Magic as Political Might: Harry Potter, Authoritarianism, and Youth Political Behavior

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Magic as Political Might: *Harry Potter*, Authoritarianism, and Youth Political Behavior

By

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Honors Thesis

Submitted to:

Department of Political Science
University of Richmond

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Second Reader: Dr. Kevin Cherry

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Abstract

This thesis examines how authoritarian structures found in J.K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter* series affect the political thoughts and behaviors of its readers, particularly those who read them at young ages. By examining how Rowling depicts authoritarianism and its opposition in the books, I hypothesized that increased exposure would correlate to an increased impact on readers’ political opinions. To test this hypothesis, I created an original survey designed to measure levels of exposure and participation in the *Harry Potter* fandom as well as respondents’ political opinions. I asked respondents to provide different examples of authoritarianism and its opposition in the books and utilized a 5-item version of Bob Altemeyer’s Right Wing Authoritarian Scale to evaluate their authoritarian predisposition. I went to two different fan conventions, GalaxyCon in Richmond, Virginia, and MegaCon in Orlando, Florida, to administer an original survey and build my sample of self-identified *Harry Potter* fans. Along with the results from disseminating the survey on the internet, I collected 161 viable responses. Results show that *Harry Potter* fans who read Harry Potter at younger ages are more ideologically liberal and will identify more with the Democratic Party than fans who read them at older ages. The same is true for fans who read the books more than once. This survey was unable to conclude that those who read books at younger ages or more frequently have lower levels of authoritarian predisposition. I recommend further testing to clarify the issue.
Acknowledgments

This honors thesis has been a passion project begging to be written for longer than Sirius Black spent in Azkaban.

I’ve owned *Harry Potter* books for longer than I’ve been aware of them. My Grandma Beverly bought me the first four books when they came out because she loved them. I wanted nothing to do with them until around the third grade—they looked boring. It was my competitive spirit that ultimately led me to Harry and to Hogwarts. My elementary school had something called Accelerated Reader. It was a competition where students accumulated points for reading books and answering questions about them. *I was* going to win, but I was running out of books to read. It was my mother who found a solution. She might regret the advice she gave me because of how radically my life changed, but I would not be who I am today had she not told me to read those dusty books on my shelf that my grandma had bought (they’ve long since fallen apart from repeated reading).

I read the fifth book first. *The Order of the Phoenix* was the longest and had the most AR points—44, to be exact. I won’t ever forget it. An unconventional start to a lifelong love affair, to be sure, but “Dudley Demented” turned my world upside down. Third-grade me devoured those books in less than two weeks. It was like the *Harry Potter* books consumed me. I read them over and over and over again until their words were imprinted into my very being. They’re a part of me.

The *Harry Potter* books have been the best friends, the most steady companions, that I’ve ever had. No matter what was going on in my life, *Harry Potter* was always there. I will admit to being a little obsessive—in middle school, I was “that crazy *Harry Potter* girl” and had
immersed myself in the fandom, arguing with people online and reading fanfiction. With time, I’ve mellowed out, but I still know more about *Harry Potter* than anyone else I know. I’ve never been defeated in *Harry Potter* trivia and am not ashamed to describe my knowledge of the series as encyclopedic. I love everything about those books, even the plot holes and the discrepancies and the parts that don’t make any sense at all. It is a comforting thing to know that no matter how lost you may feel in the world, there is one thing that you can be confident that you know. And I know *Harry Potter*.

That’s why it has been the honor of my life to have been able to combine my love for *Harry Potter* with my other passion: politics. I truly believe in the power of politics and have dedicated an immense amount of time and energy to the political world, from volunteering on campaigns to writing on the judicial system to interning in the United States Congress. I see *Harry Potter* references everywhere, and over the last fourteen years it’s been impossible not to extend those connections to politics. It was inevitable that I would become fascinated by the political impact of *Harry Potter* and want to prove that magic is indeed political might.

This thesis project has been an unforgettable, life-changing experience. Not only did I get to complete original research, but I got to do it in a community of people who let me be myself and actually liked me for it. Nowhere else but at a fan convention would I gain admiration for recognizing a TARDIS self-destruct or knowing exactly how many fouls are possible in a game of Quidditch. In any other setting, my impassioned defense of Andrew Garfield as the best Spider-Man would have gotten cut off within a few sentences and my offer to recite the 1991 Sorting Hat song would have been shut down immediately. Administering the survey for this thesis project taught me about more than field research; it reminded me that my kind of people really are out there in the world on the other side of internet screens.
I would like to think all the people who made what some said was an insane and pointless thesis project possible. I must think Grandma Beverly for buying me those first four books. I also must thank my parents, Michael and Deborah Cobbs, for being endlessly supportive of me in everything I’ve ever wanted to do, even if they didn’t always fully understand it. I’ll never be able to thank them enough. I’d also like to thank my thesis advisor, Dr. Ernest McGowen, who signed on and went along on this crazy journey with me despite knowing next to nothing about *Harry Potter*. He deserves a medal for dealing with my craziness not only as my honors thesis advisor, but also as my academic advisor for the last four years. Dr. Kevin Cherry also deserves my thanks for agreeing to be my secondary reader and for making political theory enjoyable. Dr. Jennifer Bowie is phenomenal and has opened up so many opportunities for me. I’m eternally grateful to her. I would be remiss if I forgot to thank the Office of Scholars and Fellowships at the University of Richmond for supplying the grant money that funded my research travel. Finally, I want to thank every single person who took the time to take my survey. The people at GalaxyCon and MegaCon were kinder to me than I could have imagined. Their overwhelming positivity and belief in my project gave me hope that I could pull this off!

I am now just as much as I ever was “that crazy *Harry Potter* girl”. Throughout this entire thesis project, my proudest achievement is that I was able to defend my title as the undefeated champion in *Harry Potter* trivia (See Picture 1)! This proud Ravenclaw didn’t even care that the grand prize was Gryffindor themed! Also, I got to meet Matt Lewis (See Picture 2)!
I disagree with J.K. Rowling on a lot of things, but she was right when she reminded us of this at the premiere of *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows Part 2*:

“No story lives unless someone wants to listen. The stories we love best do live in us forever. So whether you come back by page or by the big screen, Hogwarts will always be there to welcome you home.”

-Alexis Cobbs, University of Richmond, Class of 2023

***My love for the *Harry Potter* series and my pursuit of further understanding its impact on the world is not in any way an endorsement of the transphobic views of the author. I join many of my fellow *Harry Potter* fans in condemning any and all views that exclude or marginalize any group, including those who identify as transgender.***
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Introduction

“It was rather frightening, this vast sculpture of a witch and wizard sitting on ornately carved thrones, looking down at the ministry workers toppling out of the fireplaces below them. Engraved in foot-high letters at the base of the statue were the words MAGIC IS MIGHT.”

“Harry looked more closely and realized that what he had thought were decoratively carved thrones were actually mounds of carved humans: hundreds and hundreds of naked bodies, men, women, and children, all with rather stupid, ugly faces, twisted and pressed together to support the weight of the handsomely robed wizards.”

“Muggles,” whispered Hermione. “In their rightful place.”

-Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows, Chapter Twelve, “Magic is Might” p. 241-2

As Matthew Lewis, who played Neville Longbottom in the Harry Potter films, said during a Q&A Session at MegaCon Orlando in 2023, J.K. Rowling’s Harry Potter series is “inherently political” (See Picture 1) Those politics have bled from the page into the real world. My thesis project examines how the Wizarding World has influenced its readers’ views on authoritarianism and their subsequent political behavior. Harry Potter provides a unique opportunity for socialization, allowing fans to become a part of a community that encourages the group to see aspects of the series in the real world; they are predisposed to recognize parallels and respond to scenarios in ways similar to characters in the series. I choose to write about authoritarianism because of how deeply entrenched such structures are within Rowling’s narrative.

The Harry Potter books were, and still are, a global phenomenon, and countless children grew up with Harry, Ron, and Hermione. 25 years after the first book, Harry Potter and the
Philosopher’s Stone, was released, it remains the best-selling book series of all time (Buono, 2023). As of January 2023, Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows still holds the record for the fastest-selling book of all time, selling 8.3 million copies on the day of its July 2007 release (Gierzynski 2013; Atwal 2023). No other book series has ever done what Harry Potter has done—not Lewis’s Chronicles of Narnia, not Martin’s A Song of Ice and Fire, and not even Tolkien’s Lord of the Rings. As the characters in Harry Potter matured and developed the ability to see and understand the politics of the world around them, so too did the readers. Those who read and loved Harry Potter during those formative years are left with an imprint of those books. How they think about politics is intertwined with references to the series.

The books’ impact spans far beyond their pages. The movies made from J.K. Rowling’s Wizarding World make up the fourth-highest-grossing film series of all time, following only the Marvel Cinematic Universe, Star Wars, and Spider-Man (Anderson, 2023). The Wizarding World of Harry Potter even left the screen to become a twenty-acre theme park at Universal Studios in Orlando, Florida. There, fans are treated to an immersive experience in impeccably detailed renditions of the village of Hogsmeade, Diagon Alley, and even Hogwarts itself. Activities range from choosing (or, rather, being chosen by) a wand from Ollivander’s, having a butterbeer at a pub or tavern, and even taking a ride on a hippogriff or dragon. Though it is played on the ground, the fictional sport of Quidditch (now sometimes known as Quadball) has also made its way into the real world—there are almost 600 teams across 40 different countries (Andrew, 2022). The series also contributed to the fanfiction boom and inspired a generation of new authors; by first developing their skills by playing in Rowling’s sandbox, authors were able to create worlds of their own. Harry Potter fanfiction was a springboard for immensely successful authors like Cassandra Clare, who wrote The Mortal Instruments, Infernal Devices,
and *Dark Artifices* series, and Rainbow Rowell of *Fangirl* and *Carry On* fame. The online *Harry Potter* community is strong, well-organized, and consistently engaged. Hogwarts Legacy, a Warner Bros. single-player game set 100 years before the *Harry Potter* series, broke records by selling 12 million copies in two weeks before even being released on some of the largest gaming platforms (Erickson, 2023). More than a decade after the conclusion of the films, an entire new generation is about to be introduced to *Harry Potter* through a ten-year-long HBO Max television show that will faithfully adapt the books (Kagan, 2023). The strength of the *Harry Potter* fandom is unprecedented and seemingly knows no limit.

But why would we expect *Harry Potter* fans to be less authoritarian, or to have a tendency toward supporting strongly centralized political power, a lack of rule of law, and low tolerance for civil society and dissidence, than other people (Ibrahim, 2019)? The *Harry Potter* books are filled to the brim with examples of authoritarianism, as evidenced by the examples respondents mentioned in the survey. Authoritarianism as Ibrahim describes can be seen in the *Harry Potter* books in several ways—particularly the overarching battle against Lord Voldemort’s regime, which aims to not only oppress all non-magical people (referred to as “muggles”) but also to reinforce a rigid blood status hierarchy where only those with blood deemed “pure” can access the benefits of a magical society. Other authoritarian structures include Dolores Umbridge’s tyrannical regime at Hogwarts and smaller units like the Dursleys. The books also provide ample examples of opposition to authoritarianism like the Order of the Phoenix, Dumbledore’s Army, and Hermione’s crusade against house-elf enslavement. Therefore, to determine how Harry Potter impacts our political behavior, it is imperative to examine how politics function within Rowling’s world.
My thesis will highlight examples within the book that exemplify how authoritarian structures exist and are combatted in the series. Admiraal, Bassham, Bryfonski, Carlo, Cecere, Collinsworth, Dash, Fabrizi, Jarazo-Álvarez, Kullmann, Maza, Nelson, Peppers-Bates, Perri, Schott, Schulzke, and Thomas all write extensively on how politics function in Harry Potter, ranging from examining politics generally to specifically focusing on authoritarianism. A broader literature about politics and cultural media along with more specific works about other fandoms, including Game of Thrones, The Hunger Games, Star Trek, and Divergent, support the idea that books such as Harry Potter can impact the political behavior of their audience (Feldman & Sigelman 1985. Elshtain 1995. Whitebrook 1995, Zuckert 1995, Mickenberg 2005, Young 2006, Hamid & Prose 2015. Hinck 2019, Phelps 2020, Levitt 2022). I will particularly focus on evidence of their rejection and resistance of authoritarianism in the books to see if its readers follow a similar ideology and political behavior. How they reject and resist different authoritative regimes will form the basis of my research on authoritarianism within the books.

To create a stronger bridge between Harry Potter and political behavior, I have expanded upon the work of Anthony Gierzynski & Kathryn Eddy and Diana Mutz, all of whom concluded in their studies that Harry Potter fans had a more negative view of authoritarianism than those who did not read the books. I, too, administered a survey but narrowed the scope and varied my sample, focusing on those who read the books before the age of 24 and tailoring my questions toward connecting anecdotes from the series to real-world politics. Any quotes from survey responses contained within this thesis have been left untouched, regardless of spelling or grammar.

