Threat Leads to Political Polarization and Increased Cognitive, but Not Issue-Based Conservatism

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Abstract

Threatening events evoke various responses from the public. More specifically, there has been much scholarly debate about whether a conservative shift or polarization occurs after threat. We investigated moral foundations theory and “conservative shift” among liberals and conservatives, and we predicted that threat would lead to increased cognitive conservatism and polarization on issues. Ninety-one college undergraduates answered two questions that asked them to describe their thoughts on either an individual- or group-level concern. Participants then completed a questionnaire measuring their cognitive and issue-based conservatism. Consistent with the hypothesis, both groups became more cognitively conservative, while liberals and conservatives polarized on political issues. Moreover, liberals showed a stronger response to threats to individuals and conservatives to groups, providing further support for moral foundations theory.
Threats Lead to Political Polarization and Increased Cognitive, but Not Issue-Based Conservatism

Many politically relevant issues directly or indirectly relate to threat, including health care, capital punishment, terrorism, crime, and threatening foreign countries. Notable shifts in political attitudes as a result of these threatening political issues have led to increased interest in the relationship between psychological motives and politics. Following 9/11, the United States witnessed an ideological shift to the right, and the reminder of death increased the appeal of conservative views and leaders. In a study by Landau et al. (2004), priming participants with thoughts of death and 9/11 led participants to become more likely to indicate that they would vote for George Bush and less likely to vote for John Kerry in the 2004 election. Moreover, public opinion moved toward increased support of government authorities, harsh policies, conservatism, and system-justifying ideologies (Chanley, 2002). When overcoming threat and anxiety, people may streamline their thinking in order to compensate for insufficient resources that result from the threat. In order to save cognitive energy, people take mental shortcuts. For example, Gilbert and Hixon (1991) found that participants were more likely to use stereotypes if their minds were busy with other tasks. Cognitive resources may be temporarily diverted away from complex reasoning because suppressing the anxiety of the threat requires significant effort (Gailliot, Schmeichel, & Baumeister, 2006). In addition, individuals may be strongly motivated to restore a sense of control and avoid vulnerability. In order to accomplish this need, we propose that people develop an increased desire for firm solutions and definitive knowledge, while upholding the socially-shared beliefs established by their political parties.
A Tale of Two Conflicting Theories

“Just as self-respect and pride bring out the best in an individual, pride in family, pride in teammates, pride in hometown bring out the best in groups of people. War brings out the kind of pride in country that encourages its citizens in the direction of excellence, and it encourages them to be ready to die for it. At no other time do people work so well together to achieve the same goal as they do in wartime. Maybe that's enough to make patriotism eligible to be considered a virtue. If only I could get out of my mind the most patriotic people who ever lived…the Nazi Germans,” (“The rich,” 2011).

The powerful influence of not only political systems, but also religions and other tribes, highlights a significant question: How can individuals, and the groups in which they belong, be motivated by ideas to sacrifice their own lives (and those of others) in order to preserve the system? According to Haidt (2012), humans evolved to be ideological animals, as they seek to occasionally reach beyond self-interest and achieve self-transcendence (Jost, Banaji, & Nosek, 2004). Groups are more apt to be successful if they facilitate sacred experiences because they give those groups an evolutionary advantage relative to other groups (Bloom, 2005). Therefore, as individuals try to reach self-transcendence, they can be motivated to achieve remarkable accomplishments as well as commit horrendous evils for the sake of the group.

Terror management theory posits that individuals protect themselves from threatening situations by constructing and upholding their cultural worldviews, a set of socially shared beliefs regarding the nature of the world that guides proper conduct and personal values.
(Greenberg, Pyszczynski, & Solomon, 1986). More than two decades of empirical research have supported the terror management argument. Death reminders increase positive reactions to those who share cultural worldviews, increase the perception of social consensus for cultural attitudes (Pyszczynski et al., 1996), and increase disapproval of moral and social transgressions (Florian & Mikulincer, 1997). In addition, terror management theory merges with social identity theory, which proposes that group memberships are a significant source of self-esteem and sense of belonging (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Tajfel and Turner suggest that while personal identities are limited, social identities are abstract extensions of the self that are potentially boundless. Therefore, anxiety and threat cause people to protect certain aspects of their cultural worldviews and their groups. For example, threat increased Christians’ positive evaluations of other Christians, while increasing negative evaluations of Jews (Greenberg et al., 1990). Several studies have shown that death reminders increased preference for the participants’ own countries (Nelson, Moore, Olivetti, & Scott, 1997; Castano, Yzerbyt, Paladino, & Sacchi, 2002; Castano, 2004). Following mortality salience, American participants placed significantly less blame on an American company than on a Japanese company for an accident (Nelson et al., 1997). Italian participants identified more strongly with Italy following a death reminder (Castano et al., 2002), and simply priming Scottish participants with the word death led them to attribute more negative, stereotypical judgments to being English (Castano, 2004). In addition to religions and nationalities, people are even motivated to preserve their universities and sports teams (Burke, Martens, & Faucher, 2010; Giannakakis & Fritsche, 2011).

