POLITICAL DIVIDE: A TERROR MANAGEMENT PERSPECTIVE ON POLARIZATION IN AMERICA

by

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A thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the University of Colorado Colorado Springs in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts Department of Psychology 2016
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According to Terror Management Theory politics represent a unique aspect of one’s cultural worldview. The current study hypothesized that derogation by politically dissimilar others would represent an existential threat. Death-thought accessibility (DTA) as well as relative identification, blind patriotism, and constructive patriotism were all measured. It was additionally hypothesized that DTA would remain high even after some participants were given the chance to affirm their cultural worldview (e.g., America) if the country is truly in a state of deep polarization. Results did not confirm the main hypotheses but did find dispositional differences between liberals and conservatives which replicated previous work. Limitations and theoretical considerations are examined.
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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

The current political climate in the United States has been a topic of heated debate in recent years. The practical challenges currently facing Americans are numerous; however, it is the ideological differences that are the focal point pervading national discussions, and not the practical consequences of acting. Ideology is here defined as a meaningful belief system which contains sets of values, mores, and opinions that shapes the way individuals and groups think, act, and understand the world (adapted from Encarta Dictionary). There are real world consequences that follow legislation, yet the ideological divide seems to garner more attention from politicians, media pundits, and citizens than the issues themselves. While political theorists generally accept that the House of Representatives and Senate have become more polarized in the past 40 years (Theriault, 2006), there is active debate over whether this phenomenon is limited to elected representatives. Fiorina, Abrams, and Pope (2006) have argued that polarization on a national scale does not exist and is largely a misunderstanding perpetuated by increased divisions among elected officials and the media. However, data from Abramowitz and Saunders (2008) largely refutes this view finding that political division has increased steadily among political elites, the media, and the public at large.

The narrative of our increasing polarization (Mundy, 2004; Seyle & Newman, 2006) and the subsequent negative effects for our country are present in the media on a
consistent basis. Increasingly the rhetoric is painting this moment in history as one of the most divisive in our country’s history. The country appears evenly split on what being an American is and how best to be one. The current study will approach the problem of political division in the United States from a Terror Management Theory (TMT; Greenberg, Pyszczynski, & Solomon, 1986; Pyszczynski, Sullivan, & Greenberg, 2015) perspective. Specifically, this study will aim to answer whether partisan media exposure is capable of threatening, or bolstering, one’s worldview and consequently reducing its effectiveness as an anxiety-buffer; it will also explore potential differences in how liberals and conservatives respond to such a threat.

From a terror management perspective, political orientation is a component of one’s cultural worldview. Therefore, challenges to one’s political views represent a threat that may be increasing in severity as terms like liberal/conservative and red/blue come to connote political stereotypes, which increasingly characterize the out-group as more homogenous, extreme, and biased (Cohen, 2003; Graham, Nosek, & Haidt, 2012; Rutchick, Smyth, & Konrath, 2009; Seyle & Newman, 2006). If being a true American has come to connote two different identities, beliefs, values, morals, and experiences for individuals in the United States then one’s national identity may lose its effectiveness in providing existential security.

**Terror Management Theory**

Terror Management Theory (TMT; Greenberg et al., 1986; Pyszczynski et al., 2015) is an existential social psychological theory inspired by the works of Ernest Becker (1973, 1975) and various other social scientists and philosophers, such as Otto Rank, Soren Kierkegaard, Charles Darwin, Robert J. Lifton, and Eric Fromm. It has been
applied to a variety of problems unique to human experience. TMT combines evolutionary, psychodynamic, cognitive, anthropological, and social psychological perspectives to explain the development, function, and maintenance of self-esteem and cultural worldviews (Pyszczynski, Greenberg, & Arndt, 2012).

According to TMT, human beings have certain cognitive capabilities that are unique to the species (e.g. abstraction, the use of symbols), which allow for, among other things, the projection forward in time to hypothetical situations that can be imagined in the absence of direct experience. However, a large cost of our evolved cognitive complexity is our unique awareness of the inevitability of death. This awareness of the certainty of mortality in an organism that adaptively developed a strong desire for continued existence creates the potential for paralyzing terror. A partial solution to deal with our uniquely human dread of death’s certainty was the use of culture to suppress our anxiety. TMT has defined cultural worldviews as shared symbolic constructions that (a) order reality in meaningful ways, (b) are perceived as permanent and enduring, (c) set standards of value to be lived up to by individuals within the culture, and (d) provide some hope of immortality (Pyszczynski et al., 2015; Pyszczynski, Solomon, & Greenberg, 2003). The prospect of immortality can be either literal or symbolic. Literal immortality is defined as continued existence after biological death in an afterlife (e.g. heaven, hell, reincarnation); while symbolic immortality is being part of something greater than oneself that lasts forever and thus continues one’s relevance after biological death, such as through one’s children, work, or reputation (i.e. one’s impact on the world does not end with biological death).
People derive self-esteem by living up to the standards of value set by their cultural worldviews, and, more generally, are protected from the potential for terror imposed by mortality by the illusion of stability, meaning, and personal value provided by their cultural worldview, that also prescribes a path to immortality. Previous research has consistently demonstrated increased defense of cultural worldview and self-esteem striving following death contemplation, or mortality salience (MS). For example, a common measure of cultural worldview defense is how favorable American participants are toward essays ostensibly written by foreign students (e.g. one praising America and one critical of America). Following MS, Americans are more favorable toward pro-American essayists and significantly derogate anti-American essayists (Greenberg, Pyszczynski, Solomon, & Brues, 1994). These effects have been interpreted as a compensatory cognitive defense process. It is important to note that this pattern of response is specific to death reminders and does not consistently emerge with other negative stimuli (e.g., pain, social stress). Additionally, a series of studies by Harmon-Jones et al. (1997) demonstrated that experimentally manipulated and high dispositional self-esteem attenuated MS effects on worldview defense (e.g. less derogation of out-group) and lowered death-thought accessibility. MS increases one’s need for protection against death-related concerns, and thus leads to exaggerated responses to threat to cultural worldviews and self-esteem because these protective entities are especially needed under such conditions. Consequently, MS leads to either direct defense against

\[ \text{1 The literature on this issue is complicated by the fact that similar response patterns have been observed with uncertainty (van den Bos, 2013; McGregor, Zanna, Holmes, & Spencer, 2001). For a more in depth discussion of this issue see Greenberg, Vail, and Pyszczynski, (in-press), or Pyszczynski, Sullivan, and Greenberg, (2015).} \]
the threat source (e.g. derogation) to reinforce meaning and self-esteem, or bolstering of faith in one’s worldview or self-esteem.