To answer these questions, this study employed a quantitative and qualitative mixed-method design. There are several examples of Harry Potter fans responding to authoritarian issues in the
real world, so there was almost an overabundance of material to include when I built my survey questions. My survey was distributed to a sample of self-identified Harry Potter fans. This survey was designed to gauge participants’ opinions on authoritarianism in Harry Potter as well as their political habits. I also hoped to gain insight into how young people may have seen characters or scenarios in the books as caricatures of political figures that they encounter throughout life. For example, during the 2016 election, then-candidate Trump was frequently compared to various Harry Potter characters. My survey reveals whether that association is widespread. In addition to disseminating the survey online, I attended two popular conventions (GalaxyCon in Richmond, Virginia, and MegaCon in Orlando, Florida) to speak to fans and better contextualize how Rowling’s works impact how they maneuver in the political world. I aimed to discover how fans’ political opinions lean. My hypothesis is that the strong anti-authoritarian nature of the books played a part in the political development of young readers, leaving them with a low tolerance. I expected this effect to be more pronounced with readers who encountered the books at younger ages. My hypothesis was confirmed. Those who read the books at age twelve or younger are more likely to identify as Democrats and are less likely to identify as Republican. Those who read the *Harry Potter* books at or before the age of 24 are also more likely to be registered to vote than those who did not. Those who have read all seven of the books are more likely to recognize Voldemort and his Death Eaters and the Ministry of Magic, the most prominent examples in the books, as authoritarian structures.
Literature Review

Literature, *Harry Potter* and Politics

Former prolific *Harry Potter* fanfiction writer Cassandra Clare wrote in the opening book of her bestselling *Infernal Devices* series that “one must be careful of books… and what is inside them, for words have the power to change us” (Clare 2010, 87). Political scientists are beginning to agree. Fiction authors are rhetoricians; they carefully craft their words to impart important messages to the reader (Zuckert 1995). By creating a “simulation of the social world”, fiction facilitates learning through experience (Mar & Oatley 2008, 173). What is learned through books does not stay in fictional worlds, however. Scholars are confident that information and values gleaned from fictional narratives produces substantial, long-term changes in real-world beliefs and behaviors (Bal et al; 2011; Appel & Richter 2007; Green, Strange, & Brock 2002; Green & Brock 2000; Prentice and Gerrig 1999; Strange & Leung 1999; Wheeler et al. 1999;). Colleges and Universities offer courses on Shakespeare’s political wisdom and books break down the political education he provides (Cantor 1995; Bloom 1964). Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* is said to have contributed to the outbreak of the American Civil War (Appel & Richter 2007). Melville’s *Moby-Dick* is an incredible discourse on race relations, despotism, and democracy. Even Jane Austen’s writing provides subtle commentary on the politics of the Regency era (Neill 1999). It would be a mistake to overlook literature when examining political history because of how influential it is (Whitebrook 1995). Literature serves almost as a time capsule that can tell a careful reader much about not only the political regime of the time, but the ones that they imagined as well (Cantor 1995). Unlike other forms of media, novels are experienced “solitarily and in silence,” allowing the reader to leave the real world behind and
experience conditions for new conceptions of democratic society (Vuyk 2015, 211). The ability to imagine a different world is one of literature’s greatest strengths because it puts the reader on the path toward creating better worlds, but it is in no way limited to older or classical literature. Research on fandoms surrounding dystopian fiction shows that those communities raise political consciousness (Levitt 2022). The intermingling of perspectives literature encourages allows it to put “politics in its place and transgress the boundaries of what is defined as political” (Whitebrook 1995, 60). By alerting readers to the moral and ethical implications of political structures in a fictional context, books serve as a gateway to understanding and interpreting the politics of their own world.

Regardless of authorial intent, readers can grasp onto concepts or characters in a book and internalize them. This effect is exacerbated when read within a fan community, which is extremely participatory (Dean 2017). Most people could probably name a book that influenced them as they grew up, but J.K. Rowling’s Harry Potter series is remarkable; it is one of very few works of fiction that has had such a profound impact both politically and socially (Bassham 2022). Although she did not set out to write books with a political agenda, Rowling does not deny that her books are political. She described the seven Harry Potter novels as “a prolonged argument for tolerance, a prolonged plea for an end of bigotry” (Rowling, 2007). Bassham (2022) writes that “for tens of millions of young readers, the Potter books have been a powerful moral voice for the values of equality, diversity, antihierarchicalism, inclusion, and multiculturalism,” all of which weigh heavily into political opinion (495). Maza (2012, 426) concurs with this assessment, categorizing the series as “a clear representation of the grand narrative of liberal values and multiculturalism”. This is particularly important for younger
readers, who experience the series at a vulnerable age for political and moral development (Binnendyk & Schonert-Reichl 2002).

As Harry, Ron, and Hermione develop strong moral convictions and ideologies as their worlds grow increasingly complex, the reader goes on the same journey (Chappell, 2008). Importantly, young readers develop agency alongside the characters in the book, which creates “a pattern for young people’s consciously subversive behavior through their recognition and response to the notion that “society,” as imagined by adults, contains hegemonic structures that may not benefit those living within it” (Chappell 2008, 282). The books create clear yet complex binaries—there are two “sides” in several different contexts, but Rowling is careful not to present anything as black and white. As Sirius notes to Harry in The Order of the Phoenix, “the world isn’t split into good people and Death Eaters” (OotP CH14, pg. 302). There are exceptions to every rule or stereotype that the world establishes. Percy Weasley refuses to believe that Voldemort has returned, abandons his family, and sides with the Ministry. Peter Pettigrew, also known as Wormtail, is neither brave nor loyal as a Gryffindor should be; he is cowardly and traitorous. Severus Snape, head of Slytherin House, is cruel and egregiously abuses his authority to torture and mistreat children. Yet, his true loyalties have nearly always lain on the side of good and he did all he could to save lives. Even within families that the books make clear hold undesirable values like the Dursleys and the Malfoys, there is real love. Narcissa Malfoy proves she was willing to do anything to protect her husband and son by repeatedly defying Voldemort at great personal risk. Despite being intolerant and hateful, the Dursleys’ marriage seems to be one of equal, loving partners. The books even go out of the way to provide insight into Voldemort’s history, so he is not presented as the embodiment of pure evil. After learning of Voldemort’s mother’s tragic life, both Harry and Dumbledore show compassion for the suffering of both
mother and son. Much of The Half-Blood Prince is spent establishing that while it is true that Voldemort is evil, his circumstances had a great deal to do with making him into the monster they fight against (Lyubansky 2010). Indeed, in the end, understanding Voldemort’s past as Tom Riddle was essential to defeating him. The only scholars that disagree that Rowling subverts binary tropes are those like Farah Mendlesohn (2001) who wrote their articles before all the books were published and seem to have severely misinterpreted them.

The books teach that people are never just one thing; there is always more to learn. That open-mindedness lingers in the mind of young readers as they develop their political identities. The Potter books diverge from classical literature to the tune of Dahl or Baum or even Dickens by diverging from the usual trope of teaching children to accept their circumstances; instead, Rowling writes a world where decisions regarding right and wrong sometimes require taking an alternative path to the clearly defined set of rules. Harry Potter characters must make hard choices that from “within a given set of possible actions, some of them transgressive but nonetheless correct” (Chappell 2008, 292).

Readers engage in passive learning while reading about political ideas and internalize those lessons (Gierzynski 2013). Though in general, passive learning is considered temporary, repeated exposure to the books (and the movies) reinforces the messages and serves to increase their permanence, suggesting an application of cultivation theory (Gierzynski 2013). Cultivation theory is simply the notion that “long-term exposure to media shapes how the consumers of media perceive the world and conduct themselves” (Perera 2022). Stories in particular socialize us, and scholars have found that continued exposure to patterns can have behavioral consequences; for example, those who watch a lot of television interpret the world as they see it on screen (Shanahan & Morgan 1999). Research has also shown how reading books can have a
significant impact on both social capital and civic activity (Romer 2009). The existence of
Quidditch teams, the widespread phenomenon of Hogwarts House affiliation, and the bustling
online community are just a few illustrations of how cultivation theory may have occurred in
*Harry Potter*, all of which could have contributed to readers’ political socialization.

The political socialization impact is particularly strong given the age of the books’ readership—
experiences at a certain age are more likely to aid in political development (Gierzynski 2013).
Adolescence, that is, within a period of around fifteen to nineteen, has the greatest impact on
shaping a person’s politics (Gierzynski 2013; Rekker et. al 2019). It’s also when they are the
most vulnerable to influence and the most likely to retain the imprint of those influences
(Gierzynski 2013). This age period is when an entire generation nurtured their love for *Harry
Potter*—they grew up with the books and developed their political opinions with the characters.
Not only did they read them closely, but they reread them multiple times, further cementing the
books’ influence. Multiple studies confirm that the *Harry Potter* books can change the moral
attitudes of children, making them more tolerant and empathetic toward stigmatized groups
(Mishra & Ghosh 2022; Vezzali et. al 2015; Stetka 2014). This, perhaps, is what makes *Harry
Potter* so different from any other series that came before or after it. We read books to
experience different worlds, and to meet new people so that we don’t have to be so lonely.
Rowling’s words allowed millions of people to access a community where they never had to feel
alone. There, fans can discuss anything from the timeless Great Snape Debate to modern politics
(Kligler-Vilenchik 2015).

How Harry himself deals with politics is a subject of disagreement. Some criticize the series,
especially its first few books, saying that Harry is too passive because he “does not question the
basic justice of the world or school” or “the gender, class, or European hegemony of his world”
(Skulnick & Goodman 2003, 263). Instead of pushing for a rise of a collective political movement, the books focused on Harry’s personal development (Horne 2010). Indeed, some disagree that *Harry Potter* offers a political discourse at all (Dash 2012). Other authors, even those who wrote before the series concluded, find Harry to be a radical civil leader who is used to uncover overarching issues about political justice who represents good, and is always willing to risk his life to defeat evil (Chevalier 2005). These two camps argue over whether Harry ultimately failed to make a positive political difference because he did not actively work to dismantle harmful hierarchies on a systemic level and attacked individual politicians instead. Harry’s role is pivotal in toppling the regimes of both Umbridge and Voldemort, and he is by all accounts “an unusual wizard” whose unique perspective and nearly unbelievable kindness in the Wizarding World allows him to show more compassion toward magical creatures and other outcasts than everyone around him, save Hermione (*DH* CH24, pg. 486). Horne (2010) argues that Rowling’s “antiracist pedagogy” shows the reader that the first step to change is “to learn empathy, and only later to learn the ways of collective action” (pg. 98). What collective action may look like after vanquishing Voldemort is not entirely clear, but the moments after the Battle of Hogwarts indicate that wizarding society is going in the right direction.

*Harry Potter* and Modern Political Action

*Harry Potter* has already made its mark on modern politics. It has “transcended the realm of pure fantasy and become a site of political reimagining, engagement and activism” (Medvedev & Pronkina 2019, 72). Fans are able to draw parallels between the politics they see on television and those within Rowling’s books. Founded in 2005, the *Harry Potter* Alliance (recently rebranded as Fandom Forward to be more inclusive to other fandoms), or the HPA, alone has had a marked political effect, mobilizing millions of *Harry Potter* fans in more than 275 organized
chapters in 25 different countries (Hinck 2012; 2019). Through activist training, petitions, book drives, donations, flash mobs, voter registration, letters to government officials, boycotts, and more, the organization uses “parallels between the *Harry Potter* story and our world to engage in social justice activism focusing on equality, human rights, and literacy” (Hinck 2019). Fandom Forward’s website says that they “use the power of story and popular culture to make activism accessible and sustainable”, which allows fans to engage in what Hinck calls fan-based citizenship (Fandom Forward 2023, Hinck 2019).

Their “Wizard Rock the Vote” campaigns, which consisted of voter registration at wizard rock concerts (yes, there is an entire subgenre of music based on *Harry Potter*) and activist training, were extremely successful. They even created an app called Marauder’s Map to the Polls to be an election-day resource in 2018. In 2020, the HPA ran a fake presidential campaign for Hermione Granger and raised over $20,000 to mobilize thousands of fans and host a virtual Granger Leadership Academy (a beloved annual, in-person event pre-COVID) to train wizard activists and to “reclaim and rewrite the story of civic engagement in America” (McInroy & Beer 2022, 733). In 2012 alone, campaigns like “Why I Can’t Go to LeakyCon” raised almost $95,000 towards immigration reform, LGBT rights, and equal access to education. The “Protego” campaign rallies fans on behalf of the transgender community to get gender-neutral bathrooms and “#PRIDEISMAGIC” leverages the comradery within Hogwarts Houses to advocate for LGBTQIA+ equality. Gender equity was further highlighted in 2017’s “A World Without Hermione,” which raised more than $43,000 to support female students. It heavily emphasizes supporting literacy and combatting book bans by organizing book donations with their annual Accio Books (now Book Defenders) campaign, which has donated well over 390,000 books (McInroy & Beer 2022). In the last 18 years, Fandom Forward has acted like a “Dumbledore’s
Army for the real world” and knocked on thousands of doors, made thousands of phone calls, and raised hundreds of thousands of dollars to help the most vulnerable in our population (Hinck 2012).

Beyond the HPA, *Harry Potter* still serves as a guiding point for political action. Students protesting Thailand’s government have taken to utilizing *Harry Potter* and Suzanne Collins’ *The Hunger Games* as symbols for their protests (Harding 2021). Dressed up as *Harry Potter* characters, holding posters and signs, and vowing to “cast a spell” for democracy, young Thais risked up to fifteen years in prison for criticizing the government (Sarkisian 2020). Speakers recounted the plot of the books and rally-goers held aloft makeshift wands in support (Sarkisian 2020). At the “March for Our Lives,” 2018’s rally for increased gun control in the wake of the Parkland shootings, a generation of students who grew up with both school shooting and *Harry Potter* reminded people that over and over again, Harry chose to disarm instead of kill (Anderson 2018). Expelliarmus, the disarmament spell, was a rallying cry during the protest, finding its way onto countless posters. Other protesters held signs saying things like “Dumbledore’s Army: Still Recruiting” and “Hufflepuffs for Gun Control” (Anderson 2018). It was almost as if *Harry Potter* was their playbook as they protested the NRA (Cérón 2018).

That *Harry Potter* spawned activism is not surprising; one of Rowling’s most formative personal experiences was her work with the NGO Amnesty International in her early 20s (Rowling 2008). It taught her to value living in a democratic society that guaranteed legal rights and that humans are capable of true evil (Rowling 2008). But Amnesty International also taught her the power of human empathy. Despite her recent disappointing transphobic comments, Rowling’s gift to the world might just be that lesson. She taught her readers that “we do not need magic to change the world, we carry all the power we need inside ourselves already: we have the power to imagine
better” (Rowling 2008). In 2004, after reading an article about a disabled child that was begin institutionalized and caged, J.K. Rowling founded the NGO charity Lumos, named after the spell in *Harry Potter* that conjures light. Lumos has indeed illuminated the lives of children by helping them regain the right to have a family. Its goal is to end the institutionalization of orphaned children across the world. Fans of Rowling’s books learned to recognize inequality, injustice, and authoritarianism in the real world. They are unafraid to challenge it when they see it, even if it means confronting and condemning the author herself.

**Authoritarianism**

In an article written for the Journal of Democracy, Anwar Ibrahim defines an authoritarian government as one that has “strongly centralized political power along with economic power concentrated in the hands of the few” but also has “no guarantee of the rule of law or the protection of political freedoms” (Ibrahim 2019, 5). He goes on to describe such a state as having a “low tolerance for civil society, dissident political parties, interest groups, and for any other force deemed able to mobilize opposition” (Ibrahim 2019, 6-7). Steven Ludeke’s analysis finds that authoritarians have “largely sorted into the Republican Party” and consider themselves conservative (Ludeke 2018, 209). Yet, determining how authoritarianism impacts political behavior is more complicated than simple party identification.

Scholars believe that authoritarianism in its modern form can be distilled into three facets: authoritarian aggression, authoritarian submission, and conventionalism (Altemeyer 1996, Duckitt & Bizumic 2013, Ludeke 2018). Studying authoritarian aggression helps to gauge feelings towards “dangerous” outsider groups. Authoritarian submission may predict “respect for authorities and opposition to rebellion” (Ludeke 2018, 210). Conventionalism can show an orientation on LBGTQ rights and religiosity, (Teymoori et al. 2014). All three dimensions
should, according to numerous scholars, be studied together to determine a subject level of
support for authoritarianism. Of course, Greenstein (1965) reminds us that political and social
systems provide the socializing environment for politically relevant personal development and
the situations within which political action takes place.