In the same way that terror management theory explains people’s devotion to their country during wartime, the theory helps to explain people’s commitment to their political
ideologies. Political ideologies reinforce an underlying need to reduce anxiety because they serve as broad, culturally-transmitted systems that define the beliefs, behaviors, affiliations, and roles of its members. They provide individuals with a sense of structure and belonging and allow individuals to believe in a sense of immortality beyond the limitations of their temporary lives. In a study by McGregor et al. (1998), threat motivated aggression against others who disparaged the participants’ political views. After a death reminder, participants administered greater amounts of hot sauce for the threatening target to consume. According to Jost, Ledgerwood, and Hardin (2008), political parties directly reflect motivational processes because they create “shared realities” for their members. Political ideologies provide readily available systems of meaning, which suggests that liberals and conservatives will remain polarized after a threat manipulation.

Terror management theory, while it bolsters views of the ingroup, has a very individual, rather than group-level, focus. Individual-level threats cause people to seek symbolic extensions of their identities in their groups. In contrast to terror management theory, system justification theory suggests that people are not only motivated to maintain favorable views of themselves and their own groups, but also of the overarching social system (Jost & Hunyady, 2005). When groups are threatened, a consequence of system justification theory is that people increasingly support preexisting political and social arrangements (i.e., the status quo).

Several real-world events and experimental studies have supported these claims, revealing that people defend the status quo under system threat (Jost & Hunyady, 2005). After the 9/11 attacks, the American nation witnessed a “rally ‘round the flag effect,” in which President George W. Bush’s approval ratings dramatically increased (James, 2004). Moreover, American public support for almost every system-level authority increased as well, including the
military and police (Jones, 2003; Jost et al., 2010). Additionally, German participants scored significantly higher on a system-justification scale during the week of the 3/11/2004 terrorist attack in Madrid (Ullrich & Cohrs, 2007). In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, the failure to properly provide relief efforts may have threatened the perceived effectiveness of the American government, resulting in increased stereotyping, victim blaming, and acceptance of inequality (Napier, Mandisodza, Andersen, & Jost, 2006). In an experimental setting, participants have read passages allegedly written by journalists describing the uncertain futures of their countries. Participants have attributed increased intelligence and independence to powerful people after a system-threat manipulation to the United States (Kay, Jost, & Young, 2005). A comparable study conducted in Israel yielded similar results (Jost, Kivetz, Rubini, Guermandi, & Mosso, 2005).

After participants were told that Israel’s future was under threat, ingroup favoritism among high status members of society and outgroup favoritism among the low-status members of society increased, in which the high status members were rated as more intelligent, responsible, and productive (Jost et al.).

Conservatism is often defined as a preference for tradition and preserving the status quo (Jost, Glaser, Kruglanski, & Sulloway, 2003). Thus, according to system justification theory, an overall general shift toward conservatism occurs when groups feel threatened. Jost et al. (2003) found that crisis situations usually induce system-justifying shifts to the ideological right. Individuals are motivated to perceive the world as predictable and structured, while justifying existing structures and hierarchy in order to protect themselves from the potential chaos, uncertainty, and anxiety of the threat (Jost, Nosek, & Gosling, 2008). System-justifying ideologies have a calming effect, in that they increase positive affect and satisfaction of current
circumstances (Jost & Hunyady, 2002). Political conservative ideology is even a system-
justifying ideology in itself; conservatives usually seek to maintain the status quo in comparison
to liberals, who tend to seek to change it.

Terror management theory and system justification theory propose two different effects
in response to the same apparent construct. While terror management theory suggests that people
will increasingly support their preexisting ideologies under threat (i.e., liberals will maintain
their liberal ideology, while conservatives will maintain their conservative one), system
justification theory suggests that people will become increasingly conservative, regardless of
initial ideology. The two camps conflict because previous research has frequently been too
limited in scope, as they tend to utilize two different manipulations that affect different
constructs. Although mortality salience in terror management studies has been operationalized in
various ways in the past, it tends to solely focus on threats to individuals. Participants have
viewed gory images of accidents (Nelson et al., 1997), walked past funeral homes (Pyszczynski,
Greenberg, & Solomon, 1997), written about their own deaths (Rosenblatt, Greenberg, Solomon,
Pyszczynski, & Lyon, 1989), been given death anxiety scales (Florian & Mikulincer, 1997), or
been subliminally primed with death (Arndt, Greenberg, Pyszczynski, & Solomon, 1997). In
contrast, system justification manipulations solely focus on threats to systems, specifically
threats to one’s country (Kay et al., 2005; Jost et al., 2005; Ullrich & Cohrs, 2007). We
hypothesize that the discrepant effects found in previous research are a direct result of the
manipulation of two distinct mechanisms (individual-level vs. group-level threats). The manner
in which the constructs were operationalized simply affected the direction of the data. We
hypothesize that both system justification theory and terror management theory are correct, but
in different domains. Consistent with system justification theory, we expect individuals to become more cognitively conservative while under threat. *Cognitive conservatism* highlights the psychological characteristics of conservatism and reflects a tendency to resist change and accept inequality (Jost et al., 2003). Conservatives share an increased need for cognitive closure, preference for the status quo, and desire for order and stability, as they feel a need to justify existing social institutions and hierarchies. With respect to terror management theory, we expect participants to polarize in support of their preexisting political ideologies; their *political conservatism*, or attitudes on social and economic issues, should remain the same. *Political conservatism* (referred to as “ideological peripheral issues” by Jost et al.) includes issue-based attitudes and behaviors linked to specific political topics, such as capital punishment, abortion, affirmative action, funding of social programs, and gay rights.

**Moral Foundations Theory**

“The third-century Persian prophet Mani preached that the visible world is the battleground between the forces of light (absolute goodness) and the forces of darkness (absolute evil). Human beings are the frontline in the battle; we contain both good and evil, and we each must pick one side and fight for it” (Haidt, 2012, p. 309).

