetical society.

In this domain, another distinction should be highlighted between theories of authoritarian personality and the RDM. The former assert that threat perception boosts support for strong leaders only in predisposed people, mainly right-wing supporters. By contrast, the RDM predicts that, when the costs of failure are high, support for strong leaders is boosted equally across all ideological groups.

The present study aimed at assessing whether support for strong leaders grows when failure is predicted to be linked with high costs. To ensure that the effect does not emerge because participants feel threatened themselves, they were asked to make judgements about hypothetical societies. We employed a within-subject design where participants were presented with vignettes in which the potential costs of failure were described as high (High-Cost condition), and we compared these against vignettes in which these costs were described as low (Low-Cost condition). We predicted that support for a strong leader was higher in the former compared to the latter condition. Moreover, we predicted that this effect emerged among right-wing participants as well as among left-wing participants.

7.1 | Participants

A new sample of 100 British participants (age: mean = 44.02, SD = 14.79; 35 females) was recruited online from the Prolific website (no data were excluded). The sample size was established a priori employing the G-power software (Faul et al. 2009) applied to a paired sample *t*-test and assuming effect size $d_z = 0.05$, statistical power $1 - \beta = 0.95$, and probability of Type I error $\alpha = 0.05$. This requires 53 participants, which was increased to 100. The pre-screening system offered by Prolific was employed in such a way that half of the participants had previously reported a right-wing ideology, and half had reported a left-wing ideology.

7.2 | Measures and Procedure

Participants were presented with the vignettes reported in Table 2, with the order randomized across participants. Some vignettes depicted a scenario where society was described as facing a severe threat, thus implying high cost of failure (High-Cost condition), for instance:

> Consider the following hypothetical scenario. Bamboolia is a little country where, recently, a terroristic attack has killed 10,000 people. To deal with the situation, Bamboolia's citizens have decided to give their president absolute power. Do you think that the citizens' decision to give absolute power to the president was good or bad?

Other vignettes depicted a scenario where society was described as facing a mild threat, thus implying low costs of failure (Low-Cost condition). For instance, one was equivalent to the one displayed above except that the second sentence was replaced with '*Bamboolia is a little country where, recently, a terroristic attack has killed 3 people*'. After being presented with a vignette, participants could select 'Very bad' (1), 'Bad' (2), 'Neither good nor bad' (3), 'Good' (4) or 'Very good' (5) as options. The High-Cost score was derived by summing across High-Cost vignettes; the Low-Cost score was derived by summing across Low-Cost vignettes (note that, for each condition, the total score could range between 3 and 15). We also measured ideological orientation as in Study 1.

Data collection was carried out online using the software Qualtrics. Answering the questions took approximately 3 min and was paid £0.3.

7.3 | Results

The High-Cost score was on average 7.33 (SD = 3.16, skewness = 0.11, kurtosis = −1.16), and the Low-Cost score was on average 5.54 (SD = 2.48, skewness = 0.74, kurtosis = −0.25). The difference between the two conditions was statistically significant ($t(99) = 7.93$, $p < 0.001$, $d = 0.79$, 95% CI [0.57, 1.02]).

To assess whether the effect emerged on both sides of the ideological spectrum, we separated left-wing participants (those reporting 'Left' or 'Moderately left') from right-wing participants (those reporting 'Right' or 'Moderately right'). The High-Cost score was significantly higher than the Low-Cost score in both left-wing ($t(49) = 5.94$, $p < 0.001$, $d = 0.85$, 95% CI for d [0.52, 1.17]) and right-wing participants ($t(49) = 5.29$, $p < 0.001$, $d = 0.75$, 95% CI for d [0.43, 1.04]). To establish whether the effect differs across ideologies, we ran a mixed ANOVA having High-Cost versus Low-Cost as within-subjects factor and ideology (left vs. right) as between-subjects factor (Figure 9). Although this analysis revealed a main effect for High-Cost versus Low-Cost ($F(1,97) = 60.91$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta_P^2 = 0.386$) and for ideology ($F(1,97) = 3.98$, $p = 0.049$, $\eta_P^2 = 0.039$), no interaction between the two factors emerged ($F(1,97) = 0.25$, $p = 0.622$, $\eta_P^2 = 0.003$).

TABLE 2 | Vignettes employed in Study 3.