Views on authoritarianism have become an increasingly important factor in understanding how
people maneuver in the political world (Crowson & Brandes, 2017). In recent years, it has had a
substantial effect on portions of the voting populace, particularly among white voters. Knuckley
and Hassan (2022) found that authoritarianism had a substantial effect on how white voters
behaved in the ballot box during the 2016 presidential election. Trump seems to have primed his
voters by appealing to racial animus and prejudice against Muslims, among other factors. They
also found that “authoritarianism is likely to remain a salient determinant of vote choice during
the Trump era” (Knuckley & Hassann, 2022, 47). Crowson and Brandes’s 2017 study confirms
this, finding that more authoritarian individuals were more likely to vote for Donald Trump over
Hillary Clinton. Despite Trump’s unprecedented campaign style, the fact that his voters present
with more authoritarian tendencies is not a surprise; it has been long accepted that there is some
association between opinions on authoritarianism and preference for more politically
conservative candidates (Hanson, 1975).

Perhaps the most reliable method for measuring authoritarianism across samples is Bob
Altemeyer’s Right-Wing Authoritarian (RWA) Scale, first published in 1981. Altemeyer
describes right-wing authoritarianism as “an individual difference variable, a personality trait if
you like, developed on the premise that some people need little situation pressure to (say) submit
to authority and attach others, while others require significantly more” (Altemeyer 1996, 8). He
is not necessarily asserting that those who score highly on the RWA scale are full-blown fascists,
but he does acknowledge that those who are oriented in that direction can be dangerous under the right (wrong) circumstances. Altemeyer’s authoritarians can be described as being submissive to “The Establishment”, whatever that may be, and having an “Old Testament harshness” in their interactions (Altemeyer 1996, 10). High RWA scorers also tend to be significantly more likely to tolerate governmental abuses of power, care less about human rights issues, and be less supportive of democracy than lower scorers (Altemeyer, 1981; Altemeyer, 1996). The RWA scale breaks authoritarianism down into three subcategories for measurement: authoritarian submission, authoritarian aggression, and conventionalism, and it has been almost universally praised as presenting a stable pattern and having strong empirical validity (Altemeyer, 1981; Altemeyer, 1996; Bizumic & Duckitt, 2018). Altemeyer’s scale has seen several different iterations over the years, with different researchers attempting to streamline the original 30-item scale. Patrick Murray of the Monmouth University Polling Institute finds that the 5-item scale has a similar level of reliability to the 20-item version, which has a reliability score of α=.96. These shorter versions removed items obviously relating to religion, gender, or sexual orientation and still found nearly the same score distributions as longer versions of the scale (Murray, 2020).

**Authoritarianism in *Harry Potter***

**Voldemort and Death Eaters**

In *The Goblet of Fire*, Sirius Black describes what it was like living under Voldemort’s first rise to power as follows:

Imagine that Voldemort’s powerful now. You don’t know who his supporters are, you don’t know who’s working for him and who isn’t; you know he can control people so that they do terrible things without being able stop themselves. You’re scared for yourself,
and your family, and your friends. Every week, news comes of more deaths, more
disappearances, more torturing … The Ministry of Magic’s in disarray, they don’t know
what to do, they’re trying to keep everything hidden from the Muggles, but meanwhile,
Muggles are dying too. Terror everywhere … panic … confusion … that’s how it used to
be. - *GoF* CH27, pg. 526-7

That Voldemort is wizard Hitler and his Death Eaters are wizard Nazis is a bit of an open secret
in the fandom; the picture Sirius paints of life under Voldemort’s regime is as bleak as Nazi
Germany. When respondents of this survey were asked to identify authoritarian structures in
*Harry Potter*, 41% of them were able to provide Voldemort and his Death Eaters as examples
(See Figure 5-1). One survey respondent explicitly referenced the “gestapo-imagery of the death
eaters” and others wrote things like:

“The Death Eaters are an authoritarian group in the vein of the Ku Klux Klan”

“Voldemort is authoritarian! Woooo”

“Voldemort and the Death Eaters are authoritarian, since they want to murder everyone
that doesn't agree with them.”

“Voldemort and the death eaters want to eradicate all muggleborns and half bloods to
“purify” the society, which would lead to no one with a vested interest in the well being
of muggles and an easier path to oppression.”

Rowling herself admits the parallels to 20th-century dictators and that Voldemort is indeed a
nationalist and an authoritarian (Carlo 2018; O’Toole 2019). Despite himself being a half-blood,
the wizard formerly known as Tom Riddle is “motivated by the hegemonic belief in the
righteousness of “pure blood” (Chappell 2008, 283). Voldemort’s supporters range from
religiously devout like Bellatrix Lestrange to cowardly and weak like Peter Pettigrew. Either
way, once one becomes a Death Eater, the only way out of a lifetime of loyal service is death, as
is evidenced by the fates of Regulus Black and Igor Karkaroff. Voldemort’s goal is to gain total
power over the wizarding and muggle worlds alike and impose his will and his fundamentally
racist worldview over them all. Not only does he believe that only pure-bloods deserve all the
benefits of a magical society, but also that all other living beings are, at best, second-class. In the
opening chapter of The Deathly Hallows, “The Dark Lord Ascending,” Voldemort murders
Hogwarts Professor Charity Burbage for teaching her Muggle Studies class that Muggles are
“not so different from us” and allegedly proposing that wizards procreate with them (DH CH1,
pg. 1). His disdain for non-magical humans is clear when Harry, Ron, and Hermione infiltrate
the Ministry; the statue in the Atrium changed when Voldemort took over and installed Pius
Thicknesse as Minister. What had once been a group of magical creatures gazing adoringly at a
witch and wizard was now a witch and wizard sitting upon a throne made up of mounds of naked
bodies “with rather stupid, ugly faces” (DH CH12, pg. 242). Engraved at the base of the statue
were the words “MAGIC IS MIGHT”. The institution had already made its prejudice against
magical creatures clear. Voldemort went even further and subjugated other humans. One survey
respondent described it as “the most pointless ethno-nationalism of all time”.

Voldemort and his Death Eaters gain and maintain power using intimidation, violence, and
murder. Even without Voldemort’s influence, humiliating and torturing Muggles is a Death
Eater’s idea of a fun activity. Once appointed as teachers at Hogwarts, Death Eaters Amycus and
Alecto Carrow glory in the opportunity to hurt students, making them practice using Cruciatu
Curse to torture each other during detentions. Their nonexistent care for the students is on full display when Amycus tries to blame students for his hasty summoning of Voldemort. He says “he can punish them. Couple of kids, more or less, what’s the difference?” (DH, CH30, p. 593).

The books make clear that this kind of apathy is dangerous.

Opposition to Voldemort’s regime in both his rises to power came in the form of the Order of the Phoenix, a secret society Dumbledore formed. When the Ministry refuses to accept Voldemort’s return, the Order is forced to operate in the shadows. Members mobilize in different missions to destabilize and undermine Voldemort’s attempts to gain more power. For example, Hagrid and Madame Maxime are sent as envoys to a giant colony to try and sway them towards Dumbledore’s side. Remus Lupin is sent to do the same in a werewolf colony, and Bill Weasley works to persuade the goblins of Gringotts. Order members set a schedule to guard a prophecy in the Department of Mysteries; Arthur Weasley is nearly killed by Voldemort’s snake, Nagini, while on the job. When Voldemort moved into the open, Death Eaters and Snatchers sought to capture, torture, and kill Order members. Many had to go into hiding or on the run. Very few members of the Order of the Phoenix survive both wars, but with the exception of Peter Pettigrew who defected to Voldemort, all of the fallen warriors die heroic deaths.

Since Harry Potter’s explosion onto the pop culture scene, comparing politicians to Voldemort has become somewhat of a trend. Survey respondents were asked to provide a politician, past or present, that reminded them of Voldemort. 58.74% of respondents made the connection to Hitler (See Figure 5-2). He was also frequently compared to Donald Trump. A few examples of responses are as follows:

“He’s an evil dude, so probably Trump?”
“Nixon-flavored Hitler”

“I feel that the Hitler imagery is very abundant, in terms of his rhetoric and place in their power structure.”

“the orange one”

“J'daka or Killmonger.”

**The Ministry of Magic**

After Rufus Scrimgeour tries to persuade Harry to act as a mascot to convince the public that the Ministry of Magic is properly handling Voldemort’s return, Harry angrily exclaims:

> You never get it right, you people, do you? Either we’ve got Fudge, pretending everything’s lovely while people get murdered right under his nose, or we’ve got you, chucking the wrong people into jail and trying to pretend you’ve got ‘the Chosen One’ working for you! *-HBP CH16, pg. 347*

After suffering for over a year due to a government-led nationwide campaign to discredit, disparage, and torture him, Harry is understandably displeased when Scrimgeour pretends none of that happened and asks for his help. Consisting almost entirely of bureaucracy, Rowling’s Ministry of Magic is an almost comically corrupt caricature of every negative governmental stereotype. This is a government that sanctions the torture of children, arrests and imprisons people without trial or legal representation, openly admits that the rich and powerful control policy, and has almost complete control over the press. The laws of Britain’s wizarding world are “radically inconsistent and incoherent” at best and absurdly unjust at worst (Schneyer 2008, 2). There is seemingly no oversight for high-level government officials. Despite its
ridiculousness, the Ministry of Magic bears striking similarities to Anglo-American governments, allowing readers to imagine that some semblance of such a government could happen in the real world. Through a revolving door of Ministers of Magic, the reader is treated to an examination of different levels of governmental corruption and how they can all contribute to a quick descent into authoritarianism. Respondents of this survey were quick to recognize this. When prompted to provide examples of authoritarian structures in *Harry Potter*, 49.7% of respondents provided answers about the Ministry like (See Figure 5-1):

“The Ministry of Magic. There's no evidence of elections or any form of representative government. The justice system is totally corrupt, with several examples of trials held just for show and at least one innocent person sent to prison without a trial. Information that would be inconvenient for those in charge is suppressed. Anyone who challenges the establishment is seen as an enemy (referring here to Dumbledore/the Order in book 5).”

“The Wizarding society of Britain in the 90s is already on the verge of fascism by the time Voldemort takes over the government. Intolerance of non-humans and non-magical people as well as the enslavement of elves is extremely normalized.”

“During OOTP, the Ministry of Magic was not willing to listen to any outside ideas about Voldemort's return. They used the Daily Profit to provide false information, create discord amongst the people so they didn't ask questions, and cause people to question their beliefs.”

“The Ministry is much the same. Basically "Big Magic™", you either live under their societal system, or you're not really allowed much anywhere in that society. Total control of wizard society in the UK.”
We first meet the aptly named Cornelius Fudge in *The Chamber of Secrets* when he arrives to cart Hagrid off to Azkaban with no evidence, no warrant, and no trial. His administration can be characterized by a combination of fear, personal ambition, and woeful incompetence. He is a blustering, ineffectual figure whose attitude and behavior depend on the stability of his administration. When Harry emerges from the Triwizard maze clutching Cedric Diggory’s dead body and proclaiming that Voldemort had returned, Minister Fudge categorically refuses to believe it. Dumbledore, fed up with Fudge’s stubbornness in the face of irrefutable evidence, tells him “you are blinded…by the love of the office you hold, Cornelius! You place too much importance, and you always have done, on the so-called purity of blood” (*GoF* CH36, pg. 708).

That he values blood-purity and status has never been a secret. He balks at casting suspicion on Lucius Malfoy because he comes from a well-to-do family that has made many generous donations to the Ministry. He is suspicious of Hagrid and Madame Maxime because they are half-giants. Fudge’s love of office governs his mood, always thinking about the opinions of the public. When Harry accidentally blows up his aunt in *The Prisoner of Azkaban*, he thinks that he is going to be arrested and sent to Azkaban. Yet, Fudge presents a friendly, sympathetic, almost fatherly figure and brushes off Harry’s violation of the Decree for the Reasonable Restriction of Underage Sorcery because of his celebrity status and “the present climate” (*PoA* CH3, pg. 45). Harry never sees any disciplinary action. Yet, just two years later when Harry casts a Patronus Charm to protect himself and his cousin, the Ministry sees fit to assemble the entire Wizengamot, or the Wizarding High Court, to deal with a simple matter of underage magic. Fudge makes every attempt to make Harry’s trial into a kangaroo court by protesting the allowance of witnesses testimony and endeavoring to ignore the provision in the law that made Harry’s actions perfectly acceptable due to exceptional circumstances. Dumbledore’s
intervention forces Fudge to declare Harry cleared of all charges, but he continues to lean on the press to paint both Harry and Dumbledore as lying lunatics as he turns a blind eye to the growing evidence that Voldemort has indeed returned. His paranoia increases exponentially throughout *The Order of the Phoenix*, convincing himself that Dumbledore was plotting to “form his own private army, with which he will be able to take on the Ministry of Magic” (*OotP* CH14, pg. 303). It’s only when he sees Voldemort and his Death Eaters with his own eyes after the Battle of the Department of Mysteries that he finally accepts the truth. Fudge is quickly sacked and replaced without an election (the only evidence of an election within the books is the unsurprisingly unanimous one Hermione insists on to give Harry authority over Dumbledore’s Army).

Fudge’s successor, Rufus Scrimgeour, is Fudge’s virtual opposite in temperament, but he is equally ineffective. As the former Head of the Auror Office in the British Ministry, Scrimgeour is rather shrewder and more resolute than Fudge. Rather than turn a blind eye to Voldemort’s machinations, he overcompensates by imprisoning likely-innocents like Stan Shunpike in an effort to keep the public calm and create an illusion of safety. Just like Fudge, Scrimgeour is overly concerned with appearances. He tries to persuade Harry that it is his “duty to be used by the Ministry”, (*HBP* CH16, pg. 346). Harry is not at all keen on being used as a mascot as he remembers how poorly the Ministry treated him before they were forced to acknowledge Voldemort’s return. Throughout his tenure as Minister of Magic, Scrimgeour concealed how poorly the resistance efforts were going, and his eventual murder left the Ministry open as a prime target for a swift coup by Voldemort’s Death Eaters.