In recent decades, America has become the battleground for a so-called “culture war” between the political right and left (Hunter, 1991). This “culture war” has divided the country over basic moral values, such as inequality and the role of religion, that are meant to characterize the nation as whole (Graham, Haidt, & Nosek, 2009). Both sides claim to take the moral high
ground; both liberals and conservatives remain convinced that they have the best moral vision for society, while believing the opposition is immoral and misguided. Frustrations mount as people consistently fail to persuade the opposition with their arguments, and the opposition’s apparent lack of reason invites harsh criticism. However, people frequently fail to consider that reason may not be driving political decisions. In the midst of this “culture war,” negative campaigning has dramatically increased (Lau, Sigelman, & Rovner, 2007). Some have suggested that negative campaigning techniques, while ethically questionable, provide voters with valuable information (Mayer, 1996; Geer, 2006). Mainly, they emphasize the moral values of the attacked. However, the extensive use of negative campaigning and advertisements illustrates the simple concept that emotions often replace reason in politics. The opposition questions our morality, and the political divide suddenly becomes a battle between good and evil.

According to Haidt and his colleagues, the debate between liberals and conservatives derives from the simple fact that they rely on different moral foundations (Haidt & Graham, 2007). His moral foundations theory identifies six universal moral foundations (Haidt, 2012). They include “harm/care” (related to kindness and aversion to the pain of others), “fairness/justice” (related to the ideas of justice and equality), “liberty/oppression” (a foundation, related to distaste for repression, that was recently added to the theory and is not addressed by this paper), “loyalty/betrayal” (related to devotion to the ingroup and ancestral notions of tribalism), “authority/subversion” (related to respect for leadership and social hierarchies), and “sanctity/degradation” (related to feelings of disgust that drive us to live in a more virtuous way) (Haidt, 2012). While these foundations are inherent and readily available, human experience and cultural narratives enable variation across as well as within cultures (Graham et al., 2009). More
specifically, with regards to the political divide and the morality of politics in America, liberals tend to value the foundations concerning issues of harm and fairness more than their conservative counterparts. Liberals do not prioritize the foundations concerning loyalty, authority, and sanctity, while conservatives tend to value all of the foundations fairly equally (Graham et al.).

The fundamental difference in morality between political conservatives and liberals is a significant contributor to the persistence of the cultural divide. The harm and fairness foundations strongly endorsed by liberals, the *individualizing foundations*, emphasize the rights and welfare of individuals. On the other hand, conservatives, who value all of the moral foundations rather equally, also endorse the *binding foundations*, which emphasize group cohesiveness, social order, and self-control (Graham et al., 2009). Conservatives support the maintenance of ingroup loyalty, as they believe the organization of society is more valuable than the sum of its parts, while also expecting members of society to respect their place within the social hierarchy. Liberals tend to typify themselves as the kind party (Haidt, 2012), but morality is not limited to the tenets of the Golden Rule. Therefore, conservatives possess intrinsic values that liberals simply do not consider a part of morality (Haidt & Graham, 2007).

We first expect participants to polarize in support of their preexisting political ideologies and become increasingly cognitively conservative, depending on whether the threat applies to individuals or groups. This hypothesis is based on the findings of both terror management and system justification theory. In addition, based on the moral division between the political left and right, we hypothesize that liberals and conservatives may respond differently to threats depending on which moral foundations they evoke. We expect liberals to show a greater
response to threats concerning individuals, as they appeal to the *individualizing foundations* of their moral matrix. Moreover, we expect conservatives to show a greater response to threats to groups or systems, as they concern the *binding foundations*. Both groups will become increasingly cognitively conservative and simultaneously politically polarized.

**Method**

**Participants**

Ninety-one undergraduate college students, 26 men (28.57%) and 65 women (71.43%), participated in this study. Participants’ ages ranged from 18 to 30 years old (*M* = 19.48, *SD* = 1.63). During the study, political self-identification was reported, and overall, 23 participants considered themselves Democrats, 31 as moderates or independents, 33 as Republicans, and two as Libertarians. Two participants did not answer the question. Additionally, means of scores on the Moral Foundations Questionnaire, which considered their concern for issues of Harm, Fairness, Ingroup, Authority, and Purity, were used to classify people as either morally liberal or morally conservative. Forty-two participants were considered morally liberal and 49 were considered morally conservative. Participants volunteered for the study in return for course credit, and informed consent was obtained before the experiment.

**Design**

Using 2 x 3 between-participants experimental designs, we manipulated the perception of an individual- or group-level threat by providing participants with one of three pairs of open-ended questions portraying an individual-level, group-level, or neutral threat (see Appendix A). Participants’ political orientation was determined by their responses to the Moral Foundations Questionnaire, in which participants were categorized as morally conservative or morally liberal.
based on their concern for issues about Harm, Fairness, Ingroup, Authority, and Purity (see Appendix B). The degree to which participants’ cognitive and political conservatism shifted as a result of the threats was measured by their responses to a questionnaire. Participants’ issue-based conservatism was measured by their responses to three “culture war” items regarding attitudes on prominent political controversies, which were strongly correlated and averaged to form a composite score (see Table 1). In addition, political conservatism was measured by two self-reported political orientation items, which were also correlated, \( r(89) = .40, p < .0005 \), and averaged to form a single measure. Participants’ cognitive conservatism was measured by their responses to three questions from the need for cognitive closure scale (NFCS), which were strongly correlated and averaged to form a composite score (see Table 2). All scores were coded such that higher scores indicate increased conservatism.