Vignette	Condition
Consider the following hypothetical scenario. Bamboolia is a little country where, recently, a terroristic attack has killed three people. To deal with the situation, Bamboolia's citizens have decided to give their president absolute power. Do you think that the citizens' decision to give absolute power to the president was good or bad?	Low-Cost
Consider the following hypothetical scenario. Bamboolia is a little country where, recently, a terroristic attack has killed 10,000 people. To deal with the situation, Bamboolia's citizens have decided to give their president absolute power. Do you think that the citizens' decision to give absolute power to the president was good or bad?	High-Cost
Consider the following hypothetical scenario. Bamboolia is a little country recently hit by a tsunami that has killed five people. To deal with the situation, Bamboolia's citizens have decided to give their president absolute power. Do you think that the citizens' decision to give absolute power to the president was good or bad?	Low-Cost
Consider the following hypothetical scenario. Bamboolia is a little country recently hit by a tsunami that has killed 10,000 people. To deal with the situation, Bamboolia's citizens have decided to give their president absolute power. Do you think that the citizens' decision to give absolute power to the president was good or bad?	High-Cost
Consider the following hypothetical scenario. There is a pandemic outbreak in the land of Bamboolia. Once a person has contracted the illness, the probability of dying is 0.01%. To deal with the pandemic, Bamboolia's citizens have decided to give their president absolute power. Do you think that the citizens' decision to give absolute power to the president was good or bad?	Low-Cost
Consider the following hypothetical scenario. There is a pandemic outbreak in the land of Bamboolia. Once a person has contracted the illness, the probability of dying is 30%. To deal with the pandemic, Bamboolia's citizens have decided to give their president absolute power. Do you think that the citizens' decision to give absolute power to the president was good or bad?	High-Cost

Altogether, these observations corroborate the hypothesis that support for a strong leader grows when people believe that failure to address societal problems is linked with high versus low costs. Furthermore, the data demonstrate that this effect is not restricted to a specific political orientation, as it emerges both on the right and on the left.

8 | Discussion

The article introduces the RDM, a theoretical framework aimed at explaining why sometimes people support strong leaders in politics. The RDM is grounded on distinguishing between the view that a strong leader can be desired as such, an aspect reflecting the essence of the authoritarian personality construct, and the view that a strong leader can be desired as means for solving societal problems. Focusing on the latter aspect, the RDM interprets it as an instance of a causal map that can be modelled employing the Bayesian belief networks formalism. Three links are postulated to characterize the causal chain: the belief concerning whether strong leadership fosters unity, the one about whether unity leads to success and the one concerning the costs of failure. The RDM's key predictions are corroborated empirically in three studies revealing that support for strong leadership indeed grows when one believes that a strong leader fosters unity, that unity is conducive to success and that failure is very costly, effects that emerge both on the left and on the right of the political spectrum.

The RDM complements research on authoritarian personality in various ways. First, whereas theories of authoritarianism focus on the modulatory role of threat perception alone (e.g., Altemeyer 1996; Duckitt 2001; Jost et al. 2003: Peterson et al. 1993), the RDM highlights the impact of other contextual factors. These include beliefs about whether strong leadership fosters unity, about whether unity leads to success and about the costs of failure. Regarding the latter, the RDM shifts the emphasis from the notion of feeling threatened to the notion of predicting high costs for failure. These notions are similar, but the latter is better suited to explain why support for strong leaders grows in circumstances where the costs of failure increase even if a person is not directly threatened (as in Study 3 here).

Besides highlighting the role of multiple contextual factors, the RDM offers a more flexible picture of the process compared to theories of authoritarian personality. As supported by the empirical studies presented here, the model asserts that people can adjust their support for strong leaders based on the specific situation under scrutiny. In other words, the implication is that the same person can simultaneously believe that a strong leader is highly desirable in one scenario (e.g., a society where unity leads to success) but not in a different one (e.g., a society where unity does not lead to success).

The RDM complements research on authoritarian personality also by explaining why support for strong leaders sometimes arises among people who generally oppose strong leadership, such as many people on the political centre and left. Given its focus on stable and general personality predispositions, the notion of authoritarian personality struggles to explain this. By contrast, the RDM argues that, though the appeal of strong leadership in and of itself may be low for a person, the person may nonetheless believe that a strong leader is needed to solve pressing social problems, thus ultimately encouraging the rise of strong leaders.

This logic may help in understanding cases where support for strong leaders has surged on the political left or centre. To

illustrate, I shall briefly consider two historical examples: the Marxist–Leninist ideology and the support for Mussolini among the upper middle class in Italy. The writings of Karl Marx and his early followers longed for a utopian age of communism where the state is abolished and everyone is free, hence displaying little sympathy for authoritarian leaders (Walicki 1997). Yet, in Russia this early view was amended by Lenin, who asserted that a strong military-style leadership is required to ensure that society transitions to communism (Walicki 1997). The Bolshevik revolution and the ensuing authoritarian communist regimes of the Soviet block were all inspired by this ideological stance. The official rhetoric was that although in the day of communism hierarchies and strong leaderships will finally be abolished, for the time being a strong leader is necessary to ensure that the day of communism will come. This instrumental argument, which follows the logic proposed by the RDM, has aroused support for strong leaders in some quarters of the left at various points in history, despite the left's original distaste for strong leaders as such.