Cultural worldviews require a large degree of shared agreement in order for people to maintain faith in them and in order for them to function effectively at buffering existential anxiety (Pyszynski et al., 2003). When others share one’s worldview, it implies that it accurately reflects reality and thus strengthens faith in it and increases its anxiety-buffering effectiveness. However, differing worldviews raise the possibility that one’s worldview may be incorrect, which has the potential to undermine one’s certainty regarding its absolute validity. This becomes problematic when peoples, or cultures, with differing worldviews come into contact with one and other, as each represents an implicit threat to the other by subtly undermining their cultural worldviews. For example, when cultural beliefs about the afterlife are compared there is a rather large difference between the Judeo-Christian view of heaven and hell and the Buddhist view of reincarnation. Since neither belief can be objectively proven the differing perspectives undermine the stability of faith in each.

Importantly, individuals within cultures develop personalized versions of the cultural worldview in response to the wide variety of ideas and values to which they are exposed over the course of their lives. Thus, especially in the modern world of globalization and frequent exposure to diverse beliefs and values, there is substantial variability in the specifics of the individualized worldviews that people use to protect themselves from existential anxiety. For example, two studies conducted by Dechesne, Greenberg, Arndt, and Schimel (2000) demonstrated that sports team affiliation can operate as a component of worldview capable of buffering death anxiety through
vicarious victory (i.e. self enhancement). In study 1, Dutch high-school students exposed to MS were more optimistic about the national soccer team, expecting significantly more wins in the season and more goals against national rivals. Study 2 replicated this finding with American college students’ views toward their college football team. However, after the football team lost their opening match participants exposed to MS shifted their optimism to a different base (i.e. the basketball team) to distance themselves from the defeat. Of course such effects occur only among people for whom sports team affiliation is part of their worldview. Follow up studies examined the conditions under which this type of group distancing occurs, and how it differs from derogation as a defensive strategy, concluding that the more permeable the group the more likely distancing will occur (Dechesne, Janssen, & van Knippenberg, 2000). Additionally, political ideology can be thought of as an essential part of one’s worldview which may significantly differ between individuals. However, unlike affiliating with multiple sports teams, people largely affiliate with only one political party. Therefore, political ideology is not a permeable group and cannot be easily distanced from, but instead must be more directly defended.

The potential anxiety produced by a direct reminder of death (e.g. you’re going to die) and contact with worldviews that oppose one’s own (e.g. your politics/religion/beliefs are wrong) can be easily alleviated through derogation or aggression towards dissimilar others (Greenberg et al., 1994). Derogation against those who oppose one’s worldview allows the perceived threat to be written off as unimportant, and enables one to remain part of the in-group from which they are able to derive security, structure, and self-esteem. At this point, a brief review of the relevant
hypotheses and empirical literature will be helpful in understanding the interplay between mortality, worldview, and self-esteem.

**Worldview and Self-esteem: Threats and Maintenance**

The *mortality salience (MS) hypothesis* broadly states that if cultural worldviews and self-esteem provide protection from death anxiety, then reminders of mortality should promote increased defense of these structures (Pyszczynski et al., 2003; Pyszczynski et al., 2015). Increasing faith in one’s cultural worldview through derogation, or aggression, toward dissimilar others, or bolstering one’s self-esteem, reduces the anxiety brought about by MS and restores one’s ability to prevent death-related thoughts from entering conscious awareness.

A seminal TMT study found that when municipal court judges were asked to set bail for a moral transgressor (i.e. a prostitute) those exposed to mortality set a significantly higher bail than their control counterparts ($455 and $50, respectively; Rosenblatt, Greenberg, Solomon, Pyszczynski, & Lyon, 1989). A complementary study indicated that those who were perceived as more morally virtuous (i.e. a woman who apprehended a mugger) were viewed as merit ing significantly greater reward when reminded of death, as opposed to control conditions ($3476 and $1112, respectively; Rosenblatt et al., 1989). After thinking about death individuals who went against the dominant cultural worldview were perceived as more of a threat and punished more severely (i.e. out-group bias), while those who exceeded cultural standards were perceived as heroic and deserving of praise (i.e. in-group bias). Importantly, participants claimed that thinking about their own mortality did not influence their decisions. Similarly, a series of behavioral studies by McGregor et al. (1998) demonstrated the
compensatory responses of aggression and derogation to anxiety produced by MS. After writing about their own death or a control topic, participants were told about another individual who either shared their political views or did not. Participants were then allowed to determine how much of a painfully hot salsa this politically dissimilar/similar target (who made their strong dislike of hot sauce known) would ingest as part of a different study. Under MS, participants allocated significantly more hot sauce to perceived political rivals (Study 1; McGregor et al., 1998). Interestingly, when participants first were given the opportunity to express negative opinions about politically dissimilar others, aggressive responses (i.e. increased hot sauce volume) were eliminated, and vice versa (Studies 2 and 3; McGregor et al., 1998). In another series of studies by Greenberg et al. (1990), MS led Christian participants to evaluate other Christians (e.g. in-group) more favorably, while evaluating out-group members (e.g. Jews) more negatively (Study 1). Additionally, participants exposed to MS were more favorable to those who praised their culture and more negative towards those who critiqued it, regardless of whether the source was a noble prize winning Harvard professor, or the head of the American Communist Party (Study 3).

Taken together these studies support the TMT proposition that derogation and aggression are common defenses against explicit (e.g. moral transgressor, political rival) or implicit (e.g. differing religion) threats to one’s worldview and that these responses are increased by MS. Additionally, bolstering one’s worldview through praising one’s culture reverses this effect regardless of the perceived authority of the source (Greenberg et al., 1990; study 3). This should not be surprising though, as it was previously mentioned that increasing one’s self-esteem reduces the effects of derogation and aggression on
worldview defense as well (Harmon-Jones et al., 1997). One final point which should be clarified is that a threat to worldview or self-esteem produces these effects by increasing death-thought accessibility (DTA).

The death-thought accessibility (DTA) hypothesis states that if cultural worldviews and self-esteem buffer against thoughts of death, then weakening these structures should increase the accessibility of death related thoughts. Schimel, Hayes, Williams, and Jahrig (2007) examined whether threats to one’s worldview would produce increased DTA. A series of studies indicated that threats to national identity (Studies 1-4; Schimel et al., 2007) significantly increased DTA for all participants. Importantly, DTA was: (a) significantly decreased when the threat to national identity could be easily dismissed (Study 2), (b) present across different methodologies (e.g. word completion and lexical decision tasks), (c) not mediated by anger or anxiety (Study 4), and (d) categorically different from negative content (Study 3). The same pattern of results also held for increased DTA in response to threats to self-esteem (Hayes, Schimel, Faucher, & Williams, 2008). Additionally, self-affirmation following a threat to self-esteem eliminated the observed increase in DTA (Study 3; Hayes et al., 2008). These studies mark an important distinction that threats to an existential defense system allow for death specific thoughts to be more easily accessed independent of negative stimuli, affect, and anger. As a whole, when reminded of death there is a defensive response directed towards bolstering one’s cultural worldview, or self-esteem, but when these structures are threatened death is more readily accessible to awareness.
TMT and Politics