**Materials**

Participants first completed the Moral Foundations Questionnaire (Graham et al., 2010), in which they answered 31 items related to five moral foundations (Harm, Fairness, Ingroup, Authority, and Purity) using a six-point Likert-type scale: 15 items ranging from 0 = Not At All Relevant to 5 = Extremely Relevant and 16 items ranging from 0 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree. Participants were then presented with one of three pairs of open-ended questions describing an individual-level, group-level, or neutral threat. Participants read one of the following:
The individual threat:

Imagine that you had been taking an exam, and the person seated next to you copied your answers. Please briefly describe the emotions that the thought of being expelled from the university arouses in you.

The group threat:

Imagine that the University of Virginia dropped from #2 Best Public University to #8. As a result of lower retention rates, larger class sizes, and fewer financial resources, the university now follows behind Berkeley, the University of Michigan, and the College of William and Mary. Please briefly describe the emotions that the thought of UVA forfeiting its ranking arouses in you.

The control prompt:

Please briefly describe the emotions that the thought of going to the dentist arouses in you.

After reading one of the questions, participants were asked to write about what would happen to them or the university as the situation occurred. The questions were designed to remain comparable to the mortality salience manipulations used in terror management studies with regards to format, whereby participants were asked to imagine a specific situation, describe their emotions in response, and write about what happens to them as the situation occurs. Additionally, while some suggest that only death-related manipulations produce terror management and system-justifying effects, Navarrete, Kurzban, Fessler, and Kirkpatrick (2004) suggest that they can occur in a variety of threatening situations, in which social support and
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anxiety-reduction is needed. Participants then completed a simple word search (see Appendix C). This delay allowed for the threat to move beyond consciousness, as the absence of a delay eliminates the effects of a mortality salience on various dependent measures in multiple terror management studies (Greenberg, Arndt, Simon, Pyszczynski, & Solomon, 2000).

Participants then answered four questions regarding their political orientation (see Appendix D): two questions asking them to describe their political leanings on social and economic issues using a six-point Likert-type scale (ranging from 1 = Very Liberal to 6 = Very Conservative), an open question asking them to indicate their political party, and a question asking them to rate how important their political identity is to them using a six-point Likert-type scale (ranging from 1 = Not Important At All to 6 = Very Important). Participants then answered 15 survey statements in the form of statements regarding their political and cognitive conservatism (see Appendix E). Participants indicated their level of agreement with the survey statements using a six-point Likert scale (ranging from 1 = Strongly Disagree to 6 = Strongly Agree). In order to measure participants’ political conservatism, the questionnaire included four “culture war” items, such as “Same-sex civil union threatens the sanctity of marriage.” One “culture war” item concerning affirmative action was not correlated with the other variables and was removed from analysis. Participants also answered two self-report political orientation items (i.e. “How would you describe your political beliefs on social issues?” and “How would you describe your political beliefs on economic issues?”). Additionally, participants answered five questions from the need for cognitive closure scale (NFCS) to indicate their cognitive conservatism, such as “I do not like going into a situation without knowing what I can expect from it.” Two NFCS items included in the questionnaire were not correlated with the other
NFCS items and therefore were not included in the final analysis. Finally, the participants answered some demographic questions.

**Procedure**

Participants were told that they would be taking part in a study about the relationship between personality and attitudes, in which they would respond to a set of questions and answer some questionnaires. The researcher then randomly assigned the participants to one of the three conditions (Individual-Level Threat, Group-Level Threat, or Control) by distributing the stimuli from a stack of packets that had been shuffled in advance. Participants subsequently completed the Moral Foundations Questionnaire, answered the open-ended questions, completed a word search, and answered another questionnaire.

**Results**

**Political Conservatism**

The data were assessed for statistical significance at $\alpha = .05$. A 2 (liberal/conservative) x 3 (individual threat/group threat/control) between-participants analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted on issue-based conservatism items (see Figure 1). The main effect for political orientation was significant with regards to political conservatism, $F(1, 91) = 11.26, p = .001, \eta^2 = .12$. However, consistent with the hypothesis, threat did not affect political conservatism, $F(1, 91) = 0.50, p = .606, \eta^2 = .01$, and there was no significant interaction between threat and political orientation, $F(2, 91) = 0.27, p = .767, \eta^2 = .01$.

In addition, a 2 x 3 ANOVA was conducted on the self-reported political orientation items (see Figure 2). The main effect for political orientation was also significant with regards to self-reported political conservatism, $F(1, 91) = 14.25, p < .0005, \eta^2 = .14$. Further supporting the
hypothesis, threat did not influence self-reported political conservatism, $F(1, 91) = 0.86, p = .427, \eta^2 = .02$, and there was no significant interaction, $F(2, 91) = 0.35, p = .664, \eta^2 = .01$.

Therefore, there were no significant differences in the effect of threat on self-reported political conservatism for conservatives ($M = 3.75, SD = 0.13$) or liberals ($M = 3.01, SD = .14$).

**Cognitive Conservatism**

Similarly, a 2 (liberal/conservative) x 3 (individual threat/group threat/control) between-participants ANOVA revealed a significant main effect for threat on cognitive conservatism, $F(1, 91) = 8.02, p = .001, \eta^2 = .16$, and the predicted significant interaction, $F(2, 91) = 5.61, p = .005, \eta^2 = .12$, but no main effect of political orientation, $F(1, 91) = 0.37, p = .545, \eta^2 = .004$ (see Figure 3). Means and standard deviations can be found in Table 3. Simple main effect analyses revealed that threat had significantly different effects for moral liberals and conservatives.