Installed after Scrimgeour was murdered, Minister of Magic Pius Thicknesse was Voldemort’s puppet. Under the influence of the Imperius Curse, Thicknesse handled the day-to-day business
of the Ministry on Voldemort’s behalf. While Minister, Thicknesse was able to lock down communication and travel channels, control newspapers and spread propaganda, and order the surveillance and detainment of dissidents. The Muggle-Born Registration Commission was put into place to hunt down Muggle-borns and blood traitors (pure-blood witches and wizards like the Weasleys who showed too much sympathy to Muggles and Muggle-borns), cementing Thickness’s regime as staunchly authoritarian.

The legal system under the Ministry of Magic is bizarre. Schnever (2008) describes it as “a world with “laws” but no lawyers, courtrooms but no advocates, regulation but no public process for commenting or changing them” (6). Throughout the *Harry Potter* books, the reader is privy to several legal trials, but they do not showcase any sort of legal representation. That Dumbledore is present to defend Harry in his trial in *The Order of the Phoenix* is presented as a surprise. Harry has no idea that he is allowed to put forth witnesses in his defense, and Fudge tries to sway the outcome of the trial by abruptly changing the time and place in the hopes that he misses it altogether. No one is ever advised of their rights, and never is a right to counsel mentioned. Hagrid has no way to defend himself when the Minister of Magic shows up at his door and drags him away to Azkaban in the middle of the night on mere suspicion. There is no evidence against Stan Shunpike and no one brought before the Muggle-Born Registration Commission is afforded a lawyer. Sirius Black is sentenced to life in Azkaban without trial. Yet, when Ludo Bagman is on trial on suspicion of aiding Death Eaters, he is cleared primarily because he is a popular, handsome Quidditch player. Fudge refuses to consider the fact that Lucius Malfoy might be a Death Eater because he is from “a very old family” and has made “donations to excellent cause” (*GoF* CH36, pg. 706). Even though Lucius Malfoy had paid off the committee, the “defendant” shown the greatest amount of due process throughout the series
is Buckbeak the hippogriff, whose inevitable condemnation is dragged out through a series of sham appeals.

The injustice in Rowling’s government structure is deliberate; the wizarding justice system is created to fail. The Ministry of Magic itself seems to be structured after the nine circles of hell from *Dante’s Inferno*, indicating that she intends it to be used as a lesson (McCarron 2008). She teaches readers to recognize the signs of authoritarian or tyrannical structures and fight them. She actively discourages faith in institutions like the Ministry of Magic. When Scrimgeour asks Hermione whether she’s considering a career in Magical Law Enforcement, she retorts that “No, I’m hoping to do some good in the world!” (*DH* CH7, pg. 124). Hermione has always been willing to fight for what she believes in, even starting the Society for the Promotion of Elfish Welfare (S.P.E.W.) to fight against house-elf enslavement and obtain them increased rights. She continues to insist that even though house-elves generally claim to enjoy their enslavement they deserve to be treated fairly under the law. Nearly every other character within Rowling’s magical system writes off Hermione’s pleas as a joke, but she is proven right in the end when Sirius’s lack of kindness towards his family house-elf, Kreacher, contributes to his death. Rowling’s treatment of house-elves is a hotly debated topic within the *Harry Potter* fandom, but Rowling’s ultimate message on the subject is not a defense of slavery. Rather, the books suggest that “our institutions of law, government, and justice survive only so long as we say they do” (Schneyer 2008, 21). It is up to us to break down those institutions, brick by brick if we must. Like Hermione, we have to be willing to make an effort where no one else will. In learning this lesson, readers are better able to recognize and consider the flaws that exist in the political and legal systems they encounter in the real world.
Dolores Umbridge

Dolores Jane Umbridge, who held the titles of Senior Undersecretary to the Minister of Magic, Defense Against the Dark Arts Professor, High Inquisitor of Hogwarts, and Headmistress of Hogwarts all at some point between 1995 and 1996, interrupts Albus Dumbledore at the beginning of the year welcome feast to say the following:

There again, progress for progress’s sake must be discouraged, for our tried and tested traditions often require no tinkering. A balance, then, between old and new, between permanence and change, between tradition and innovation… because some changes will be for the better, while others will come, in the fullness of time, to be recognized as errors of judgment. Meanwhile, some old habits will be retained, and rightly so, whereas others, outmoded and outworn, must be abandoned. Let us move forward, then, into a new era of openness, effectiveness and accountability, intent on preserving what ought to be preserved, perfecting what needs to be perfected, and pruning wherever we find practices that ought to be prohibited. -OotP, Chapter 11, “The Sorting Hat’s New Song” pg. 213-4

Harry, Ron, and the vast majority of the student populace are far too bored to take in anything of what Umbridge says, but Hermione summarizes the speech nicely when she says that it means that “the Ministry’s interfering at Hogwarts” (OotP CH11, pg. 214). Indeed, they all learn quickly that Umbridge’s position as a Ministry-appointed Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher is a way for her to enforce Fudge’s narrative that everything is fine, Voldemort is not back, and Harry and Dumbledore are attention-seeking, deranged pathological liars. She is a textbook example of an authoritarian figure. Just as she said she would, she gets right to “pruning” and he cracks down on Hogwarts with an iron fist, refusing to allow students to practice spells because school is “not the real world” (OotP CH12, pg. 244). She bullies and belittles students and
categorically refuses to entertain questioning or criticism. Umbridge shows joy at the thought of hurting others, relishing the torture of children. She jumps at the opportunity to punish Harry for “spreading evil, nasty attention-seeking stories” and forces him to write lines with a special quill writes with one’s own blood and carves the words into the writer’s hand (OotP CH13, pg. 265). After silently suffering weeks of detention with Umbridge, the scar on the back of Harry’s right hand that reads “I must not tell lies” never fully fades away.

Although she purports to strictly follow the law, like any authoritarian, Umbridge is more than willing to bend them for her own benefit. She is determined to hold absolute power and uphold her agenda in all situations and will use any means necessary to ensure that she cannot be usurped. Umbridge attends Harry’s hearing for violating the Decree for the Reasonable Restriction of Underage Sorcery by casting a Patronus charm that prevented two Dementors from sucking out his and his cousin’s souls. When Dumbledore inquires as to how the Dementors, who are supposed to be completely under Ministry control, ended up attacking Harry in a muggle town, Umbridge condescendingly replies, “I’m sure I must have misunderstood you, Professor Dumbledore. So silly of me. But it sounded for a teensy moment as though you were suggesting that the Ministry of Magic had ordered an attack on this boy!” (OotP CH8, p. 147). Umbridge spends most of The Order of the Phoenix trying to help the Ministry convince the world that Harry Potter is a liar and categorically denies all his claims. Yet, near the end of the book, she admits that she herself was the one who sent Dementors to Little Whinging because, “somebody had to act…They were all bleating about silencing you somehow—discrediting you—but I was the one who actually did something about it” (OotP CH32, p. 747). Immediately before admitting this, she attempted to use an illegal spell, the Cruciatus Curse, to torture information out of Harry. In her view, her actions are justified because “what Cornelius doesn’t
know won’t hurt him” (*OotP* CH32, p. 746). Her attempts to drug Harry into revealing what she wanted to know were unsuccessful, and she was delighted to be able to escalate.

Umbridge turns herself into an almost Big Brother-like figure, repeatedly attempting to gain students’ trust and confidence with statements like “I am here to help. I am your friend” (*OotP*, CH12 p. 245). She tries to leverage her Ministry connections to get students like the unfortunate Marietta Edgecombe to be her spies. Through a combination of forcing through increasingly tyrannical laws and educational decrees, the formation of a band made up of loyal students created to enforce her rules called the Inquisitorial Squad, and drugging students with Veritaserum, a truth-telling potion, Umbridge establishes her authoritarian regime at Hogwarts.

Her rise to power is rapid. She could not stand to have less power than other teachers and had the Minister appoint her Hogwarts High Inquisitor. She has Fudge rubber stamp a series of increasingly draconian laws called Educational Decrees which increase her own power considerably. These Decrees afford her supreme control over all punishments and student organizations at the school. She also forbids teachers from “giving students any information that is not strictly related to the subject that they are paid to teach,” and orders the expulsion of any student found in possession of the magazine *The Quibbler*, which contained an interview with Harry where he explained what he saw when Voldemort returned (*OotP* CH35, pg. 551). She makes every effort to censor dissent and silence criticism of the Ministry’s position.

She also gives herself the power to inspect her fellow teachers. She immediately targets Hagrid, who she views as a “filthy half-breed” because of his giantess mother and Professor Trelawney, who is widely considered a fraud. Although both Trelawney’s and Hagrid’s teaching methods are generally questionable at best, Umbridge’s inspections are ludicrous, humiliating, biased, and designed to fail. She made a public show of sacking Trelawney, attempting to throw her out in
front of the entire school and smiling as she sobbed that she’d known no other home than Hogwarts for 16 years. She made a point to treat Hagrid as though he was not capable of understanding human speech and spends time loudly muttering conspicuously harsh comments like “has...to...resort...to...crude...sign...language...” (OotP CH 21, p. 447). In actuality, Hagrid’s teaching that year had never been better, but Umbridge targeted Hagrid because of his half-giant status and his unwavering loyalty to Dumbledore, who the Minister was convinced was raising an army to overthrow him. Because Dumbledore intervened and prevented her from throwing Trelawney from the castle, Umbridge tries to avoid causing a scene and attempts to oust Hagrid quietly by sending a delegation of five Aurors to arrest him for a nonexistent crime. This attempt was satisfyingly unsuccessful, and Hagrid escaped to join Dumbledore in the resistance.

Fudge’s worst fear was ironically realized when Harry, Ron, and Hermione start Dumbledore’s Army, or the DA. Taught by Harry, the DA focused on teaching students who want to learn defensive magic, especially as Umbridge refused to teach them anything practical in preparation for their exams. A secret organization, members of the DA communicated meeting times with enchanted coins. A jinxed piece of parchment made any member who betrayed them regret it, as Marietta Edgecombe painfully discovered. Harry’s leadership qualities help arm his classmates with knowledge necessary not only to pass their Defense Against the Dark Arts O.W.L.s, but also to their survival. The skills that members learned in the DA enabled them to fight not just against Umbridge’s reign at Hogwarts but also to defend themselves and others during events like the Battle of the Department of Mysteries, the Battle of the Lightning-Struck Tower, and the Battle of Hogwarts. Although Harry, Ron, and Hermione did not return to Hogwarts for their seventh year, Neville, Ginny, and Luna were able to restart the DA and mobilize students to
oppose the Carrows, Death Eaters who spread Voldemort’s authoritarian regime throughout Hogwarts. They were able to prevent their fellow students from being tortured, provide a safe-haven for those who needed shelter, and boost morale for those losing hope that things would improve.

Although the DA was eventually discovered and disbanded in *The Order of the Phoenix*, it left a spirit of resistance in the school. It was as if Hogwarts itself rallied against Umbridge. When Dumbledore was driven from the school in a characteristically dramatic fashion, the guard gargoyles refuse to allow her entrance into the Headmaster’s office, even though she had been named Headmistress by Education Decree Number Twenty-Eight. Fred and George Weasley were inspired to take equally dramatic action and flee the school in a spectacular explosion of aggressive fireworks that ran Umbridge ragged during her first week as Headmistress. Fireworks chased her down the hallways, spelled out offensive words, and resisted vanishing spells. The other teachers were inclined to simply enjoy watching Umbridge suffer. Professor Flitwick remarks that “I could have got rid of the sparklers myself, of course, but I wasn’t sure I had the authority” (*OotP* CH28, pg. 634). Students leave Umbridge’s classes in droves with various illnesses manufactured through Fred and George’s Skiving Snackboxes, explaining their symptoms as “Umbridge-itis” (*OotP*, CH30, pg. 678). Pranks and chaos meant to disrupt Umbridge and her Inquisitorial Squad were constant, instigated by student and poltergeist alike. Even the teachers were not left out of the resistance effort: Harry spotted Professor McGonagall whispering “it unscrews the other way” to Peeves, who was attempting to loosen a chandelier to terrorize Umbridge and her cronies (*OotP* CH30, pg. 678). With it’s careful depiction of how different groups fight against authoritarian structures, *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix* is a masterclass in protests and resistance efforts.
Umbridge’s bigotry goes well-beyond her tenure as a Hogwarts professor; her obsession with the purity of blood and her hatred for “half-breeds” is well-documented. She drafted a piece of anti-werewolf legislation that “makes it near-impossible” for Remus Lupin, an extremely talented wizard who is only dangerous for one night a month, to get a job (OotP CH14, pg. 302). In The Deathly Hallows, she is the Head of the Muggle-Born Registration Commission at the Ministry while under the control of Voldemort’s puppet, Pius Thicknesse. This commission operated under the blatantly false notion that Muggle-born witches and wizards had somehow “stolen” magic. Its sole purpose was to degrade, torment, and imprison Muggle-borns to purify wizarding society. Muggle-borns were ordered to present themselves for questioning and registration in an eerily similar manner to how Jewish people were rounded up in Nazi Germany. Freelance bounty hunters called Snatchers were employed by the Ministry to hunt down Muggle-borns who failed to show up for questioning or had gone on the run. By the end of the war, hundreds of Muggle-borns had been killed, imprisoned, or left impoverished and homeless. To reinforce anti-Muggle-born sentiment, the Ministry distributed propaganda, such as a pamphlet entitled “Mudbloods and the Dangers They Pose to a Peaceful Pure-Blood Society”. Mudblood is an extremely offensive word for a Muggle-born witch or wizard, as Harry and Hermione, who is Muggle-born, learn in The Chamber of Secrets. The Muggle-Born Registration Commission is tantamount to ethnic cleansing.

Though she is a complex and well-developed character, Umbridge may be the only major antagonist in the entire series that has absolutely no redeeming qualities. Rowling makes no attempt to provide a tragic backstory that might explain her evil nature. She is likely the most reviled character Rowling ever wrote, even surpassing Voldemort—a glance at tweets using the #Umbitch tag on Twitter in the 2010s will prove that quickly (Griffeth 2019). She is just an
unequivocally terrible person. Perhaps her most memed quote isn’t in the books; rather it comes from the *Order of the Phoenix* movie. In a culmination of her pathological need to arrange the world according to her bigoted viewpoints, she exclaims to a herd of angry centaurs “I WILL HAVE ORDER!” She says this right before that herd of angry centaurs carries her away; whether she is ultimately gang raped by them is a hotly debated topic within the fandom (Griffeth 2019).