Liberals and conservatives are ideologically dissimilar to say the least. However, operationalizing political ideology presents its own challenges. Jost, Fitzsimons, and Kay (2004) previously referred to people as ‘ideological animals’ stressing ideology as a tacit conglomeration of beliefs and values that permeate all aspects of human existence, that will be defended even at the expense of the individual (Jost et al., 2004). This definition has significant overlap with how TMT defines cultural worldview. It is important to note that there are individual differences in how people develop their cultural worldviews, and while political, or any other kind of ideology is an important piece it is only that: a piece of one’s cultural worldview, not its totality. Additionally, research from Moral Foundations Theory (MFT; Haidt, 2012; Graham, Haidt, & Nosek, 2009) has demonstrated that liberals and conservatives rely on different types of morality, which may be helpful in explaining different response patterns to the same stimuli. This will be explained in more detail later. At this point a review of political TMT research and how it differs from the ideological definitions of Jost et al (2004) will be helpful (for a more detailed account of TMT findings see Burke, Martens, & Faucher, 2010; Burke, Kosloff, & Landau, 2013)

Research conducted in 2003 (Study 1, Landau et al., 2004) found that MS significantly increased participants support for then President G.W. Bush and his antiterrorism policies. Additionally, Landau et al. (2004) found that priming participants with either MS or terrorism equally increased support for Bush with no differences between liberals and conservatives (Study 3). It was also demonstrated that, shortly before the 2004 presidential elections, MS significantly increased support for Bush while
support for presidential candidate John Kerry significantly decreased regardless of
political orientation (Study 4, Landau et al., 2004). One potential interpretation of these
results is that people are drawn to charismatic leaders. Consistent with this interpretation
Cohen, Solomon, Maxfield, Pyszczynski, and Greenberg (2004) had participants evaluate
campaign statements supposedly written by local gubernatorial candidates. The
candidates’ messages varied their supposed leadership styles as: charismatic (e.g.
unspecified visionary rhetoric about the greatness of one’s state), task oriented (e.g. focus
on specific goals), and relationship oriented (e.g. focus on listening to constituents). In
the control condition only 4% of participants voted for the charismatic leader, but under
MS the charismatic leader received 33% of the votes (Cohen et al., 2004).

Taken together these studies suggest that, under MS, people prefer charismatic
conservative leadership regardless of their personal political orientation. Some theorists
have interpreted these results by positing a conservative-shift hypothesis for the general
population (Jost, Glaser, Kruglanski, & Sulloway, 2003). The conservative-shift
hypothesis (Jost et al., 2003) assumes that political conservatives are motivated to
manage existential uncertainties by adhering to rigid, but stable, worldviews which are
resistant to change and able to operate as a source of security for others. On the other
hand, political liberal leaders are more accepting of change, and therefore less likely to be
sources of comfort in existentially tumultuous times. However, the conservative shift
hypothesis fails to account for more recent evidence of political polarization, which
indicates that the country is ideologically split along the extremes, but not necessarily
becoming more conservative (Kosloff, Greenberg, Weise, & Solomon, 2010).
Polarization along party lines is more readily explained by TMT, which posits that under an existential threat people will seek the quickest and most efficient buffer for their anxiety. For systematic political threats, TMT would hypothesize the quickest and more efficacious buffer to be one’s own political in-group. Additionally, research has demonstrated that following MS liberals and conservatives are more favorable towards charismatic leaders who support their ideology (Kosloff, et al., 2010). Following MS, liberal and conservative participants assessed two hypothetical gubernatorial candidates (one liberal, and one conservative) who differed on charisma (Kosloff et al., 2010). It is important to note that this study allowed for a direct comparison between the conservative shift hypothesis (i.e. following MS people like conservative leaders more regardless of political affiliation), the charismatic leader hypothesis (i.e. following MS people are drawn toward charismatic leaders regardless of political affiliation), and the TMT hypothesis that MS should increase favorability of charismatic leaders who support one’s own political ideology (e.g. liberals more drawn to charismatic liberals, conservatives more drawn to charismatic conservatives). Kosloff et al. (2010) found support for the TMT hypothesis, demonstrating that liberals and conservatives rely on their political bases as a source of support following existential threat.

A recent meta-analysis (Burke, Kosloff, & Landau, 2013) compared effect sizes for studies showing both polarization ($r = .35$) and conservative shift ($r = .22$) effects of MS, and both demonstrated significant effects. However, a qualitative analysis of the data indicated that conservative-shifting may have been an artifact of historical context (i.e. most studies for conservative shifting were done under a conservative president; Burke et al., 2013). Burke et al. (2013) suggest that
When prevailing cultural trends favor conservatism, MS often strengthens conservative leanings; yet when prevailing trends are more progressive in nature, MS often strengthens liberal leanings. However, such conclusions must be qualified by the fact that—as the present review shows—many effects in the literature of MS effects on political variables are moderated by additional dispositional and/or situational factors.

There are several empirical examples of such dispositional and situational factors influencing support away from conservatism. A study done by Vail, Arndt, Motyl, and Pyszczynski (2009) demonstrated that when compassionate values were made salient MS increased support for Barack Obama and decreased support for John McCain during the lead up to the 2008 election. Research has also demonstrated that individual differences in attachment style moderate political leanings following MS. Weise et al. (Study 1, 2008) demonstrated that under MS participants low in attachment security evaluated George Bush more favorably and John Kerry less favorably. While the conservative shift hypothesis can easily explain this result, it is harder to explain the inverse pattern that was demonstrated for participants high in attachment security. Taken as a whole, the literature suggests that whether MS produces polarization or conservative shifts depends on situational and contextual variables. Anson, Pyszczynski, Solomon, and Greenberg (2009) summarized this literature by suggesting that MS leads people to shift in whatever direction provides the most existential security in the particular context at hand.

**Extreme responses to MS.**

Recent TMT research has demonstrated that aggressive responses to political conflicts are increased by MS and become more likely under certain circumstances.
Pyszczynski et al. (2006) found that MS produced a significant increase in support for martyrdom missions to kill Americans in a sample of Iranian students. Participants were randomly assigned to either MS or a control condition (i.e. dental pain), and following a delay of filler questionnaires, were presented with counterbalanced pro and anti-martyrdom statements ostensibly from another University student. Participants were then asked to give their impressions of the student and indicate their support for joining each cause. Under MS, participants rated the pro-martyrdom student more favorably than the anti-martyrdom student and expressed a significantly greater willingness to consider joining the pro-martyrdom movement (Pyszczynski et al., 2006). In Study 2, Pyszczynski et al. (2006) demonstrated increased support for extreme military force (e.g. preemptive strikes, use of nuclear and chemical weapons) and the Patriot Act (e.g. exchanging freedoms for safety) among American conservatives under MS.