At the turn of the 20th century, Italy had a relatively stable constitutional regime where multiple parties competed for government. Due to the severe economic crisis that erupted immediately after the First World War, wage workers responded with an unprecedented 2-year-long period of strikes (Lyttelton 2004). Frightened by the prospect of a communist revolution akin to the one recently occurred in Russia, many in the upper middle class shifted their support from traditional liberal parties to the fascists, eventually enabling the rise of Mussolini to power (Adler 1995; Cardoza 1982; Elazar 2000; Gocmen 2016; Linz 1976). According to some historians, a substantial chunk of the upper middle class was not enchanted by the option of ceding power to a strong leader as such, but nonetheless supported this option for instrumental reasons (Adler 1995; Cardoza 1982; Elazar 2000; Linz 1976). They considered Mussolini's rise as necessary to prevent what they viewed as an existential threat, that is, to prevent a communist revolution in Italy. Once again, this example fits with the logic proposed by the RDM and illustrates a case where support for strong leaders surges within the political centre based on instrumental reasons.

Notwithstanding the points highlighted above, the RDM should not be viewed as alternative to theories of authoritarianism but as complementary. As argued above, the RDM focuses on the instrumental motives underlying support for strong leaders, whereas theories of authoritarian personality focus primarily on the intrinsic desirability of strong leaders. This aspect is modelled by the RDM as corresponding to the prior probability assigned to the option of having a strong leader. An avenue for future research is to further explore how intrinsic and instrumental motives underlying support for strong leaders are integrated at the psychological level.

The RDM builds upon recent studies that have pioneered a causal map approach to explain support for strong leaders (Crimston et al. 2022; Lima et al. 2021; Selvanathan et al. 2022; Sprong et al. 2019). Two of such studies (Crimston et al. 2022; Sprong et al. 2019) have revealed that support for strong leaders increases when a person believes that a strong leader is needed to alleviate anomie. This observation is compatible with the RDM since anomie can be interpreted as an instance of a social malaise that should be avoided. The RDM generalizes this literature by arguing that instrumental support for a strong leader can arise not only in order to combat anomie but also to address other social problems that require the community to be united.

At a broader level, the RDM offers a first example of how theories relying on the concept of causal map, which can be modelled using Bayesian belief nets, can be developed and tested in political psychology. Models analogous to the RDM may be proposed in the future to understand the nature of other attitudes. The development and test of such models may follow the same steps proposed here. First, the attitude towards a certain phenomenon (e.g., immigration) can be decomposed into an intrinsic (e.g., cherishing immigration as such) and instrumental component (e.g., concerning the consequences of immigration). Second, the instrumental component can be described at the theoretical level by identifying the different causal links involved. Third, the theory can be tested by manipulating beliefs about the different causal links and assessing whether this impacts the attitude towards the phenomenon (as in the empirical studies described in this article).

Finally, we highlight some limitations of the research presented here. First, support for strong leaders is measured in general terms, rather than regarding specific political leaders. It remains to be established whether the findings observed here can be replicated when participants are enquired about their support for specific leaders. Second, the measure of support for strong leaders is based on a self-report questionnaire. An open question is whether the same results emerge in more consequential settings, such as when voting or participating in other political activities. Relatedly, our measure of support for strong leader for each scenario is based on one single item. We made this choice for optimising the time needed for completing the task, but using multiple items, although more time consuming, may allow to improve the reliability of the measure. Third, the empirical studies are based on evaluating fictitious scenarios, with limited ecological validity. Whether the same effects can be observed in the context of real situations remains to be assessed. Fourth, in all studies, the sample was recruited from a single country, the United Kingdom—rising the issue of cross-cultural applicability. Whether the same effects characterize other countries, especially those with a substantially different culture and social structure than the United Kingdom, remains to be assessed. One last limitation of the empirical studies is that these were not preregistered.

In conclusion, the article proposes an alternative framework to explain why people sometimes support strong leaders in politics. The key insight is that this support does not always stem from desiring a strong leader as such but sometimes arises because a strong leader is viewed as means for solving pressing social problems. This framework may help in understanding why authoritarian sentiments have recently soared on a global scale. Many people today may not regard the prospect of being ruled by strong leaders as particularly appealing in and of itself. Still, many may have become convinced that society is facing daunting problems such as war, economic crises, anomie and climate change, leading them to the conclusion that a strong

leader is necessary to address these problems and therefore highly desirable after all.

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Funding

The author has nothing to report.

Ethics Statement

The studies reported in the article were approved by the Research Ethics committee of City St George's, University of London.

Consent

Participants gave their consent to participate after being presented with the info sheet—all this occurred online. Participants were informed that no personal information were acquired during data collection and hence that the data were fully anonymized.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

The data are available at https://osf.io/9sm8e/?view_only=b7e28762fea840d9a8b7d5b0420fb86f.

Peer Review

For transparency, the peer review documents associated with this article are available at https://doi.org/10.1111/issj.70051.

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