Dolores Umbridge is perhaps the most hated character because, while readers have likely never actual met a wizard Nazi, chances are good they’ve encountered an authority figure like Umbridge before. She is easily relatable to people readers have already had, or easily could have had interactions with (Griffeth 2019). A master’s thesis called “I wanted her dead more than Voldemort” tracked fan comments about Umbridge on six different websites and “cruel” and “relatable” were by far the most commonly mentioned (Griffeth 2019). She’s the embodiment of every bad teacher who belittles and bullies children, every corrupt politician who cares only for themselves, and every authoritarian dictator who demands blind, unquestioning compliance all wrapped up in a fluffy pink cardigan. Consequently, she gets compared to many different political figures. Dozens of artists on Redbubble sell stickers asking “who put Dolores Umbridge in charge of 2020?” and of Donald Trump’s face superimposed on Umbridge’s pink-clad body. There are also memes comparing her to Betsy Devos, Hillary Clinton, and Margaret Thatcher, associations which the responses to this survey support (See Figure 5-3). Although she was more frequently compared to former President Donald Trump, respondents wrote in things like:

“ron desantis adjusting education”

“margerie taylor green, the gop and maga”
“Elizabeth I of England. Her autocratic ruling style is similar to Dolores Umbridge’s leadership style.”

“Amy cony beret both of them are wanting to regulate things that are just human nature”

“Trump LOL”

“She seemed to be based on the Iron Woman, although worse”

“Hillary Clinton, its the dress pant suites totally hideous”

Those who participated in this survey make clear that Dolores Umbridge’s goals of absolute power and racial purity are not magical threats; they are very real issues in the world Harry Potter readers inhabit.

**Gierzynski, Eddy, & Mutz**

There have been two major studies done that directly link Harry Potter to opinions on authoritarianism. First was a book called *Harry Potter and the Millennials: Research Methods and Politics of the Muggle Generation* by Anthony Gierzynski and Kathryn Eddy published in 2013. The second was Diana Mutz’s study of multivariate observational models and panel data from 2014 to 2016 called “Harry Potter and the Deathly Donald” (2016).

From 2009 to 2011, Gierzynski and Eddy surveyed more than 1,100 college students in the Millennial generation (which Gierzynski and Eddy say is made up of people born between 1982
and 2002) across the country, resulting in a captive sample size of 1,141 (2013). They found that even when controlling for other predictors, *Harry Potter* fans are generally more open to diversity, more politically tolerant, less authoritarian, less likely to support the use of deadly force or torture, more politically active, more likely to have had a negative view of the Bush administration, more likely to have supported Barack Obama for president, more liberal, and more politically engaged (Gierzynski & Eddy 2013). Arguing that the specific timing of the series’ arrival on the cultural scene had a unique impact on that generation’s political socialization, they tease out six different lessons that they internalized from the books, the third of which is “Don’t be an Authoritarian Git” (Gierzynski & Eddy 2013). Gierzynski and Eddy note that many of the books’ antagonists “provide perfect illustrations of the authoritarian dynamic” with the best example being Dolores Umbridge (Gierzynski & Eddy 2013). Yet, they highlight how all the books “good” characters display traits that are the exact opposite of an authoritarian predisposition (Gierzynski & Eddy 2013). To test for authoritarian predisposition, which Gierzynski and Eddy describe as “the tendency to show obedience to authorities, to conform to rules and norms, and to disdain those not deemed part of the in-group,” they asked respondents to choose a word or phrase that appealed to them more from a set of two, one of which would indicate a predisposition to authoritarianism (Gierzynski 2013 & Eddy, 81). The researchers generated scores from this test, and *Harry Potter* fans scored significantly lower than non-fans.

Diana Mutz’s more recent study also examined authoritarian predisposition in respondents, but while examining how *Harry Potter* fans reacted to Donald Trump, relying on the obvious parallels between Trump and Lord Voldemort. Trump’s anti-Muslim rhetoric is reminiscent of Voldemort’s desire to eradicate all those not of pure wizarding descent (“pure-bloods”). His
proclamations of law and order bear marked similarities to the state of the Ministry of Magic under Voldemort’s control in *The Deathly Hallows*. Like Gierzynski and Eddy, Mutz discerns the dangers of authoritarianism as one of *Harry Potter’s* main themes, alongside tolerance and respect for differences and opposition to violence. She found those same three themes to be prominent in the discourse surrounding Donald Trump’s 2016 presidential campaign. Because Gierzynski and Eddy’s model included only college students, Mutz tested similar hypotheses with a larger sample representative of all American adults (Mutz 2016). With a sample size of 1,142 respondents, she found that *Harry Potter* produces more positive attitudes toward Muslims and homosexuals and significantly more negative attitudes towards Donald Trump (Mutz 2016).

My research derives directly from Gierzynski, Eddy, and Mutz. I sought to reconfirm the political preferences and habits of *Harry Potter* fans as well as see how authoritarian predisposition differed within the fan base.

**Hypotheses**

This survey was primarily designed to test the following hypotheses:

**Hypothesis 1**

*H1: Those who have read all Harry Potter books will present as ideologically liberal.*

This hypothesis seeks to confirm Gierzynski, Eddy, and Mutz’s findings that *Harry Potter* fans will be ideologically liberal, but with an assumption that increased levels of exposure will produce a higher effect. Most people read the books in order, and the books see a marked increase in the prominence of authoritarian structures. There are hints in earlier books, like when Cornelius Fudge shows up to Hagrid’s hut in the middle of the night and arrests him without
warrant or evidence because “the Ministry’s got to do something” (CoS CH14, pg. 261). He justifies this treatment by asking Hagrid and Dumbledore to “Look at it from my point of view... I’m under a lot of pressure. Got to be seen doing something” (CoS CH14, pg. 261). Fudge arrests Hagrid pointlessly and subjects him to the horrors of Azkaban and Dementors just to protect his image from the public. His decision was heavily influenced by Lucius Malfoy, a generous donor to the Ministry with a vendetta against Dumbledore and his allies. Seeing the harm that Fudge’s position causes could have reinforced a disinclination for the type of “Tough on Crime” ideology that permeates more conservative circles. Examples of negative governmental actions that run contrary to liberal ideology only grow more abundant as the books continue.

**Hypothesis 2**

*H2. Those who have read all Harry Potter books will have higher levels of political engagement.*

This hypothesis uses a similar rationale to Hypothesis 1 regarding increased exposure to the books. Increased exposure to the books may have led to increased self-reported levels of political engagement. Additionally, the prevalence and strength of *Harry Potter*-based activism and philanthropy such as what was formerly known as the Harry Potter Alliance, Lumos, and various protests movements over the last 25 years lent strength to this assumption. Even in recent years, a large portion of *Harry Potter* fans have been diligent in speaking out against Rowling’s transphobic rhetoric.

**Hypothesis 3**

*H3: Those who have read or listened to the Harry Potter books more than once will present as more ideologically liberal.*
Like the first two hypotheses, this hypothesis assumes that more exposure to *Harry Potter* increases the books’ ideological impact. Surprisingly, there is not much literature on the phenomena of rereading fiction, but this study posits that *Harry Potter* fans may be predisposed to rereading because of the fandom culture that inspires continued interaction with the content.

**Hypothesis 4**

*H4: Respondents who read Harry Potter at younger ages will score lower on Altemeyer’s Right-Wing Authoritarian Scale.*

This hypothesis assumes that the age that a person reads *Harry Potter* matters when considering how they think about authoritarian structures. *Harry Potter* is relentless in its condemnation of authoritarianism, and younger children are more impressionable.

**Hypothesis 5**

*H5: Respondents who read Harry Potter at younger ages will present as ideologically liberal and will identify more with the Democratic Party.*

This hypothesis combines hypotheses 1 and 2, but instead of considering *Harry Potter* fans that have read all the books, it only looks at those who have read them more than once.

**Data and Design**

To conduct this research, I created a University of Richmond IRB-approved original survey that utilized the shortened, 5-question version of Altemeyer’s Right-Wing Authoritarian Scale (See Appendix). I attended two separate fan conventions, GalaxyCon Richmond in Virginia and MegaCon Orlando in Florida. MegaCon is a smaller, more regional convention, but MegaCon is the second-largest fan convention in North America. At the conventions, I asked people to fill
out my survey either on paper or by scanning a QR code to gain access to an online form. I also placed the form online in several select fan communities.

Overall, I received 161 viable responses to my survey. 69.57% came from the Google Form, 22.98% paper responses from GalaxyCon Richmond, and 7.45% from MegaCon Orlando. Respondents were 63.35% female, 27.95% male, 4.97% non-binary, and 2.4% “other” (See Figure 1-1 and Figure 1-2). The online responses populated themselves into a spreadsheet, but I entered all the data from the paper surveys by hand.

Figure 1-1: Survey Sources & Figure 1-2: Gender

Because I was particularly interested in how the age one read the *Harry Potter* books influenced political opinions and behavior, I made to sure ask the current age of participants as well the age at which they first read or listened to the books. These questions were not multiple choice; they required the respondent to write or type an actual age. 19.86% of respondents were between the ages of 18 and 24. 42.23% were between the ages of 25 and 34. 17.39% were between the ages of 35 and 44. 12.42% were between the ages of 45 and 54. 4.35% were between the ages of 55 and 64. 1.24% were over the age of 65 (See Figure 1-3). I observed nearly every person I watched complete the survey pause and struggle to answer what age they were when they read or listened to the books. I frequently had to provide respondents with the year *Harry Potter* was
published or the year the first movie was released so that they could do some quick math. The results show that most people had read or listened to the books at or before the age of 12, encompassing 52.17% of respondents. An additional 17.38% of people read or listened to the books between the ages of 13 and 18. 9.94% of people said that they were between the ages of 19 and 24. 13.04% of people were between the ages of 25 and 34. 5.59% of people were between the ages of 35 and 49. 1.86% of respondents confirmed that they first read or listened to *Harry Potter* at the age of 50 or older (See Figure 1-4). This steady trend of fewer respondents reporting reading *Harry Potter* as age increases is not surprising considering the series falls somewhere in the gray area between Children’s and Young Adult literature. While *Harry Potter* attracts fans of all ages, its target demographic is younger. This survey only considers responses from those aged 18 and older.

Figure 1-3: Age & Figure 1-4: Age Read

The survey included a list of all seven *Harry Potter* books and asked respondents to check the ones they’ve read or listened to. I used the phrase “read or listened to” consistently throughout the survey to account for the popularity of the *Harry Potter* audiobooks. Americans listeners are most likely to have listened to the version read by Jim Dale, and Europeans are likely more
familiar with Stephen Fry’s rendition. 88.6% had read or listened to all 7 books and 11.39% had not (See Figure 1-5). I also considered how many times a person had read or listened to the books under the assumption that more exposure to the content would intensify its impact. Of those who had read or listened to all seven books, 21.74% respondents had done so only once. 26.81% had read or listened to them 2-3 times. 18.12% had read them 4-7 times. 33.33% reported reading the books 8 or more times (See Figure 1-6). 78.26% of respondents had read through all 7 books more than once. This is unsuprising considering the community and culture surrounding *Harry Potter* that encourages continued engagement. It’s almost as if the *Harry Potter* fandom is a slippery slope that pushes people deeply into the fandom, making it harder to be a “casual fan”.

*Figure 1-5: Read All & Figure 1-6: Times Read*

I measured those types of community engagement by asking if and how participants interact with *Harry Potter* media on the internet. I provided 12 different websites as well as a place to write in a website that was not included on that list. Websites that the most participants attested to using include what used to be Pottermore but is now WizardingWorld.com, YouTube, Instagram, Facebook, and Reddit (See Figure 2-1). I also asked them to write in what source of media that
they used the most to interact with *Harry Potter* content online (See Figure 2-2). Fewer respondents answered this question, and the results are spread. I was surprised to see how much interaction with Pottermore, but it makes sense considering the prevailing belief in the fandom that the Sorting Quiz on Pottermore is the only “official” one. Most fans who claim to have been sorted into their Hogwarts House likely used that website, and most research done on the topic uses that test as a metric (Crysel 2015). I was also surprised to see that while An Archive of Our Own (a nonprofit, fan-run fanfiction website, normally referred to as AO3) was used more frequently than FanFiction.net (FFN) and Wattpad (other fanfiction websites), more people reported FFN as their most used form of media to interact with the *Harry Potter* fandom than they did AO3. If the frequent discourse on r/HPfanfiction, the *Harry Potter* fanfiction subreddit, is to be believed, the renaissance of FFN is dwindling quickly due to it being plagued by advertisements. AO3 is generally thought of as superior because of its comprehensive tagging system, greater freedom of thought, and commitment against ads. However, that very discourse may indicate what happened with these results—those who prefer AO3 as a fanfiction website also frequently use Reddit; this may have caused them to have to choose between them and split the results.

*Figure 2-1: Media Used & Figure 2-2: Most Used Media*
To further study engagement, I asked the participants how much *Harry Potter* merchandise they owned. Only 8.75% said that they owned none. 64.375% characterized themselves as owning “a little” *Harry Potter* merchandise. 26.875% respondents admitted to having “a whole lot” (See Figure 2-3). It is worth noting that J.K. Rowling’s prominent transphobia has caused many fans to get rid of their merchandise and distance themselves from the fandom. That may be why we have fewer people owning “a whole lot” of merchandise. Indeed, a respondent at GalaxyCon noted that they used to have a *Harry Potter*-themed room in their house but had gotten rid of all of it in protest of Rowling. I heard several anecdotes to this point, with people noting that they used to engage more with *Harry Potter* media online, but no longer do so because of Rowling. A few paper surveys filled out the media surveys, but left notes in the margins emphasizing that they do not engage anymore.

It does not seem, however, that Rowling’s transphobia has caused people to stop identifying with Hogwarts Houses. Because of the values of Ravenclaw House (wit, learning, and curiosity), I expected to see more Ravenclaws represented in my survey responses. I expected to see a low number of Gryffindors in a sample of people who have read the books because the movies do a disservice to both Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff Houses by focusing on the rivalry between Gryffindor and Slytherin. My expectations were met. 15.89% of respondents identified with Gryffindor House, 31.79% from Ravenclaw House, 26.39% from Hufflepuff House, and 25.83% from Slytherin House (See Figure 2-4). I was surprised at the high level of representation from Hufflepuff because they are historically both misunderstood and disliked. While they value loyalty, kindness, and hard work, they have a reputation for being the house of “leftovers.” In the Sorting Hat’s song at the start of the 1995-96 school year, it says that Hufflepuff “took the rest” after her co-founders declared the attributes of the students they wanted to teach (*OotP* CH11,
One of the first things Harry, and therefore the reader, hears about Hufflepuff house is Hagrid explaining that “everyone says Hufflepuff are a lot o’ duffers” (SS CH5, pg. 80). That perception has held weight. At a Sorting Ceremony event at MegaCon, I witnessed a little girl burst into uncontrollable tears upon being sorted into Hufflepuff and the Hat had to re-sort her. However, I would posit that the Fantastic Beasts film franchise did much heavy lifting toward rehabilitating Hufflepuff House through using magizoologist Newt Scamander as a protagonist. Newt is a beloved character and when we meet him in Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them, he is wearing a Hufflepuff scarf.