As their worldviews come under increasingly visceral threats, individuals become forced to deal with increased death anxiety and subsequently become more prone to violent defenses. A study conducted in Israel indicated that MS made Jewish participants increasingly in favor of military retaliation against Hamas both when it served to potentially decrease violence in the region (utility) and when intervening was purely retaliatory (justice; Hirshberger, Pyszczynski, & Ein-Dor, 2009; Hirshberger & Pyszczynski, 2012). These findings may shed light on the recent military action in the Gaza region, and are made increasingly disturbing by a study that found that the death of a member of a perceived worldview threatening out-group serves a distal defense function (Hayes, Schimel, & Williams, 2008). Hayes et al. (2008) found that when Christian participants were randomly assigned to read about an area becoming
increasingly more Muslim, this increased worldview defense and death-thought accessibility; however, participants who learned about a plane crash in the region which supposedly killed many Muslims apparently garnered some comfort from this tragic event, since their tendency to respond aggressively after MS was completely eliminated (Hayes, et al., 2008). Taken together these studies indicate that in increasingly volatile regions political threats to worldview can take defensively exaggerated forms.

The research above is consistent with previous TMT research which demonstrated that death reminders are capable of producing aggressive responses against out-group members (McGregor et al., 1998). While this research has extended the TMT literature cross-culturally, it more importantly demonstrates that when a threat is perceived as serious enough, policies oriented toward potential annihilation of the foreign other becomes an acceptable option. Political instability and increased polarization seem to be a prerequisite for this level of extreme response. If we cannot reason with, convert, or compromise with the other side then violence becomes an increasingly viable option.

**Current Political Divide: Perceptions and Realities**

“The two parties are still more polarized than ever before and the rise of partisan media is an important reason for it” John Avlon (n.d.)

Since the 2000 election the United States has become increasingly divided into distinct political and ideological camps that seem unwilling or unable to work together to effectively govern. Seyle and Newman (2006) have suggested that the way we frame our political discourse significantly contributes to either facilitating or impeding meaningful progress. They posit that the metaphor of Red and Blue states, which was popularized during the 2000 election, is an inaccurate and overly simplistic view that is likely to be
problematic to future political progress (Seyle & Newman, 2006). Empirical support for Seyle and Newman’s (2006) claim was provided by Rutchick et al., (2009). Participants were randomly assigned to receive one of four 2004 electoral maps: a) electoral/data (e.g. red/blue states for Bush/Kerry with voting percentages for Bush/Kerry for each state), b) electoral/no data, c) proportional/data (e.g. proportional was a purple composite based on the state voting percentages), d) proportional/no data. All participants then were asked to answer questions about the American political climate. Red-Blue electoral maps colored states won by George W. Bush as ‘Red,’ and those won by John Kerry as ‘Blue,’ whereas proportional maps were various shades of purple based on the percentage of state voters who respectively supported Kerry and Bush (Rutchick et al., 2009). Half of the maps also reported poll data by explicitly displaying the respective state percentages of support for Bush and Kerry. Rutchick et al.’s (2009) results supported the hypothesis that red-blue state framing negatively contributes to perceptions of polarization. Significant main effects were observed for map (electoral, proportional) and information (data, no data; Rutchick et al., 2009): Participants who viewed the electoral map presented in red and blue perceived the country as more divided than participants who viewed the proportional map with shades of purple; and participants who were presented with no numerical data perceived the country as more divided than participants given numerical polling data. Map type was also found to significantly influence perceived political attitudes, political agency, and voting likelihood even when presented with representative numeric data (Rutchick et al., 2009). For example, participants that viewed the red and blue electoral map perceived Democrats and Republicans as further apart on real political issues (e.g. gun control, environmental protection, etc.), but importantly not on filler control issues
(e.g. federal constructionism and economic compliance reform). With the red-blue electoral map participants’ perceived states as more extremely liberal or conservative leaning than on the proportional map. Additionally, on the proportionate map participants perceived the minority party as more likely to vote in, and more likely to influence, the upcoming election than participants shown the red-blue electoral maps. Further analysis indicated that voting likelihood was significantly mediated by perceived influence (Rutchick et al, 2009); if people perceived voting would have an effect they were more likely to vote.

Similarly, Cohen (2003) demonstrated the significant impact that political parties can exert through group influence, and participants inability to recognize that influence. Cohen (2003) presented liberal and conservative participants with a copy of a supposed welfare policy (generous/liberal, stringent/conservative) that was favorably endorsed by either a Democrat, or Republican, and assessed their attitudes towards the proposed program. Regardless of policy content, liberals and conservatives both sided with their political reference group assessment (i.e. liberals supported a stringent welfare program if other liberals supported it; conservatives supported a generous welfare program if other conservatives supported it; vice versa). The content of the policy had no effect even though participants reported that their assessment of the proposed program came from careful and informed consideration, and was not influenced by typical Republican or Democratic beliefs (Cohen, 2003). Interestingly, participants were more favorable toward a policy when it deviated from what was ideologically expected (e.g. when a supposed Democrat supported the conservative welfare policy). While both liberal and conservative participants did not see themselves as susceptible to group influence, both
groups acknowledged that their political rivals would be significantly prone to group influence, and that even members of their own party would be susceptible but to a lesser degree (Cohen, 2003).

Taken together these studies suggest that people: (a) are susceptible to political group influence, (b) misinterpret and overgeneralize politically representative stimuli, and (c) exaggerate the homogeneity of political out-groups. These findings combined with research from TMT, which has empirically demonstrated political orientation as both a component of worldview and uniquely susceptible to subtle non-conscious influence (Cohen & Solomon, 2011), raise many questions about how our political climate directly and indirectly affects American citizens. More importantly, our perceptions about polarization are grounded by a statistical reality which indicates that the country has been gradually splitting for at least the past two decades.

A recent study by the PEW Research Center (2014) highlighted our growing political divide. The study found that in the past 20 years the percentage of extreme liberals and conservatives has doubled leading to a bi-modal picture of American politics where the typical Republican is more conservative than 94% of Democrats, and the typical Democrat is more liberal than 92% of Republicans (PEW, 2014). Additionally, 27% of Democrats and 36% of Republicans see the opposing party as a significant threat to the nation’s well-being (PEW, 2014). It is interesting to note that another PEW study found the amount of time Americans are spending on news consumption has gradually increased from 2000 (57 m/day) to 2010 (70 m/day; PEW, 2012). The majority of this time is still spent with televised news (32 m/day) where 39% of American’s regularly ingest one of the major cable news networks (e.g. Fox, CNN, MSNBC). Though 82% of
Americans report some bias in news media (PEW, 2013) this is probably due to viewership being split along partisan lines. Liberals are watching more MSNBC and their pundits (Rachel Maddow, Chris Mathews, etc.), while conservatives are watching more Fox and their pundits (Hannity, O’Reilly, etc.). This kind of selective media exposure may serve to bolster one’s self-esteem and worldview by reaffirming already held beliefs, but it may also consistently derogate opposing opinions. In short, partisan news media may be a simultaneous source of security to some and threat to others, and thus capable of exacerbating our growing political divide.