Specifically, these comparisons revealed that conservatives reported a higher need for cognitive closure in the control condition, $F(1, 91) = 3.75, p = .056, \eta^2 = .04$. Consistent with predictions, the individual-level threat significantly increased need for cognitive closure in liberals ($M = 5.38, SD = 0.38$), $F(1, 91) = 5.89, p = .020, \eta^2 = .06$, while the group-level threat marginally increased need for cognitive closure in both liberals ($M = 4.79, SD = 0.66$) and conservatives ($M = 5.12, SD = 0.71$), $F(1, 91) = 2.31, p = .132, \eta^2 = .03$. Looked at differently, liberals displayed an increased need for cognitive closure in both the group- and individual-level threat condition, $F(2, 91) = 11.46, p < .0005, \eta^2 = .21$, relative to the control condition, while conservatives displayed an increased need for cognitive closure in the group-level condition, but not in the individual-level condition, $F(2, 91) = 1.64, p = .200, \eta^2 = .04$. 
To test whether certain moral foundations played a larger role in influencing cognitive conservatism after threat, a 2 (liberal/conservative) x 3 (individual threat/group threat/control) ANOVA was conducted for each individual foundation. Means of scores on the Moral Foundations Questionnaire were used to classify people as either morally liberal or morally conservative on issues of Harm, Fairness, Ingroup, Authority, and Purity. The Authority foundation produced a significant interaction between morality and threat, $F(2, 91) = 3.52, p = .034, \eta^2 = .08$, and the Purity foundation produced a marginally significant interaction, $F(2, 91) = 2.97, p = .057, \eta^2 = .07$. However, the Harm, Fairness, and Ingroup foundations did not produce a significant interaction between morality and threat, $F(2, 91) = 0.72, p = .492, \eta^2 = .02; F(2, 91) = 0.36, p = .696, \eta^2 = .01; F(2, 91) = 1.36, p = .263, \eta^2 = .03$. Additionally, a 2 (male/female) x 3 (individual threat/group threat/control) ANOVA conducted on cognitive conservatism revealed a non-significant main effect for gender, $F(1, 91) = 0.06, p = .804, \eta^2 = .001$, and a non-significant interaction between threat and gender, $F(2, 91) = 0.05, p = .956, \eta^2 = .001$.

**Discussion**

Many current issues facing the nation today, including the Iranian development of nuclear weapons or the issue of universal health care, relate to the notion of death. Following 9/11, the United States witnessed a dramatic shift to the political right that brought forth questions about how threatening events influence people’s ideologies. More than two decades of empirical research on terror management theory suggests that people are motivated to uphold their cultural worldviews in response to anxiety and threat. While personal identities are finite, social identities serve as symbolic extensions of the self without limitations. Hence, individuals seek to maintain favorable views of not only themselves, but of their groups. People are
motivated to preserve their universities, religions, nationalities, and sports teams (Burke et al., 2010; Giannakakis & Fritsche, 2011; Greenberg et al., 1990; Nelson et al., 1997). Threat increases positive reactions to those who maintain the same cultural worldview (McGregor et al., 1998), increases disapproval of social transgressions, and increases the perception of social consensus for cultural attitudes (Pyszczynski et al., 1996).

Similarly, political ideologies provide readily available systems of meaning and create “shared realities” in support of people’s cultural worldviews (Jost et al., 2008). Therefore, we hypothesized that liberals and conservatives would remain polarized after a threat manipulation, and the data supported this claim. Consistent with terror management theory, political conservatism remained the same after both individual- and group-level threats. People’s self-reported political orientation and responses to “culture war” issues were not significantly influenced by threat, as support for preexisting ideologies persevered. The “culture war” items addressed issues of sacredness, and groups that are able to form around sacred experiences and values are better equipped to survive, as members sacrificially come to the group’s defense (Haidt, 2012). This provides further evidence for the idea that people’s political ideologies are a notable part of their identities.

In addition, system justification theory suggests that people are not only motivated to maintain positive evaluations of themselves and their particular groups, but also of the entire system. According to system justification theory, an overall shift toward conservatism occurs when groups or systems feel threatened (Jost et al., 2003). For example, public support for system-level authorities and organizations, such as federal agencies and the police, increased in the aftermath of 9/11 (Jones, 2003; Jost et al., 2010). People are motivated to perceive the world
as structured and predictable in order to reduce the anxiety of the threat (Jost et al., 2008). The conservative platform typically serves as a system-justifying ideology, as conservatives usually resist change and preserve the status quo. Therefore, we hypothesized that both liberals and conservatives would become increasingly conservative while under threat, but only in a cognitive manner. The results extended support for this claim as well, as cognitive conservatism significantly increased as a result of threat.

Therefore, both terror management theory and system justification theory are technically correct. They do not contradict, but rather complement one another with regards to conservative shifts. Previous research simply failed to fully address both individual- and group-level threats, and the appearance of conflicting findings surfaced as a result. The current study provided evidence that people increasingly support their current ideologies, while simultaneously becoming increasingly cognitively conservative under threat because they are motivated to preserve their own identities, groups, and systems.