Figure 2-3: Merchandise & Figure 2-4: House

The main variables I aimed to consider in relation to Harry Potter fans were political ones, so it was important to be deliberate in how I analyzed respondents’ politics. I expected to be able to confirm Gierzynski, Eddy, and Mutz’s findings that Harry Potter fans present as ideologically liberal and lean toward to Democratic Party, and I did, though more survey participants answered that they did not identify with a political party than expected. 40.37% of participants identified themselves as Democrats. 9.32% identified as Republicans. 34.16% did not identify with a party, and 16.15% responded with “other” (See Figure 3-1). Answers for those who wrote in answers for “Other” included the Socialist and Freedom parties. I asked participants to rate their political
ideology on a scale of one to ten with one being extremely liberal and ten being extremely conservative. Respondents averaged a score of 3.625, which is firmly liberal. The chart below shows a clearly liberal trend, with only 13.75% of participants identifying themselves on the conservative side of the scale (See Figure 3-2).

Beyond party and ideology, I was interested in if people actually engaged in politics. The survey inquired if people considered themselves politically engaged. 54% of participants considered themselves to be at least moderately politically active. I was surprised that as much as 44% said that they were not politically active (See Figure 3-3). The survey did not define what “politically active” meant, however, so the validity of that question may be affected by that ambiguity. There was less room for interpretation in the question that simply asked if participants were registered to vote. As expected, an overwhelming majority of respondents, 96.2% of them, said that they were registered to vote compared to just 3.8% who said they were not (See Figure 3-4).

However, we must consider that being registered to vote is not a guarantee of consistently voting. The survey did not ask how consistently participants voted. Regardless, the survey results
support that more than half of *Harry Potter* fans who attend fan conventions consider themselves to be politically active, in whatever form that may take.

*Figure 3-3: Politically Active & Figure 3-4: Registered to Vote*

### Results

#### Right-Wing Authoritarian Scale

The main hypothesis I tested was to what extent reading *Harry Potter* affected levels of or tolerance toward authoritarianism. To test that, I applied the 5-question version of Altemeyer’s Right-Wing Authoritarian Scale, or RWA Scale which was indicated by a Monmouth University Polling Institute report. The survey included the following 5 questions and asked respondents to indicate their opinion on a scale of one to nine with one meaning strongly disagree and nine meaning strongly agree. Based on this metric, those with lower scores are less authoritarian than those with higher scores.

*RWA 1: The “old-fashioned ways” and the “old-fashioned values” still show the best way to live.*
The average score for RWA 1 was 3.2.

*RWA 2: What our country really needs is a strong, determined leader who will crush evil, and take us back to our true path.*

The average score for RWA 2 was 3.6.
**RWA 3:** Our country will be great if we honor the ways of our forefathers, do what the authorities tell us to do, and get rid of the “rotten apples” who are ruining everything.

*Figure 4-3: RWA 3*

The average score for RWA 3 was 2.5.

**RWA 4:** This country would work a lot better if certain groups of troublemakers would just shut up and accept their group’s traditional place in society.

*Figure 4-4: RWA 4*
RWA 5: Once our government leaders and the authorities condemn the dangerous elements in our society, it will be the duty of every patriotic citizen to help stomp out the rot that is poisoning our country from within.

The average score for RWA 4 was 2.2.

**Figure 4-5: RWA 5**

The average score for RWA 5 was 3.1.

Using the 1-9 scale, the average overall score when RWA 1-5 are added together was 14.2 out of a possible 45. However, in order to produce a score in Altemeyer’s Scale comparable to the original researcher’s, we must assign values of -4 to 4 to the 1-9 scores participants produced. Therefore, 1 gets reassigned a value of -4, 5 get reassigned a value of 0, and 9 gets reassigned a value of 4. When readjusting to those values, the average score becomes -10.
Examples of Authoritarianism in *Harry Potter*

In addition to collecting data on participants’ RWA scores, I also asked them to provide examples of authoritarianism and its opposition in *Harry Potter* after supplying the following definition:

In an article written for the Journal of Democracy, Anwar Ibrahim defines an authoritarian government as one that has “strongly centralized political power along with economic power concentrated in the hands of the few” but also has “no guarantee of the rule of law or the protection of political freedoms” (Ibrahim 2019, 5). He goes on to describe such a state as having a “low tolerance for civil society, dissident political parties, interest groups, and for any other force deemed able to mobilize opposition” (Ibrahim 2019, 6-7).
The survey asked for three examples, though not everyone was able to think of that many. After examining the responses, I was able to determine 10 different areas of authoritarianism or its opposition into which all the data fit and coded them accordingly (See Figure 5-1). Those categories were Voldemort and/or Death Eaters, the Ministry of Magic, Dolores Umbridge, Dumbledore’s Army, the Order of the Phoenix, SPEW/Magical Creatures, the Dursleys, Blood Status, the tension between wizards and muggles, and Hogwarts teachers. The Ministry of Magic was unsurprisingly the most frequently cited example of authoritarianism, followed by Voldemort and his Death Eaters and Dolores Umbridge. The frequency of Hogwarts staff members other than Umbridge being cited as authoritarian was surprising, but the way Severus Snape runs his classroom may fit the model—one respondent said an example of authoritarianism was “Snape trying to control everything Harry does” and another said “Snape’s class, preference given to certain students”. However, several write-in responses mentioned things like Hogwarts having “rigid rules” and “the point system seems to be willy nilly” and “the hierarchy of Hogwarts teachers and Heads of House in relation to the Headmaster”. Participants who responded in such ways seem to have focused on the “centralized power” portion of Ibrahim’s definition.
The last questions on the survey asked participants if any of four characters from the *Harry Potter* books reminded them of a political figure, past or present. The four characters were Voldemort, Dolores Umbridge, Albus Dumbledore, and Ludo Bagman. Bagman is a minor character that appears only in *The Goblet of Fire* and is not in the movie. In his youth, he was a popular professional Quidditch star who played Beater for the Wimbourne Wasps. When we meet him in the books, he is the Head of the Department of Magical Games and Sports and could be described as lackadaisical at best. Bagman lacks discipline and ignored the disappearance of one of the members of his department for months. Throughout the book, it is revealed that he has a gambling problem and is in deep trouble with goblins. He tries to use his position as a judge of the Triwizard Tournament to cheat and help Harry win because of a bet he made with the goblins. He has cheated several people out of their savings, including Fred and George Weasley and Lee Jordan’s dad. I included Bagman in the survey because he is much less recognizable than the other three characters and may only be remembered by those who have either read *The Goblet of Fire* recently or read it several times. The question about Bagman was the most
skipped question on the survey. Because so few people were able to supply viable responses, Bagman will be left out of my analysis from this point forward.

The political figures respondents mentioned in relation to Voldemort were unsurprising, though having 58.74% of individual respondents compare Voldemort to Hitler is significant (See Figure 5-2). J.K. Rowling has admitted that she partially modeled Voldemort after Hitler and other Fascist leaders (Lyubansky 2010).

*Figure 5-2: Political Figures Similar to Voldemort*

![Figure 5-2: Political Figures Similar to Voldemort](image)

*This chart only represents political figures that were mentioned more than once.*

Dolores Umbridge is perhaps the most hated character in the *Harry Potter* universe. She exhibits several qualities of authoritarianism, from her tyrannical rein at Hogwarts to her spearheading of increasingly prejudiced initiatives at the Ministry of Magic. That she was most frequently compared to Trump is not surprising considering how often the fandom made jokes about the two throughout Trump’s presidency (See Figure 5-3). It may be that collecting responses at MegaCon, which took place in Orlando, Florida, caused the surge in comparisons to Ron DeSantis. Interestingly, respondents quite frequently refrained from naming an actual person to
compare to Umbridge; rather, they were a little more general. Despite the fact that they could not name a specific political figure, they seemed to understand Umbridge’s authoritaran tendencies without prompting and were able to relate them to their own lives. Responses indicate Dolores Umbridge reminded respondents of:

   “Modern Trump leaning conservatives”

   “a generic archetype of bigotry among conservatives education”

   “the soccer mom who voted for Trump and actively works to strip rights”

   “every politician trying to ban drag/lgbt in general/ who won’t ban guns/ the ones who want to ban tiktok because it’s not an American social media company and therefore not able to be censored by the American government.”

   “The people trying to ban library books and micromanage school curriculums in the southern United States”

   “the zealous fascist enforcer type who abuses their newly given power and enjoys using rules and cruelty to put others down.”

   “a white supremcist”
People struggled to compare Dumbledore to political figure and seemed to prefer to think of him as a-political. I chose to ask survey respondents about Dumbledore not because of any authoritarian tendencies he may have (though several respondents did mention that the way he ran Hogwarts fits the authoritarian model more closely than they were comfortable with), but rather because he is positioned as a direct opposition to governmental forces in *Harry Potter*. After Harry returns from the maze of the Third Task of the Triwizard Tournament clutching another student’s dead body, Minister of Magic Cornelius Fudge categorically refuses to believe that Voldemort has returned in fear of losing power. Dumbledore eventually stops trying to convince him, saying “if your determination to shut your eyes will carry you as far as this, Cornelius, we have reached a parting of the ways. You must act as you see fit. And I – I shall act as I see fit” (*GoF* CH36, pg.709). It is this statement more than anything, I think, that feeds Fudge’s unhinged paranoia over Dumbledore’s supposed plan to usurp him and overthrow the Ministry. While not training his students in combat as Fudge feared, Dumbledore does lead the
Order of the Phoenix. Fudge thinks that Dumbledore’s determination to fight against Voldemort and his work with the Order is a threat and refuses to see what Dumbledore says plainly: “The only one against whom I intend to work is Lord Voldemort. If you are against him, then we remain, Cornelius, on the same side” (GoF CH36, pg. 709). It is Fudge himself who sets up Dumbledore as a political opponent, but the idea of Dumbledore in politics did not begin in June 1995; he had “been offered the post of Minister of Magic, not once, but several times” and had turned it down every time (DH CH35, pg. 717). Dumbledore viewed holding political office as more power than he felt himself capable or worthy of wielding; perhaps that is why when asked to name a political figure that reminded them of Dumbledore, respondents answered with some of the following:

“i can't think of anyone --I don't velieve any politician is quite as wise as  Dumbledore. however, one of dumbledore's biggest flaws were putting duty to the cause over the individual. that isn't always a bad thing, but it certainly can lead to that depending on the situation”

“I can't think of anyone as genuinely un-corrupt as Dumbledore. He was problematic in some ways, of course”

“honesly I always thought of him as a grandpa. he apolitical to me”

“Again I can’t think of anyone in particular, but he seems to align with what leftists would call a liberal, in that he seems interested only in addressing the symptoms of a problem (Voldemort and his death eaters) but not addressing any systemic issues that have given rise to or exacerbated that problem, or that may cause another version to resurface in future.”
“Dumbledore seems above politics. He's more of a civil servant. Virginia is different in that our judges are appointed, not elected. Dumbledore is more of an appointee.”

These sometimes wildly different interpretations of Dumbledore’s politics may be partially explained by rise in criticism toward Dumbledore. Some still see him as a kindly old man with only the best interests at heart; his favorite remedy for evil is love. Other, however, are marking him as manipulative, abusive, and callous in his dealings with people. That camp would invasion Dumbledore as a chess master arranging people around a board to his liking; they tend to think what Severus Snape did upon discovering Dumbledore’s plan for Harry, aghast that he had been raising him “like a pig for slaughter” (DH CH33, pg. 687). Despite sometimes struggling to name a specific political counterpart to Dumbledore or even to agree about the nature of his politics, *Harry Potter* fans seem to have again demonstrated deep thought on the matter.

*Figure 5-4: Political Figures Similar to Dumbledore*

![Bar chart showing political figures similar to Dumbledore](image)

*This chart only represents political figures that were mentioned more than once.*

At the two fan conventions I attended, I wore *Harry Potter* cosplay or some manner of *Harry Potter* themed clothing to help me attract people. I have no reason to believe that my choices to
wear a Marauder’s Map Dress, a Snitch costume, or a Beauxbatons uniform had any undue influence on participant responses. Indeed, relating to others’ costumes helped me relate to other people and made me more comfortable approaching them, and them me.

Picture 2: Costumes Worn at Conventions

In the seven days I spent at conventions, I carried a clipboard with a QR code flyer advertising my research wherever I went (See Picture 3). I offered specially-designed two-inch round stickers as incentives to take my survey until I ran out after the first day of MegaCon (See Picture 4). The incentive seemed to excite people, as several people approached me because they saw others rifling through my bag of stickers. I saw increased enthusiasm because of the different color schemes I offered. Though it was likely a joke, more than one person told me
point-blank that they were taking the survey so they could receive a sticker. To be clear, given the breadth and variety of sticker vendors at both locations, attendees of fan conventions may be predisposed to appreciate stickers more than the average population. However, running out of stickers did not seem to slow down my progress.

*Picture 3: Flyer with QR code for Survey*
The sample represented here is one of convenience and is made up of people who attended the events I targeted specifically because I anticipated finding people in certain places that would be willing to take my survey. I attended every *Harry Potter*-themed event that I could for obvious reasons. But when *Harry Potter* events were not available, I attended and participated in *Doctor Who* and *Marvel* events because of the potential overlap in their fan base. I attended events that were targeted at Virginia residents because I thought they may be interested in helping a University of Richmond student, and I attended several panels on data, analytics, and research in the hopes that I would find people who just liked helping others’ research. I also tended to haunt longer lines where people welcomed the distraction of a survey. Outside of attending events at the conventions and walking up to people in obvious *Harry Potter* cosplay, I frequently approached people who made eye contact with me and looked “friendly.” Because of that, there may be some level of unconscious bias in the sample. Still, this sample is still generally representative of a *Harry Potter* fan that would attend a fan convention.
Respondents showed the most engagement when I interacted with people as a member of the fan community instead of only as a researcher. I had conversations with people outside of my research, participated heavily in panel discussions and community events, and won several different trivia competitions. By engaging with the people around me, they were more willing to listen to me explain my research and take my survey. This allowed me to build relationships with prominent people at the conventions who helped me promote my research. On multiple occasions, I was asked to make announcements at the beginning or end of a panel or event and to walk around with my QR code. Throughout the conventions, people began to recognize me—they’d heard of the girl with the clipboard doing research on *Harry Potter* and politics and approached me. I capitalized on this recognition after each convention ended by posting a message thanking people for their kindness in GalaxyCon’s and MegaCon’s respective Facebook Groups with a link to the survey.