TMT has previously demonstrated that environmental cues can elicit increased death-thought accessibility and cultural worldview defense (see Vail, Arndt, Motyl, & Pyszczynski, 2012). If political identity is a source of self-esteem for some and threat for others, than merely hearing about political discourse may be enough to trigger defensive responses. Being reminded of the difference in political parties may make it harder to derive overall security from an American identity, because it reminds one that a large portion of the population does not share one’s beliefs, values, and general worldview. However, this may manifest differently for liberals and conservatives due to inherent disparities between these groups.

**Differences between Liberals and Conservatives**

Moral Foundations Theory (MFT; Haidt, 2012) posits that morality is produced by evolved innate architecture in the brain (e.g. modules) that has been adapted over time by culture. According to MFT, all individuals possess the innate moral modules of a) harm/care, b) fairness/reciprocity, c) ingroup/loyalty, d) authority/respect, e) purity/sanctity, and more recently f) liberty/oppression (Haidt & Joseph, 2006; Iyer,
Koleva, Graham, Ditto, & Haidt, 2012), which are thematically shared across cultures. However, culture adapts these modules, leading to diverse representations through various moral systems. Perhaps most interesting is the empirical finding that individuals do not necessarily rely on all moral foundations equally.

Graham, et al. (2009) demonstrated that liberals and conservatives emphasize different foundations. For example, Graham et al. (Study 2, 2009) asked participants to judge a series of moral dilemmas representing different moral foundations (e.g. The government must first and foremost protect all people from harm; harm/care).

Additionally, political orientation was assessed explicitly on a 7-point Likert scale (1 Strongly Liberal – 7 Strongly Conservative), and implicitly with an Implicit Association Test (IAT). Results demonstrated that liberals relied more heavily on harm and fairness (i.e. the individualizing foundations) than the other foundations, while conservatives relied on all foundations equally, and significantly more than liberals on ingroup, authority, and purity (i.e. the ‘binding’ group foundations). Both explicit and implicit assessments of political orientation were significant predictors of all moral foundations.

Another study examined moral stereotypes of liberals and conservatives (Graham, Nosek, & Haidt, 2012). The study asked individuals to respond to a similar series of moral dilemmas and judgments with their own views, or the views of a typical liberal/conservative (Graham et al., 2012). Results indicated that stereotypes about the typical liberal/conservative were directionally accurate (e.g. typical liberal was rated higher for harm and fairness) but exaggerated. Graham et al. (2012) operationalized exaggeration as the difference between actual liberal/conservative means and the typical liberal/conservative means that were estimated by participants. Interestingly, there was
evidence of both in-group and out-group biasing. Participants exaggerated the extent to which those with opposing views differed from them and how much importance a typical in-group member placed on certain foundations (Graham et al., 2012). It was also found that extreme liberals were the least accurate in all assessments (i.e. exaggerated differences the most), while moderate conservatives were the most accurate.

Taken together these studies demonstrate support for real and perceived differences between liberals and conservatives. Political ideology exhibits differences in moral priorities, which are well known albeit stereotypically exaggerated. If morality and politics are related ideologies than it is reasonable to hypothesize that since liberals and conservatives are morally distinct they should have equally diverse response patterns to a perceived threat to American identity. Recent personality research on liberal and conservative differences have found that conservatives are less open to new experience, more contentious, better organized, and more conventional; while liberals are more open to new experience, less contentious, and more creative (Carney, Jost, Gosling, & Potter, 2008).

The previous studies demonstrate that liberals and conservatives: (a) differ on moral concerns, (b) hold exaggerated but well known stereotypes about their political in-group and out-group, (c) display reliably distinct personality traits, and (d) respond differently to existential threat. Therefore, it is reasonable to infer that ‘American’ as a meta-identity means something different to liberals and conservatives. This also raises the possibility that this divisiveness may undermine the meaning of American identity. If Americans are so different from one and other, what does it mean to be an American?
This, in turn, may threaten the ability of American identity to provide a buffer against existential anxiety.

**Current Study**

The current study hypothesized that exposure to partisan views which were radically different from one’s own would undermine the protective value of American identity by reminding individuals of the current political extremes, which are primarily made salient through partisan news media and should be familiar to most participants. Therefore, opposing partisan views were hypothesized to represent an implicit existential threat capable of increasing death-thought accessibility (DTA). TMT has previously demonstrated that increases in DTA can be eliminated by increasing self-esteem, or affirming one’s cultural worldview (Harmon-Jones et al., 1997); however, the current study hypothesized that the extreme nature of political discourse has undercut the efficacy of American identity as a universal source of cultural worldview. Research has shown that affirming one’s cultural identity decreases DTA (Schimel et al., 2007); however, the current study hypothesized that when political divisiveness was made salient, DTA would remain high regardless of whether an individual affirmed their national identity (i.e. cultural worldview) or not.

Additionally, the current study hypothesized a significant difference in liberal and conservative responses to partisan sentiments relating to identification and patriotism measures. MFT has demonstrated that liberals and conservatives rely on different moral foundations in their decision making processes. Liberals have been shown to rely more on individualizing foundations (Harm, Fairness) while conservatives have been shown to rely on all foundations equally and more especially the grouping foundations (Ingroup,
Authority, Purity). Therefore, liberals should identify more with their party affiliation especially under threat conditions, while conservatives should identify equally with their party and America under threat. Differences in identification were also hypothesized to be supported by liberal and conservative differences on measures of Patriotism (Blind/Constructive). Previous research (Schatz et al., 1999) has demonstrated a significant positive relationship between blind patriotism and conservative identification, symbolic behavior preference, and selective information exposure (i.e. greater preference for positive national framing. Additionally, Schatz et al. (1999) demonstrated that constructive patriotism scores were significantly positively associated with political interest, knowledge, and behavior; and unrelated to selective information exposure or a preference for symbolic behaviors. Therefore, under existential threat, conservatives were hypothesized to increase in blind patriotism and decrease in constructive patriotism, while an inverse pattern was predicted for liberals.

To test these hypotheses a 2(Political Identity: Liberal, Conservative) × 3(Partisan Derogation: In-group, Out-group, Neutral) × 2(Affirmation: Affirm America, None) three factorial analysis of variance (ANOVA) was used, in which DTA, relative identification, blind patriotism, and constructive patriotism were the primary dependent measures.
CHAPTER 2

METHOD

Participants

An a priori power analysis indicted that for a 2(Political Identity) × 3(Derogation) 
× 2(Affirmation) ANOVA design with a medium effect size the required sample should 
be 251 participants. Medium effect size was selected based on the aggregate finding from 
the Burke et al. (2013) meta-analysis. A total of 253 participants (147 men and 105 
women) sampled from Amazon’s Mechanical Turk (Mturk) were included for analysis. 
Participants ranged in age from 19 to 77 ($M = 37.94$, $SD = 13.71$). The sample was 
etirely U.S. citizen’s and predominantly Caucasian (83.8%), college educated (51% with 
Bachelor’s degree or higher) and lower middle class (71.5% earning 60K or less; full 
demographics are presented in Table 1).