Finally, we hypothesized that liberals and conservatives would respond differently to various types of threats based on their moral foundations. According to moral foundations theory, liberals tend to value the foundations concerning issues of harm and fairness to individuals (the *individualizing foundations*) more than their conservative colleagues, while also deemphasizing the foundations concerning loyalty, authority, and sanctity (the *binding foundations*) (Graham et al., 2009). This moral dichotomy perpetuates the “culture war” that currently characterizes the American political environment. Based on this moral division, we expected liberals to show a greater response to threats to individuals and conservatives to show a greater response to threats to groups or systems. The data supported this hypothesis and provided
further support for moral foundations theory. The individual-level threat significantly increased cognitive conservatism in liberals, while the group-level threat increased cognitive conservatism in both liberals and conservatives. Furthermore, the results showed that the Authority and Purity moral foundations played a significant role in determining liberal and conservative morality and their response to threat. The larger role of the *binding foundations* may be a result of conservatives valuing all of the foundations rather equally. Therefore, the largest difference occurs within the foundations that conservatives emphasize and liberals generally disregard.

The results suggest that liberals and conservatives will respond differently to threats based on the way they are framed (in terms of individuals or groups) and their appeal to their moral values. As a result, the media may have a significant influence in determining what liberals and conservatives view as important, simply by manipulating the ways in which political events are portrayed. Furthermore, this liberal-conservative dichotomy may help to explain differing foreign policy opinions in response to threat. For example, while Republicans are usually considered the hawkish political party, slightly more Democrats than Republicans supported the recent U.S. role in the Libya no-fly zone (“Public,” 2011). This suggests that American foreign policy in response to potentially threatening events may be influenced by partisan morality. The establishment of a no-fly zone over Libya was in response to a direct threat to individuals and evoked moral concerns of harm and fairness.

**Limitations and Future Directions**

Our conclusions regarding the different conservative shifts that occur in liberals and conservatives depend on the threat manipulations. Both the individual- and group-level threat manipulations were designed so that the threats derived from others (outward blame). However,
as a result, the individual-level threat manipulation may have also evoked group-level concerns. At the University of Virginia, the single sanction rule for expulsion after committing an honor-related offense (lying, cheating, or stealing) serves as a sense of pride. The rule fosters trust within the university community, where students can believe in the integrity of their peers and their achievements. Being expelled as a result of another student’s cheating may evoke concerns about the UVA honor system as a whole lacking legitimacy. The participants may have been led to believe that the university failed to properly address cheating throughout the entire student body, which threatens the functioning of the system. Moreover, the group-level threat may have elicited individual concerns. This may explain why liberals displayed increased cognitive conservatism and need for cognitive closure after both the individual- and group-level threats. For example, some participants discussed individual concerns as a result of the University of Virginia losing its national ranking. Some participants wrote about personal embarrassment, concerns about their parents’ perceptions of their academic degrees, and receiving less positive attention from the outside world.

Furthermore, while these particular manipulations were salient to undergraduate students, these effects may not apply to other situations. There may be a specific trait of these manipulations that presented a special case. For example, the intensity of the individual-level threat (being expelled from the university) may have been more severe than the group-level threat (the university losing its ranking). This may have created a larger difference in conservative shift for the liberals than would have otherwise occurred, which might imply that liberals and conservatives do not actually differ in their response to threat. However, this notion is unlikely, as the direction of the conservative shifts continue to indicate that liberals and
conservatives react differently to threats to individuals or groups. On the other hand, perhaps the difference in the degree of the severity of the threats served as a manipulation itself. Liberals and conservatives may simply respond differently based on the intensity of the threat. Future research will utilize a wider range of manipulations to ensure that liberals and conservatives respond to threats based on their moral matrices.

In addition, the Moral Foundations Questionnaire used in the current study did not include items concerning the “liberty/oppression” foundation (Haidt, 2012). Addressing this foundation, which is a significant part of the liberal moral matrix, may create a slightly different divide between morally liberal and conservative participants. Furthermore, including this foundation in future research may help to explain public responses to policy concerning equality and equity. Opposing policies or viewpoints on this issue may pose a direct threat to people’s morality. This may shed light on the perpetual division between members of Occupy Wall Street and the Tea Party.

The student population and environment certainly does not accurately represent the United States as a whole. Some might argue that the self-report political orientation and “culture war” items could have been influenced by social desirability, in which participants’ answers may have failed to become more politically conservative under threat because of the predominant moderate attitudes that specifically characterize the university. According to Haidt and Hersh (2001), studies conducted in large classes at the university revealed that students’ self-reported political orientation typically fell within the moderate to slightly liberal range. There is a possibility that during this “culture war,” students are refusing to take sides and fight the battle laid out by their parents, or perhaps young individuals are simply more open-minded to the
arguments of both the right and left. Whatever the reason, the moderate tendency may mask the actual differences between the mainstream liberals and conservatives of America. However, the significant effects of the current study highlight the noteworthy differences between conservative and liberal morality and response to threat. Utilizing a sample in which the distribution is more polarized should only demonstrate increasingly different responses.

Additionally, liberals and conservatives in the current study were determined by their responses to the Moral Foundations Questionnaire, which also revealed a relatively normal distribution. Creating such a dichotomous division ignored the possible differences in morality between the political extremes and the moderates. The split also disregarded the various types of liberals and conservatives. Future research will explore the moral matrices of subdivisions of liberals and conservatives as well as other political orientations, as we recognize that other moral classifications, other than the liberal-conservative moral clash, may exist and respond to threats in various ways.