To interpret the data, I used the program *R* and ran t-tests to determine if the difference between the mean of two samples is significant or due to chance. The data was able to confirm several expected results, which increase the validity of the confirmation or rejection of my hypotheses.

The results show that those who scored lower, or more liberally, on the ideology scale are significantly more likely to identify as Democrats. In the same vein, those who score higher, or more conservatively, on the ideology scale are significantly more likely to identify as Republicans. It must be noted that there were a proportionately low number of Republicans in the sample, which makes sense. Previous research consistently asserts that *Harry Potter* fans favor the Democratic Party over the Republican Party in general. This trend holds true when eliminating respondents who either said that they did not identify with any particular party and
those who said that they identified with an “other” party. The association between ideology and party is clear and significant.

*Table 1: Dem/Rep vs. Ideology*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ideology Scale (1-10)</th>
<th>1: Mean of Democrats</th>
<th>2.86</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0: Mean of Republicans</td>
<td>5.87</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>p-value</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Democrats were given a value of 1 and Republicans a value of 0. All other responses were omitted.

**All values have been rounded to two decimal points.

Similarly, Democrats and Republicans behaved as expected on the 5-question version of Altemeyer’s Right-Wing Authoritarian Scale. Democrats scored consistently lower on the 1 to 9 scale than Republicans did, although the difference is not significant on RWA 5, which asks respondents’ opinions on the following statement:

*RWA 5: Once our government leaders and the authorities condemn the dangerous elements in our society, it will be the duty of every patriotic citizen to help stomp out the rot that is poisoning our country from within.*

This discrepancy may be caused by the higher-than-average percentage of respondents who felt neutral about the statement choosing to respond with 5. RWA 5 saw 16% respond neutrally compared to all four other questions’ 11%. This could possibly be explained by survey fatigue or even a widespread difference of opinion on what the “rot” is that is poisoning our country.
Table 2: Dem/Rep vs. RWA 1-5

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>RWA 1</th>
<th>RWA 2</th>
<th>RWA 3</th>
<th>RWA 4</th>
<th>RWA 5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1: Mean of Democrats</td>
<td>0.19</td>
<td>0.25</td>
<td>0.12</td>
<td>0.09</td>
<td>0.22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0: Mean of Republicans</td>
<td>0.45</td>
<td>0.48</td>
<td>0.38</td>
<td>0.37</td>
<td>0.31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>p-value</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>0.33</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*This table shows the mean values of respondents’ scores on the 1 to 9 scale. The values have been recoded where a score of 1=0 and a score of 9=1. Here, Democrats were given a value of 1 and Republicans a value of 0. All other responses were omitted.

**All values have been rounded to two decimal points.

When adding the values of all five questions on the -4 to 4 scale that Altemeyer recommends for comparison, the trend continues. While Democrats score significantly lower than Republicans, the Republicans are still not particularly authoritarian. It may be that the kind of people who attend a fan convention and consent to take a survey about *Harry Potter* and politics are less authoritarian in general. Of all participants, the mean RWA score was -10.

Table 3: Dem/Rep vs. RWA Score

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Altemeyer RWA Scale</th>
<th>Score (-20-20)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1: Mean of Democrats</td>
<td>-12.72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0: Mean of Republicans</td>
<td>-4.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>p-value</td>
<td>0.01</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*The 1 to 9 scoring system has been converted into a system that scores each system that scores each individual RWA question from -4 to 4 where 1=-4, 5=0, and 9=4. This table shows the
mean of the sum of each respondent’s answers to all 5 questions of the RWA scale. The lowest possible score is -20 and the highest possible score is 20. Here, Democrats were given a value of 1 and Republicans a value of 0. All other responses were omitted.

**All values have been rounded to two decimal points.

Hypothesis 1

**H1: Those who have read all Harry Potter books will present as ideologically liberal.**

The survey’s sample, which is made up of self-identified Harry Potter fans, had an average score of 3.65 on the ideology scale. Only about 8% of total respondents measured themselves on the conservative half of the scale. Those who read the books averaged a score of 3.589928 while those who had not read all of them averaged 3.8333. While it is true that those who had read or listened to all the books presented as more liberal, the significance of this difference is not high. I was not able to conclude that reading all seven books had any significant impact on ideology. We must accept the null hypothesis.

*Table 4: Read All vs. Ideology*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Liberal-Conservative</th>
<th>Ideology Scale (1-10)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1: Read all 7 books</td>
<td>3.59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0: Did not read all 7 books</td>
<td>3.83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>p-value</em></td>
<td>0.61</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Those who read or listened to all seven Harry Potter books were given a value of 1. All other respondents were given a value of 0.

**All values have been rounded to two decimal points.*
Hypothesis 2

**H2. Those who have read all Harry Potter books will have higher levels of political engagement.**

66% of respondents reported that they considered themselves to be at least moderately politically active, but having read all seven books in comparison to those who have not does not appear to have any significant effect (See Table 5). The inconclusiveness of this data may be due to the fact that the survey did not define what “political engagement” meant. It is entirely possible that different conceptions of the term affected the results. We must accept the null hypothesis.

*Table 5: Read All vs. Political Engagement*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Political Engagement</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
<th>Moderately</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1: Read all 7 books</td>
<td>0.21</td>
<td>0.34</td>
<td>0.45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0: Did not read all 7 books</td>
<td>0.39</td>
<td>0.33</td>
<td>0.28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>p</em>-value</td>
<td>0.16</td>
<td>0.93</td>
<td>0.15</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*This table shows respondents’ self-reported level of political engagement. Each column was recoded where Yes, No, and Moderately respectively were given the value of 1 and everything else was given a value of 0.

**All values have been rounded to two decimal points.

Hypothesis 3

**H3: Those who have read or listened to the Harry Potter books more than once will present as more ideologically liberal.**
30% of respondents who have read all 7 *Harry Potter* books have read them more than once. My hypothesis was made under the assumption that the more one interacts with a book series, the greater impact that it will have on political development. The results show that those who have only read the book once are more ideologically conservative than those who have read them more than once. It is more difficult to discern a pattern in exactly how many times reading the books may lead to a change in ideology, but the data shows that those who read the books at least 4 times presented as ideologically more liberal than those who had read them 1-3 times (See Table 6). We often reread books that make the biggest impression on us, so it makes sense that those who would return to the books again and again would show more of being influenced by them. This hypothesis is confirmed.

*Table 6: Read Frequency vs. Ideology*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Liberal-Conservative</th>
<th>Liberal-Conservative</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>Ideology Scale (1-10)</em></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>1: Read Once</strong></td>
<td>4.43</td>
<td>3.87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0: ELSE</td>
<td>3.41</td>
<td>3.55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>p-value</em></td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>0.37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>1: Read all 4-7 Times</strong></td>
<td>2.79</td>
<td>3.37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0: ELSE</td>
<td>3.81</td>
<td>3.77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>p-value</em></td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>0.20</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
*This chart shows the mean of self-reported ideology scores compared to how many times one had read the books. For each test, the variable in question was given a value of 1 and everything else was coded as 0.

**All values have been rounded to two decimal points.

**Hypothesis 4**

*H4: Respondents who read Harry Potter at younger ages will score lower on Altemeyer’s Right-Wing Authoritarian Scale.*

The results here are inconclusive. Those who read the books at or before age 18 have consistently lower RWA scores, but not to a high degree of significance (See Table 7). Those who read the books after the age of 19 show slightly higher scores. We must accept the null hypothesis.

Table 7: Age Read vs. RWA Score

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>RWA Score</th>
<th>RWA Score</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1: Read ≤ Age 12</td>
<td>1: Read Age 13-18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0: ELSE</td>
<td>0: ELSE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>p-value</td>
<td>p-value</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-10.56</td>
<td>-10.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-9.43</td>
<td>-9.99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0.36</td>
<td>0.91</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>RWA Score</th>
<th>RWA Score</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1: Read Age 19-24</td>
<td>1: Read Age 25-34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0: ELSE</td>
<td>0: ELSE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>p-value</td>
<td>p-value</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-9.81</td>
<td>-9.05</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
This chart shows the average RWA score after the data has been converted to the -4 to 4 scale.

**All values have been rounded to two decimal points.

However, when evaluating each RWA question differently, we see that younger people consistently disagreed more with RWA 4 than any other question (See Figure 4-4 and Table 8).

RWA 4 reads as follows:

*This country would work a lot better if certain groups of troublemakers would just shut up and accept their group’s traditional place in society.*

It is clear that those who read the books before the age of 18 are much more likely to disagree with above statement, despite the ambiguity in the word “troublemaker.” From age 18 onward, participants increasingly agreed with the statement.
Table 8: Age Read vs. RWA 4

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age Range</th>
<th>RWA 4</th>
<th>RWA 4</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1: Read ≤ Age 12</td>
<td>1.85</td>
<td>1.74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0: ELSE</td>
<td>2.48</td>
<td>2.24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>p-value</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>0.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1: Read Age 13-18</td>
<td>0: ELSE</td>
<td>0: ELSE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1: Read Age 19-24</td>
<td>2.53</td>
<td>2.81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0: ELSE</td>
<td>2.11</td>
<td>2.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>p-value</td>
<td>0.38</td>
<td>0.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1: Read Age 25-34</td>
<td>2.89</td>
<td>5.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0: ELSE</td>
<td>2.11</td>
<td>2.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>p-value</td>
<td>0.25</td>
<td>0.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1: Read Age 35-49</td>
<td>1: Read ≤ Age 24</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0: ELSE</td>
<td>3.06</td>
<td>1.82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>p-value</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1: Read ≤ Age 18</td>
<td>2.90</td>
<td>0: ELSE</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*This chart shows the mean of how respondents reacted to RWA 4 relative to how old they were when they first read or listened to the *Harry Potter* books.

**All values have been rounded to two decimal points.
Hypothesis 5

*H5: Respondents who read Harry Potter at younger ages will present as ideologically liberal and will identify more with the Democratic Party.*

While younger people tend to politically identify as more liberal than older people, I argue that for Harry Potter fans, the age that participants first encountered the *Harry Potter* books had an impact on their ideology (Peltzer, 2019). There is certainly a trend that shows that the older a person currently is, the older they likely were when they first encountered *Harry Potter*. This lack of spread may be explained by the relative newness of the series. The first book was published in 1997 in England and then migrated to America in 1998. I would not expect an American reader to have been exposed to the books for more than 25 years. A participant that read the books when they were first released must be at least 43 years old today. Still, the average age of participant was 33.9, which fits with 43% of the sample being between the ages of 25 and 34. Because we tend to form the bulk of our political identities around age 18, groups of people who encountered the books when in later stages of life may not have been as impacted ideologically as those who read them at younger ages (Rekker et al. 2019). The results show that there is a statistically significant ideological difference in those who read the books at or before the age of 24 (See Table 9). That trend holds true when narrowing the sample to those who read the books at or before the age of 18 and at or before the age of 12. This hypothesis has been confirmed.
Figure 1-7: Current Age vs. Age Read

Table 9: Age Read vs. Ideology

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Liberal-Conservative</th>
<th>Liberal-Conservative</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ideology Scale (1-10)</td>
<td>Ideology Scale (1-10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1: Read ≤ Age 12</td>
<td>3.29</td>
<td>3.44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0: ELSE</td>
<td>4.00</td>
<td>3.66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>p-value</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>0.57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1: Read Age 19-24</td>
<td>3.75</td>
<td>4.24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0: ELSE</td>
<td>3.61</td>
<td>3.53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>p-value</td>
<td>0.76</td>
<td>0.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1: Read Age 35-49</td>
<td>5.44</td>
<td>4.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0: ELSE</td>
<td>3.52</td>
<td>3.61</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Liberal-Conservative Ideology Scale (1-10)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>0.06</th>
<th></th>
<th>0.72</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>p</em>-value</td>
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<td><em>p</em>-value</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>3.38</th>
<th></th>
<th>3.32</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>p</em>-value</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td><em>p</em>-value</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*This chart shows the average ideology score of respondents relative to the age they first read *Harry Potter*.

**All values have been rounded to two decimal points.**

We see a similar trend when we consider party instead of ideology. Those in the sample are more likely to identify as Democrat than any other party, but those who read the books at younger ages are more likely to define themselves as such, especially those who first read *Harry Potter* at or before the age of 12. We also see that those who read the books from between ages 13 and 34 are more likely not to identify as Democrats. These results are telling; we would expect those who read the books between the ages of 13 and 18 to still prefer the Democratic party by a wider margin; the Democratic advantage in Americans aged 18-44 has been steadily increasing for all demographics since at least 2014 when considering presidential and midterm elections (Pew Research Center, 2022; Brookings; Frey 2022). The average current age of participants who said they read *Harry Potter* between the ages of 13 and 18 is 31.4, which falls squarely within that window of 18-44. 94% of survey participants are registered to vote, so it is not unreasonable to assume that this sample should behave similarly to larger election samples (See Figure 3-4). This age group does show a preference for the Democratic Party compared to the Republican Party, but not by a very significant margin. Otherwise, the trend of Democratic advantage amongst
*Harry Potter* fans who attend fan conventions trend is even stronger when directly comparing Democrats and Republicans (See Table 10).

**Table 10: Age Read vs. Party**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Read ≤ Age 12</th>
<th></th>
<th>Read Age 13-18</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1: Democrat</td>
<td>0.62</td>
<td>1: Democrat</td>
<td>0.15</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0: Republican</td>
<td>0.33</td>
<td>0: Republican</td>
<td>0.07</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>p-value</td>
<td>0.06</td>
<td>p-value</td>
<td>0.29</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Read Age 19-24</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1: Democrat</td>
<td>0.09</td>
<td>1: Democrat</td>
<td>0.06</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0: Republican</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0: Republican</td>
<td>0.33</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>p-value</td>
<td>0.013</td>
<td>p-value</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Read Age 35-49</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1: Democrat</td>
<td>0.06</td>
<td>1: Democrat</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0: Republican</td>
<td>0.20</td>
<td>0: Republican</td>
<td>0.07</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>p-value</td>
<td>0.23</td>
<td>p-value</td>
<td>0.46</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Read ≤ Age 24</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1: Democrat</td>
<td>0.86</td>
<td>1: Democrat</td>
<td>0.89</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0: Republican</td>
<td>0.40</td>
<td>0: Republican</td>
<td>0.63</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>p-value</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>p-value</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*This table shows the age at which one read *Harry Potter* in comparison to their party affiliation.

Only the Democratic and Republican Parties were considered.

**All values are rounded to two decimal places.
Other Findings

This survey yielded interesting findings beyond the aforementioned five hypotheses.