Table 1.

Participant Characteristics

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Materials and Procedure

All participants were informed that they are completing a study on political attitudes in the United States. The experiment was programmed in Qualtrics and each participant was tested individually on personal computers, gaining access to the materials through a hyperlink address.

First, participants were asked to give their political orientation on a 1 (Very Liberal) to 6 (Very Conservative) Likert scale, as well as their party identification (e.g. Democrat, Republican, Independent, Libertarian). All moderates (n = 166) were barred from answering further questions. Participants then filled out a measure of individual self-esteem (i.e. Rosenberg Self-Esteem; RSE, 1965). All participants then filled out the Collett-Lester Fear of Death Scale (CLFDS; Lester & Abdel-Khalek, 2003) subscales for ‘Own Death’ and ‘Own Dying.’ This served to prime mortality concerns for all participants to determine whether DTA was increased in control groups, exacerbated by threat conditions, and capable of being lessened by affirmation. Items and scaling for the RSE and CLFDS are reproduced in Appendix A and B.

Participants were then randomly assigned to read one of three articles, which ostensibly came from a political blog: a) derogation of liberal, b) derogation of conservative, or c) neutral. Articles are adapted from McGregor et al. (1998). The essay derogating liberals was designed to threaten their worldview, but should reinforce conservatives:

Don’t even get me started. Liberals are the cause of so many problems in this country, it’s not funny. Not only that, but they get in the way of decent Americans who are trying to solve all those problems that they created in the first place. The
bleeding heart stance they take, of trying to help everyone is a joke and incredibly stupid. How can they help the world when they can’t even help themselves?! Do Liberals put any thought into what they believe? I don’t think so. If they did, they would realize that they are ruining the country. Thankfully there are people in power that agree with me who can, and will control the whiny Liberals, and put them in their place. The best place for a Liberal is out of my sight. They make me sick. [And while they occasionally dupe the public into voting for them it comforts me to know that they will never brainwash a majority of the country. After all, the polls support my position which is shared by over half of the country and steadily growing.]

On the other hand the essay derogating conservatives was designed to threaten their worldview, while reinforcing liberals:

Don’t’ even get me started. Conservatives are the cause of so many problems in this country, it’s not funny. Not only that, but they get in the way of decent Americans who are trying to solve all those problems that they created in the first place. The cold-hearted stance they take, of trying to help only themselves is a joke and incredibly stupid. They are too busy thinking of themselves, and don’t care about anyone else. Do Conservatives put any thought into what they believe? I don’t think so. If they did, they would realize that they are ruining the country. Thankfully there are people in power that agree with me who can, and will control the selfish Conservatives, and put them in their place. The best place for a Conservative is out of my sight. They make me sick. [And while they occasionally dupe the public into voting for them it comforts me to know that they
will never brainwash a majority of the country. After all, the polls support my position which is shared by over half of the country and steadily growing.]

The control essay will be a brief description of 3D printing, which should not be threatening for liberals or conservatives:

Scientists are currently working on a variety of technological advancements. One of the most interesting developments in recent years is 3 dimensional printing. Three-dimensional printing uses computer modeling to render 3D images digitally. After the modeling is complete the computer uses a specialized printer to fuse various materials, usually high density plastic powders, with a laser one layer at a time. Each layer can be 1 micron thick, or less than the width of a single human hair. What is particularly astounding is that 3D printing has recently begun to move out of high density plastics and into more complex materials, such as conductive liquid metal. This rapid technological advancement has opened the door to a wide array of interdisciplinary cooperation among usually separate fields. For instance, engineers and neuropsychologists are now able to work together on complex problems such as printing a working model of an individual’s brain in all its anatomical complexity.

Immediately following the essay condition, all participants received the Big Five Personality Inventory (BFI-10; Gosling, Rentfrow, & Swann, 2003). This was used as a brief distraction from political content (Appendix C).

Following this, participants were randomly assigned to either give an affirmation of America, or not. In the American affirmation condition participants were asked to
briefly write what being an America means to them, and overall why it is a good place to live.

Following the American affirmation, all participants were presented with the primary dependent measure assessing death-thought accessibility (Schimel et al., 2007; Hayes et al., 2008; Appendix D). Participants received 20 individually presented timed (6 s presentation) word stems to complete. Six of these are words that can either be completed with a neutral word, or a death related word (e.g. COFF_ _, Coffee/Coffin). This was a novel variation of the traditional DTA measure designed to decrease the ability to think of alternative solutions to the word stems and force participants to go with their gut responses. This measure was used to assess whether threats to one’s political ideology are capable of increasing DTA, whether affirming America as a meta-identity was capable of providing existential security, and whether exposure to rhetoric from the other side which makes the divided nature of American politics salient undermines this security.

Participants then filled out Absolute and Relative identification questions, which are presented in Appendix E (Motyl & Hawkins, n.d) Absolute identification asked each participant to identify with how a) American, b) Democrat, c) Republican, d) Male, e) Female they felt on a 1 (not at all) to 5 (Extremely) Likert scale. Relative identification was comprised of a single item 7-point Likert scale that ranged from identifying more with one’s political party (1) or with the United States (7). This was used to assess whether threats to one’s political identity drive one to self-identify more fervently with one’s party or one’s country.
Participants then completed the Blind and Constructive Patriotism scales presented in Appendix F (BCP; Schatz, Staub, & Lavine, 1999). The BCP scale is 18-items on a 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 6 (Strongly Agree) Likert scale with 12 blind items (e.g. People who do not wholeheartedly support America should live somewhere else) and 6 constructive items (e.g. If you love America, you should notice its problems and work to correct them). The BCP served as a dependent measure to assess an additional hypothesis concerning potential differences in how liberals and conservatives respond to political divisiveness salience.

Participants then filled out general demographics (e.g. age, ethnicity, gender), were thanked for their participation, and debriefed.
CHAPTER 3

RESULTS

Cleaning Procedures

First, all moderates (n = 166) and foreign IP addresses (n = 85) were removed from the raw data set (n = 556). Following this, the data were screened for manipulation checks and participants who failed to recall their article were removed from further analysis (final sample n = 253). Following this, appropriate items were reverse coded and alphas for each were calculated before computing each predictor (see Table 2).

Table 2

Internal Consistency

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<th>Cronbach’s Alpha</th>
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<tr>
<td>Collet-Lester Fear of Death, Death Subscale</td>
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<td>Collet-Lester Fear of Death, Dying Subscale</td>
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<td>Brief Big 5: Agreeableness</td>
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<td>Brief Big 5: Emotional Stability</td>
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<td>Brief Big 5: Openness to Experience</td>
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<td>Constructive Patriotism</td>
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<td>Blind Patriotism</td>
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Primary Analyses

Four 3-way factorial analyses of variance (ANOVA’s) were conducted on each of the primary dependent variables. Each dependent measure (i.e. DTA, Relative ID,
Constructive Patriotism, Blind Patriotism) was submitted to a 2(Political Orientation: Liberal, Conservative)×3(Essay: Conservative, Liberal, Control)×2(Affirm America: Yes, No) ANOVA design with an adjusted alpha of .01.