Also, the results indicate that no significant difference exists between men and women and their response to threat. However, this may simply be a result of the small sample size utilized in the current study. Previous research suggests that when groups are threatened, women have evolved to “tend-and-befriend,” such that they engage in nurturing behaviors to protect themselves and their offspring and create social networks that will facilitate such protection (Taylor et al., 2000). A typical “fight-or-flight” response may not address the specific challenges that women face while under threat, as adopting such a strategy would be potentially maladaptive and could jeopardize the survival of offspring. However, men may be more likely to
exhibit the “fight-or-flight” response while under stress, resulting in an increased tendency towards aggression. Therefore, future research, utilizing a larger sample of men, may reveal that men respond to group-level threats to a greater extent in comparison to women.

Moreover, the liberal and conservative moral dichotomy focused on the political divide in the United States. Perhaps future research could explore the differences in morality of political groups in other countries where a similar split exists. Specifically, would a similar phenomenon occur in East Asia, where the connection between individuals and their groups/systems are substantially stronger in comparison to the United States and other western nations? Would individuals in collectivist cultures respond to threats to groups the same way they respond to threats to individuals?

**Conclusion**

Humans have evolved to be ideological animals (Jost et al., 2004). People gather around abstract beliefs, which motivate individual and collective action and behavior. Political ideology not only describes what we think about specific economic and social issues confronting the nation, but also describes our morality and what we value for society as a whole. This deep-seated difference between liberals and conservatives directly influences partisan responses to changes in the political environment. More specifically, liberals show a greater response to threats to individuals and conservatives show a greater response to threats to groups. Moreover, people increasingly support their current ideologies, while simultaneously becoming increasingly cognitively conservative under threat. The current study integrated three theories of political ideology- terror management theory, system justification theory, and moral foundations theory.
The results demonstrated that both terror management theory and system justification theory are correct with regards to ideological shifts, while providing further support for moral foundations theory. In addition, the liberal-conservative moral difference in response to threat and anxiety explains disagreements over threatening political events that perpetuate the “culture war” in America.
References


Appendix A

Threat Manipulations

Individual Threat:

1. Imagine that you had been taking an exam, and the person seated next to you copied your answers. Please briefly describe the emotions that the thought of being expelled from the university arouses in you.

2. Jot down, as specifically as you can, what you think would happen to you as you were expelled from the university and after your expulsion.

Group Threat:

1. Imagine that the University of Virginia dropped from #2 Best Public University to #8. As a result of lower retention rates, larger class sizes, and fewer financial resources, the university followed behind Berkeley, the University of Michigan, and the College of William and Mary. Please briefly describe the emotions that the thought of the University of Virginia forfeiting its #2 ranking arouses in you.

2. Jot down, as specifically as you can, what you think would happen to the university and all of its students as it lost its national ranking.

Control:

1. Please briefly describe the emotions that the thought of going to the dentist arouses in you.

2. Jot down, as specifically as you can, what you think would happen to you as you are at the dentist and after.
Appendix B

Moral Foundations Questionnaire

Part 1. When you decide whether something is right or wrong, to what extent are the following considerations relevant to your thinking? Please rate each statement using this scale:

[0] = not at all relevant (This consideration has nothing to do with my judgments of right and wrong)
[1] = not very relevant
[2] = slightly relevant
[3] = somewhat relevant
[4] = very relevant
[5] = extremely relevant (This is one of the most important factors when I judge right and wrong)

______ Whether or not someone suffered emotionally
______ Whether or not some people were treated differently than others
______ Whether or not someone’s action showed love for his or her country
______ Whether or not someone showed a lack of respect for authority
______ Whether or not someone violated standards of purity and decency
______ Whether or not someone was good at math
______ Whether or not someone cared for someone weak or vulnerable
______ Whether or not someone acted unfairly
______ Whether or not someone did something to betray his or her group
______ Whether or not someone conformed to the traditions of society
______ Whether or not someone did something disgusting
______ Whether or not someone was cruel
______ Whether or not someone was denied his or her rights
______ Whether or not someone showed a lack of loyalty
______ Whether or not an action caused chaos or disorder
______ Whether or not someone acted in a way that God would approve of
Part 2. Please read the following sentences and indicate your agreement or disagreement:

|------------------------|-------------------------|-----------------------|-------------------|---------------------|-------------------|

Compassion for those who are suffering is the most crucial virtue.

When the government makes laws, the number one principle should be ensuring that everyone is treated fairly.

I am proud of my country’s history.

Respect for authority is something all children need to learn.

People should not do things that are disgusting, even if no one is harmed.

It is better to do good than to do bad.

One of the worst things a person could do is hurt a defenseless animal.

Justice is the most important requirement for a society.

People should be loyal to their family members, even when they have done something wrong.

Men and women each have different roles to play in society.

I would call some acts wrong on the grounds that they are unnatural.

It can never be right to kill a human being.

I think it’s morally wrong that rich children inherit a lot of money while poor children inherit nothing.

It is more important to be a team player than to express oneself.

If I were a soldier and disagreed with my commanding officer’s orders, I would obey anyway because that is my duty.

Chastity is an important and valuable virtue.
Appendix C

Word Search Puzzle

Circle as many words as you can in the puzzle below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Book</th>
<th>Computer</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Desk</td>
<td>Phone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Movie</td>
<td>Train</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paper</td>
<td>School</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grass</td>
<td>Beer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Music</td>
<td>Actor</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

S R E T U P M O C O
W P H O N E R E E E B
A M U S I C P Z S N
B T N R O T C A S K
B M R K S E D E A O
R F O A G O L B R O
E L G V I Z B O G B
P A N U I N E L W Q
A G T A B E T G D O
P S C H O O L N I T
Appendix D

Political Orientation Questions

The following survey asks some questions concerning your values and beliefs. The survey is anonymous and confidential, and there is no right or wrong answer. If you are uncomfortable with any question, please feel free to skip it and move to the next one. Please respond as openly as possible. It should take you about 5 minutes to complete this questionnaire. Thank you for your time.