Those who score higher on the RWA scale are significantly less likely to recognize Voldemort and/or his Death Eaters and the Ministry of Magic as authoritarian structures. They are also less likely to recognize Dumbledore’s Army as opposition to authoritarianism (See Table 11). To determine such, I analyzed all responses to the opened ended question that asked respondents to identify authoritarian structures and their opposition after being given Ibrahim’s definition of authoritarianism. Most responses fell into ten different categories, and I coded each of them separately for analysis. Each category was given a group separately, with every respondent who mentioned one of these ideas given a one and those who did not a zero. Of the ten categories discovered, the most prominently mentioned were Voldemort and his Death Eaters, the Ministry of Magic, Dolores Umbridge, Dumbledore’s Army, the Order of the Phoenix, and Hogwarts Teachers (See Figure 5-1). No significance could be attributed to respondents who mentioned the house-elves or magical creatures, the Dursleys, wizard/Muggle relationships, or Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry.

No one who read the books between the ages of 19 and 24, a category that made up 10% of the sample, recognized the Ministry of Magic as an example of an authoritarian structure. This is surprising as its mention made up 26.1% of responses (See Figure 5-1). By contrast, those who read the books at or before the age of 18 are significantly more likely to recognize the Ministry as an authoritarian structure.
No one who read the books between the ages of 13 and 18 recognized the tension between wizards and muggles as an example of an authoritarian structure. Those who read the books at or before the age of 12 mentioned this example significantly more than anyone else.

Those who score lower on the ideology scale were more likely to recognize the tension between wizards and muggles as examples of an authoritarian structure. Those who scored higher on the ideology scale, or more liberal, were significantly less likely to recognize Hermione’s crusade for house-elf rights as opposition to authoritarianism. Interestingly, more conservative respondents were more likely to characterize Hogwarts teachers that were not Umbridge as examples of authoritarian figures. Those who identified as Democrats were more likely to recognize Umbridge as an authoritarian figure.

Table 11: HP Authoritarianism Recognition vs. RWA Score

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>RWA Score</th>
<th>Voldemort/Death Eaters</th>
<th>Ministry of Magic</th>
<th>Umbridge</th>
<th>DA</th>
<th>OotP</th>
<th>Blood Status</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1: Recognized</td>
<td>-12.05</td>
<td>-12.38</td>
<td>-11.87</td>
<td>-13.00</td>
<td>-12.08</td>
<td>-12.63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>p-value</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>0.13</td>
<td>0.14</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*This chart displays respondents’ RWA score relative to their recognition of the labeled above.

**All values are rounded to two decimal points.
I did not find any significant political differences between respondents of different Hogwarts Houses. However, those who read the books at or before age 24 are less likely to identify with Gryffindor House and more likely to identify with Hufflepuff House. There is little difference in identification with Ravenclaw and Slytherin House, which may be explained by the type of person who would normally be interested in taking a survey like this. The interest in Hufflepuff House was unexpected, but younger readers were exposed to the *Fantastic Beasts* franchise in tandem with reading the books. The character Newt Scamander puts Hufflepuff House in a much better light than it was in the books. This may explain the increase in young Hufflepuffs.

Those who read the books at or before age 24 are more likely to use AO3, FFN, Pottermore, Reddit, Tumblr, and Wattpad. They’re slightly more likely to use Instagram and Twitter. This is interesting as older *Harry Potter* fans contributed heavily to the widespread popularity of fanfiction.

*Figure 5-1: Examples of Authoritarianism/Opposition*
Discussion & Recommendations

I hypothesized that reading *Harry Potter* contributed to levels of authoritarianism, particularly for young readers and those who had read the books the most. The results are inconclusive. This is likely due to the makeup of my sample. If this survey were to be replicated, I would recommend that it take care to create a sample with a better distribution in the age that *Harry Potter* was first encountered and how many times the books were read. The greatest failing of this study may be that the survey pool includes too many hardcore fans. It is difficult to compare *Harry Potter* fans against each other when almost 90% of the sample has read all seven *Harry Potter* books and nearly 80% of those people have read them more than once (See Figure 1-5 and Figure 1-6). There simply were not enough “casual” fans to make a statistically significant comparison. I think that lack is partially my fault; during the conventions, many of the discussions I had with people who I approached about the survey were diehard book fans and I spent a lot of time talking to people about the movies’ inaccuracies. These conversations may have discouraged people who think highly of the movies from volunteering to take the survey. Regardless, the *Harry Potter* fandom is not one that it is easy to engage with casually. Chances are that if you engage with *Harry Potter* media online in your free time, you are more likely to have read the books (or at least have seen the movies) multiple times. I should have included questions about the movies in the survey in any case for analytical purposes. Fortunately, the upcoming HBO Max television series will spawn an entire new generation of *Harry Potter* fans who will find the books by way of the how. They make up the perfect sample pool for further testing of the hypotheses in this study.

I also did not anticipate how the environment of a fan convention would impact my survey results. Immediately noticeable was the shoddiness of the wifi throughout both convention
centers. GalaxyCon Richmond’s wifi was nearly unusable, leading to an increased amount of surveys taken on paper. Paper surveys tended to be less detailed than the ones taken via the online form. I also tended to get more detailed results when I solicited people standing in lines who had time to kill; the fast-paced nature of a convention caused people to fill out the survey in a hurry, leading to lesser-quality responses. Some respondents wrote entire paragraphs, some wrote single words, and others skipped questions entirely. If this survey were to be replicated, I would recommend either limiting the number of write-in responses in favor of more multiple choice or haunting celebrity autograph/photograph lines. I found success in getting survey responses when targeting “nerdy” panels that were not necessarily Harry Potter based, like ones on the Marvel Cinematic Universe and data analytics or the psychology of evil in Disney villains. I would also rework several of the survey questions to be less vague.

Given the size and power of the Harry Potter fandom, this survey omitted large portions in favor of focusing exclusively on the original source materials. Because most of the fandom does not consider it canon, Harry Potter and the Cursed Child was omitted, though I did have several spirited discussions at the conventions with survey respondents about how truly terrible it was. Though they were generally better received, I also did not include questions about the Fantastic Beasts film franchise, which serves as a prequel to Harry Potter set around World War II, or the Hogwarts Legacy single-player game. Although J.K. Rowling has released much background information about characters and events via Twitter and Pottermore, this thesis attempted to root its political analysis strictly within content that can be found in the original seven novels.

This study has several limitations. Its results can only fairly be extrapolated to the kind of Harry Potter fan that would attend a fan convention and is strictly a convenience sample of participants kind enough to want to help me. Additionally, it may be that the type of person who chooses to
read *Harry Potter* is already predisposed to be liberal and to have a decreased tendency toward authoritarianism.

**Conclusion**

What we read really *can* change us. Whether it be Shakespeare or Melville, Vonnegut or Fitzgerald, Blume or Paolini, books *move*. As Rudine Sims Bishop reminds us in her 1990 essay, books are mirrors, windows, and sliding doors. Not only do they reflect truth back to us, but they also allow us glimpses into different worlds and offer the opportunity to live within them. No book series in living memory has done more to *move* people across the globe than J.K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter* series. Readers were able to immerse themselves into the story and learn and grow with Harry, Ron, and Hermione. In doing so, they absorbed some of their politics. The books teach tolerance, acceptance, and anti-violence. Most of the political structures in *Harry Potter* can qualify as an authoritarian structure, and the results of this survey show that readers are able to recognize them.

This thesis considered whether having read all seven of the *Harry Potter* books made any difference in how participants behaved politically. Those people generally scored lower on the authoritarian scale and are more likely to be engaged in politics and be registered to vote. This group of people also tended to have read them more than once and were more likely to recognize Voldemort and the Ministry of Magic as examples of authoritarianism. *Harry Potter* fans who read the books at younger ages are more likely to be ideologically liberal and to identify as a Democrat than other fans. Respondents who read the books more than once were also more likely to be ideologically liberal. Likely because of an issue in the sample, this study is unable to
make conclusions regarding how the age at which one first read *Harry Potter* affects their disposition toward authoritarianism. Further testing is recommended.
Appendix
Survey Consent Form
Assessing Public Opinion of *Harry Potter* and Politics URIRB230308

Consent Form

You are being asked to take part in a research study about J.K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter* series and the politics surrounding it. Details about this study are discussed below. It is important that you understand this information so that you can make an informed choice about being in this research study. If you have questions, please feel free to ask the researcher for more information.

**Purpose**

The purpose of this study is to learn more about the impact of J.K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter* series on political behavior. If you agree to participate, you will be asked a series of questions about both the books and your political opinions. The estimated time for the survey is 15 minutes. You may also choose to participate in an interview estimated to last no longer than 30 minutes.

**Contact Information**

This research is being conducted by Alexis Cobbs. If you have any questions about the project, Alexis Cobbs can be contacted at lexi.cobbs@richmond.edu or 704-577-4291.

**Possible Risks**

There is no more than minimal risk involved in participating in this study. That is, the risks for completing this study are no more than the risks experienced in daily life. Some questions may elicit mild psychological discomfort due to their political nature. If you do experience any discomfort during the study, remember you can stop at any time without any penalty. You may also choose not to answer particular questions that are asked in the study.

**Possible Benefits**

You will receive a small token of gratitude for your participation. You may also get some satisfaction from contributing to this investigation.

**Confidentiality of Records**

Reasonable steps will be taken to ensure that your individual results will remain confidential. However, as with any research process, the risk of a breach of confidentiality is always possible. Nevertheless, to the best of the investigators’ abilities, your answers in this study will remain anonymous and confidential. Once the study is completed, we will completely “deidentify” our data. All identifiers will be removed from the identifiable private information or identifiable biospecimens and only then will the information be used for future research studies.

**Use of Information and Data Collected**

We will not tell anyone the answers you give us. Your responses will not be associated with you by name and the data you provide will be kept secure. What we find from this study may be presented at meetings or published in papers, but your name will not ever be used in these presentations or papers.

**Protections and Rights**
If you have any questions concerning your rights as a research participant, you may contact the Chair of the University of Richmond’s Institutional Review Board (IRB) for the Protection of Human Subjects of Research at (804) 484-1565 or irb@richmond.edu for information or assistance.

**Statement of Consent**

The study has been described to me and I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I may discontinue my participation at any time without penalty. I understand that my responses will be treated confidentially and used only as described in this consent form. I understand that if I have any questions, I can pose them to the researcher. I have read and understand the above information and I consent to participate in this study by signing below. Additionally, I certify that I am 18 years of age or older.

Signature of Participant: _______________________________ Date: _____________

Signature of Witnessing Researcher: _______________________________
Survey

Assessing Public Opinion on *Harry Potter* and Politics

1. How old are you? _______
2. What gender do you identify as?
   a) Male
   b) Female
   c) Non-binary
   d) Other (please specify): ___________
   e) Prefer not to answer
3. How old were you when you started reading or listening to *Harry Potter*? ____________
4. Have you read or listened to all seven *Harry Potter* books? Circle One: Yes or No
5. If yes, how many times?
   a) Once
   b) 2-3 times
   c) 4-7 times
   d) 8+ times
6. Please check all the books you have read.
   - *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone*
   - *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*
   - *Harry Potter at the Prisoner of Azkaban*
   - *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*
   - *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*
   - *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince*
   - *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*
7. Do you engage with *Harry Potter* media online?
   a) Yes
   b) No
8. If yes, what websites do you use? Check all that apply.
   - An Archive of Our Own
   - Facebook
   - Fanfiction.net
   - Instagram
   - The Leaky Cauldron
   - Mugglenet
   - Pottermore
   - Reddit
   - Tumblr
   - Twitter
   - Wattpad
   - YouTube
   - Other (please specify): ______________________
9. Which one do you use the most? ______________________
10. Do you discuss *Harry Potter* on forums?
    a) Yes
    b) No
11. If yes, which ones? ______________________
12. Which, if any Hogwarts House do you consider yourself to be part of? ______________
13. Why?
14. How much *Harry Potter* merchandise do you own?
    a) None
    b) A little
c) A whole lot

15. When did you last read or listen to the *Harry Potter* books?
   a) Within the last week  
   b) Within the last month  
   c) Within the last year  
   d) Within the last 2 years  
   e) Within the last 5 years  
   f) 10+ years ago

16. What political party, if any, do you identify with?
   a) Democrat  
   b) Republican  
   c) None  
   d) Other (please specify): ____________

17. On a scale of 1-10 with one being extremely liberal and ten being extremely conservative, how would you describe your political ideology?

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<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
<th>8</th>
<th>9</th>
<th>10</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Extremely Liberal</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extremely Conservative</td>
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</table>

18. Would you consider yourself to be politically active?
   a) Yes  
   b) No  
   c) Moderately

19. Are you registered to vote?
   a) Yes  
   b) No

20. In an article written for the Journal of Democracy, Anwar Ibrahim defines an authoritarian government as one that has “strongly decentralized political power along with economic power concentrated in the hands of the few” but also has “no guarantee of the rule of law or the protection of political freedoms” (Ibrahim 2019, 5). He goes on to describe such a state as having a “low tolerance for civil society, dissident political parties, interest groups, and for any other force deemed able to mobilize opposition” (Ibrahim 2019, 6-7). Can you think of examples of authoritarianism or its opposition in *Harry Potter*?
   a) Please discuss an example here:

   b) Please discuss a second example here:

   c) Please discuss a third example here:
21. On a scale of 1-9, with one meaning strongly disagree and nine meaning strongly agree, how do you respond to the following statements?

The “old-fashioned ways” and the “old-fashioned values” still show the best way to live.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
<th>8</th>
<th>9</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>O</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

What our country really needs is a strong, determined leader who will crush evil, and take us back to our true path.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
<th>8</th>
<th>9</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>O</td>
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<td>O</td>
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</table>

Our country will be great if we honor the ways of our forefathers, do what the authorities tell us to do, and get rid of the “rotten apples” who are ruining everything.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
<th>8</th>
<th>9</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>O</td>
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This country would work a lot better if certain groups of troublemakers would just shut up and accept their group’s traditional place in society.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
<th>8</th>
<th>9</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>O</td>
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</table>

Once our government leaders and the authorities condemn the dangerous elements in our society, it will be the duty of every patriotic citizen to help stomp out the rot that is poisoning our country from within.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
<th>8</th>
<th>9</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
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</tbody>
</table>

22. What does activism look like in *Harry Potter*? Is it successful?

23. Does Voldemort remind you of any political figure, past or present? Who?
24. Does Dolores Umbridge remind you of any political figure, past or present? Who?

25. Does Albus Dumbledore remind you of any political figure, past or present? Who?

26. Does Ludo Bagman remind you of any political figure, past or present? Who?
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