**Death Thought Accessibility.** The main effect of political orientation for liberals ($M = 1.87, SD = 1.03$) and conservatives ($M = 1.68, SD = .98$) was not statistically or practically significant, $F(1, 241) = 1.73, p = .19, \eta_p^2 = .007$. The main effect of essay for the conservative ($M = 1.80, SD = .97$), liberal ($M = 1.75, SD = 1.08$), and control essays ($M = 1.77, SD = 1.01$) was not statistically or practically significant, $F(2, 241) = .05, p = .96, \eta_p^2 < .001$. The main effect of American affirmation for the affirm ($M = 1.87, SD = 1.06$) and control ($M = 1.70, SD = .97$) conditions was not statistically or practically significant, $F(1, 241) = 1.41, p = .24, \eta_p^2 = .006$.

The interaction between political orientation and essay was not statistically or practically significant, $F(2, 241) = .34, p = .71, \eta_p^2 = .003$. The interaction between political orientation and the affirmation condition was not statistically or practically significant, $F(1, 241) = 1.95, p = .16, \eta_p^2 = .008$. The interaction between the essay condition and the American affirmation condition was not statistically or practically significant, $F(2, 241) = .83, p = .44, \eta_p^2 = .007$. The three-way interaction was similarly not statistically or practically significant, $F(2, 241) = .98, p = .38, \eta_p^2 = .008$.

**Relative identification.** There was a statistical and practically significant main effect of political orientation, $F(1, 239) = 23.02, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .09$, such that Liberals identified more with their political party ($M = 4.19, SD = 1.66$) and Conservatives identified more with America ($M = 5.29, SD = 1.57$; Figure 1). The main effect of essay for conservative ($M = 4.92, SD = 1.69$), liberal ($M = 4.48, SD = 1.82$), and control essays
Figure 1. Mean differences between liberals and conservatives for relative identification with political party (1) and America (7).

(M = 4.66, SD = 1.66), was not statistically significant, F(2, 239) = 1.74, p = .18, ηp² = .01, but did demonstrate a small practical effect. The main effect of American affirmation between the affirm (M = 4.64, SD = 1.71) and control conditions (M = 4.77, SD = 1.73) was not statistically or practically significant, F(1, 239) = .003, p = .95, ηp² < .001.

The interaction between political orientation and the essay condition was not statistically or practically significant, F(2, 239) = .20, p = .82, ηp² = .002. The interaction between political orientation and American affirmation was not statistically or practically significant, F(1, 239) = .18, p = .67, ηp² = .001. The interaction between the essay and
American affirmation conditions was not statistically significant, $F(2, 239) = 1.62, p = .20, \eta_p^2 = .01$, but demonstrated a small practical effect. The three-way interaction between political orientation, essay, and American affirmation was not statistically or practically significant, $F(2, 239) = .42, p = .66, \eta_p^2 = .003$.

**Constructive patriotism.** The main effect of political orientation for liberals ($M = 4.88, SD = .82$) and conservatives ($M = 4.78, SD = .72$) was not statistically or practically significant, $F(1, 240) = .86, p = .36, \eta_p^2 = .004$. The main effect of essay for conservative ($M = 4.82, SD = .81$), liberal ($M = 4.81, SD = .74$), and control essays ($M = 4.85, SD = .74$) was not statistically or practically significant, $F(2, 240) = .02, p = .99, \eta_p^2 < .001$. The main effect of American affirmation between the affirm ($M = 4.85, SD = .81$) and control conditions ($M = 4.80, SD = .74$) was not statistically or practically significant, $F(1, 240) = .13, p = .72, \eta_p^2 = .001$.

The interaction between political orientation and essay condition was not statistically or practically significant, $F(2, 240) = .27, p = .76, \eta_p^2 = .002$. The interaction between political orientation and American affirmation was not statistically significant, $F(1, 240) = 2.51, p = .12, \eta_p^2 = .01$, but demonstrated a small practical effect. The interaction between the essay and American affirmation conditions was not statistically or practically significant, $F(2, 240) = .80, p = .45, \eta_p^2 = .007$. The three-way interaction between political orientation, essay, and American affirmation was not statistically significant, $F(2, 240) = 1.52, p = .22, \eta_p^2 = .01$, but demonstrated a small practical effect.

**Blind patriotism.** There was a significant main effect of political orientation, $F(1, 240) = 183.78, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .44$, such that conservatives were more blindly patriotic ($M = 3.41, SD = .87$) than liberals ($M = 1.98, SD = .78$; Figure 2). The main effect of essay
between the conservative ($M = 2.61, SD = 1.07$), liberal ($M = 2.92, SD = 1.17$), and control essays ($M = 2.59, SD = 1.04$) was not statistically significant, $F(2, 240) = 1.79, p = .17, \eta^2_p = .02$, but demonstrated a small practical effect. The main effect of American affirmation between the affirm ($M = 2.69, SD = 1.13$) and control conditions ($M = 2.70, SD = 1.06$), was not statistically or practically significant, $F(1, 240) = .49, p = .49, \eta^2_p = .002$.

The interaction between the political orientation and essay condition was not statistically or practically significant, $F(2, 240) = 0.73, p = .48, \eta^2_p = .006$. The interaction between the political orientation and the American affirmation conditions was
not statistically or practically significant, $F(1, 240) = 1.22, p = .27, \eta^2_p = .005$). The interaction between the essay and American affirmation conditions was not statistically or practically significant, $F(2, 240) = 0.24, p = .79, \eta^2_p = .002$. The three-way interaction between political orientation, essay, and American affirmation was not statistically or practically significant, $F(2, 240) = .35, p = .71, \eta^2_p = .003$.

**Additional analyses.** As the DTA task was timed the possibility for missed words was examined to make sure there were no differences across groups. However, conservatives ($M = 4.62, SD = 3.74$) missed significantly more words than liberals ($M = 3.58, SD = 2.58; F(1, 241) = 5.72, p = .02, \eta^2_p = .02$) in general; including significantly more missed target (i.e., death) words ($M = 1.01, SD = 1.12$) than liberals ($M = .63, SD = .89; F(1, 241) = 7.56, p = .006, \eta^2_p = .03$). Additionally, conservatives took significantly longer to start each word completion ($M = 1.31, SD = .55$) than liberals ($M = 1.10, SD = .42; F(1, 241) = 11.89, p = .001, \eta^2_p = .05$). A longer start time for conservatives ($M = 1.31, SD = .63$) compared to liberals ($M = 1.11, SD = .54$) was also observed for target words, $F(1, 241) = 8.30, p = .004, \eta^2_p = .03$.
CHAPTER 4
DISCUSSION

Taken as a whole this study fails to support the initial hypothesis that political identifications serve an existential function. DTA was not significantly increased regardless of the threat, and was not significantly decreased if participants were able to affirm America. Indeed, no significant effects of any kind were found on DTA. However, support was found for dispositional differences between liberals and conservatives. As hypothesized, liberals identified more with their political party and conservatives identified more with America than conservatives (or than their party) regardless of threat or affirmation. Additionally, conservatives are more blindly patriotic than liberals regardless of threat or affirmation. While not revelatory, these findings do replicate previous findings (Schatz et al., 1999).