Please circle the number that best describes you:

1. How would you describe your political beliefs on social issues? (please circle)
   a. Very Liberal
   b. Liberal
   c. Slightly Liberal
   d. Slightly Conservative
   e. Conservative
   f. Very Conservative

2. How would you describe your political beliefs on economic issues? (please circle)
   a. Very Liberal
   b. Liberal
   c. Slightly Liberal
   d. Slightly Conservative
   e. Conservative
   f. Very Conservative

3. If you belong to a political party, which one is it? ____________________

4. If you belong to a political party, how important is that identity to you? (please circle)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Not Important At All</td>
<td>Unimportant</td>
<td>Slightly Unimportant</td>
<td>Slightly Important</td>
<td>Important</td>
<td>Very Important</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix E

Conservatism Questionnaire

*Please indicate the number that best matches your agreement with the following statements using this scale:*

[1] = Strongly Disagree  
[2] = Disagree  
[3] = Slightly Disagree  
[4] = Slightly Agree  
[5] = Agree  
[6] = Strongly Agree

_____ Taxation should be used to fund social programs.

_____ America’s domestic policy should do more to ensure that living and working conditions are equal for all groups of people.

_____ Same-sex civil union threatens the sanctity of marriage.

_____ By law, a woman should always be able to obtain an abortion during the first trimester of a pregnancy for any reason she chooses.

_____ I do not like to go into a situation without knowing what I can expect from it.

_____ I think that having clear rules and order at work is essential for success.

_____ I would rather know bad news than stay in a state of uncertainty.

_____ I usually make important decisions quickly and confidently.

_____ I do not usually consult many different options before forming my own views.

_____ This country would definitely be a better place if most conservative Republicans packed up and moved out.

_____ This country would definitely be a better place if most conservative Democrats packed up and moved out.

_____ Liberal Democrats are generally good people.

_____ Conservative Republicans are generally good people.

_____ I am glad that I chose to attend the University of Virginia.

_____ I would like to be a student at a different university.
Age in years: ______

Gender: ______

Year in School: ______

Among the options below, which best describes your religious affiliation NOW?

___Buddhist
___Christian: Catholic or Orthodox
___Christian: Protestant or other
___Hindu
___Jewish
___Muslim
___No religion
___Other

What do you think this study was about?

___________________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________________

End of Questionnaire
Thank you for your participation!
Table 1

*Correlations of the “Culture War” Questions that Composed the Dependent Measure of Political Conservatism*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Questions</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Taxation should be used to fund social programs.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Same-sex civil union threatens the sanctity of marriage.</td>
<td>.33*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. By law, a woman should always be able to obtain an abortion during the first trimester of pregnancy for any reason she chooses.</td>
<td>.23*</td>
<td>.49**</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p < .01, **p < .0005
Table 2

*Correlations of the Questions that Composed the Dependent Measure of Cognitive Conservatism*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Questions</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. I do not like to go into a situation without knowing what I can expect from it.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. I think that having clear rules and order is essential for success.</td>
<td></td>
<td>.40**</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. I would rather know bad news than stay in a state of uncertainty.</td>
<td>.40**</td>
<td></td>
<td>.31*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* p < .01, ** p < .0005
Table 3

Means and Standard Deviations for Threat and Political Orientation on Cognitive and Political Conservatism

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>Cognitive Conservatism Mean (SD)</th>
<th>Issue-Based Items Mean (SD)</th>
<th>Self-Report Items Mean (SD)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Political Orientation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liberal</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>4.81 (0.63)</td>
<td>2.33 (0.95)</td>
<td>3.00 (1.03)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conservative</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>4.93 (0.66)</td>
<td>3.08 (1.11)</td>
<td>3.74 (0.81)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Threat</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individual</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>5.10 (0.58)</td>
<td>2.90 (1.04)</td>
<td>3.58 (0.97)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>4.98 (0.69)</td>
<td>2.66 (1.01)</td>
<td>3.30 (0.71)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>4.55 (0.53)</td>
<td>2.66 (1.25)</td>
<td>3.32 (1.21)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political Orientation x Threat</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liberal, Individual</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>5.38 (0.38)</td>
<td>2.54 (1.03)</td>
<td>3.31 (0.85)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Liberal, Group</td>
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<td>4.79 (0.66)</td>
<td>2.10 (0.69)</td>
<td>2.81 (0.56)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Liberal, Control</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>4.35 (0.33)</td>
<td>2.35 (1.08)</td>
<td>2.91 (1.39)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Conservative, Individual</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>4.88 (0.61)</td>
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<td>3.79 (1.02)</td>
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<td>Conservative, Group</td>
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<td>5.12 (0.71)</td>
<td>3.08 (1.02)</td>
<td>3.68 (0.58)</td>
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<td>Conservative, Control</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>4.76 (0.64)</td>
<td>2.98 (1.37)</td>
<td>3.77 (0.82)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Figure 1. Political conservatism determined by “culture war” items after threat manipulation.
Figure 2. Political conservatism determined by self-report items after threat manipulation.
Figure 3. Cognitive conservatism of conservatives and liberals after threat manipulation.