There are certain weaknesses of the current study which need to be addressed. Perhaps the most significant limitation is that our sample only comprised Mturk participants. It is important to note that many studies find no difference between Mturk and lab samples and in some cases find Mturk samples to be superior (i.e. more representative sampling) to in-lab samples (Buhrmester, Kwang, & Gosling, 2011; Casler, Bickel, & Hackett, 2013). However, certain limitations to internet based research are inherent such as the lack of a controlled environment and an increased potential for task inattention. Although many psychological experiments have been replicated with
Mturk samples (Crump, McDonnell, & Gureckis, 2013) psychological processes that rely on deep cognitive activation (Wegner & Smart, 1997) have not been assessed. Because deep activation relies on a delayed time course for TMT it may be that there was not enough distraction between tasks to allow for distal activation. Additionally, the contextual environment of participants taking the study on a home computer surrounded by various creature comforts may have lessened the threat posed by a political other. There may also have been some dispositional differences between liberals and conservatives on task engagement. Conservatives may have been less invested as evidenced by a significantly greater number of missed word completions in the DTA measure compared with liberals including significantly more missed target words than liberals. However, conservatives could also be less adept at timed word completion tasks as evidenced by significantly longer start times for each word.

Recent research on political intolerance has demonstrated that both liberals and conservatives are politically intolerant of those who do not share their political beliefs (Crawford & Pilanski, 2012). Crawford and Pilanski (2012) additionally measured perceived political threat using a single item measure on a 1(not at all threatening to our country) – 7(very threatening to our country) Likert scale and found that perceived political threat fully mediated ideological self-placement (i.e. political orientation) on intolerance. In the current study it could be that the perceived threat from a political other was too weak to produce defensive responses, and thus did not produce intolerant or polarized responses. If the political essays were not viewed as significantly threatening then it makes sense that they would not have any effect on DTA, and compared to the variety of vitriol expressed on internet political blogs these days it seems likely that our
threat prompts are somewhat tame by comparison. It is also possible that participants have become habituated to political arguments and attacks because they have become so common in today’s highly polarized political world. A potentially stronger threat manipulation could involve the use of actual media clips from well-known pundits talking about the inferiority of the opposing side.

Another potential reason for our lack of significant findings could be that our sample was simply not extreme enough. Previous research has found that 27% of Democrats and 36% of Republicans perceive the opposing party as a significant threat to America’s wellbeing (PEW, 2014). It could be that this is the level of extremism needed for politics to serve an existential function. This is partially supported upon examination of only the ‘Very Liberal’ (n = 44) and ‘Very Conservative’ (n = 30) participants in our current sample on DTA, $F(2, 62) = 2.04, p = .14, \eta^2_p = .06)$. While still not statistically significant there is a medium practical effect with liberals trending in the hypothesized direction (Figure 3). Of course this analysis lacks the statistical power needed to draw confident inferences.

Although the current study did not find support for the primary hypothesis there was support for previously documented findings of a relationship between political orientation and relative identification and blind patriotism. Relative identification shifts have previously been shown in response to uncertainty primes (Hohman, Hogg, & Bligh, 2008) demonstrating that liberals identify more strongly with their political party while conservatives identify more with America. However, the current study shows that this may be a stable ideological difference between liberals and conservatives, as identification with political party, or America, was not influenced by threat or affirmation.
Figure 3. Three-way interaction between political orientation, essay, and American affirmation for very liberal and very conservative participants.
conditions. According to Cohen (2003) it makes sense for participants to identify more strongly with their political in-group. One explanation for the difference between liberals and conservatives is that for conservatives their party identity and national identity maybe synonymous with one and other. This interpretation is further supported by conservatives scoring significantly higher on dispositional blind patriotism, which demonstrates that allegiance to America, right or wrong, comes first. Additionally, conservatives’ demonstrating higher blind patriotism replicates and supports previous findings from Schatz et al. (1999).

Future research on political polarization should have measures in place to ensure that the sample of interest is indeed politically extreme and, if possible, that politics serve as a significant source of identity and self-esteem. Researchers utilizing politics as an existential threat should think about testing more intense threat manipulations. As previously mentioned, one suggestion is to employ actual audio-video clips of well-known political pundits who evoke visceral responses from conservatives (e.g. Rachel Maddow) and liberals (e.g. Bill O’Reilly), as this is a more externally well-established partisan threat. Additionally, while the use of Mturk is both cheap and efficient, research which employs cognitively time sensitive measures or existential threats may be better suited to the laboratory environment. In conclusion, this study shows that while liberals and conservatives demonstrate certain dispositional differences the political divide in this country may not be at the level of an existential crisis, yet.
REFERENCES


Motyl & Hawkins


APPENDIX A

Premeasures: Rosenberg Self-Esteem and Collett-Lester Fear of Death Scale

Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale

Instructions

Below is a list of statements dealing with your general feelings about yourself. Please indicate how strongly you agree or disagree with each statement.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1. On the whole, I am satisfied with myself.

2. At times I think I am no good at all.

3. I feel that I have a number of good qualities.

4. I am able to do things as well as most other people.

5. I feel I do not have much to be proud of.

6. I certainly feel useless at times.

7. I feel that I’m a person of worth, at least on an equal plane with others.

8. I wish I could have more respect for myself.

9. All in all, I am inclined to feel that I am a failure.

10. I take a positive attitude toward myself.

Scoring: Items 2, 5, 6, 8, 9 are reverse scored. Scores for all 10-items are summed with above point values for Strongly Agree (4) – Strongly Disagree (1). Higher scores indicate higher self-esteem.
## APPENDIX B

### Collett-Lester Fear of Death Scale

**Instructions**

How disturbed or made anxious are you by the following aspects of death and dying.

Read each item and answer it quickly. Don’t spend too much time thinking about your response. We want your first impression of how you think right now. Circle the number that best represents your feeling.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Your Own Death</th>
<th>Very</th>
<th>Somewhat</th>
<th>Not</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. The total isolation of death</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. The shortness of life</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Missing out on so much after you die</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Dying young</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. How it will feel to be dead</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Never thinking or experience anything again</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. The disintegration of your body after you die</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Your Own Dying</th>
<th>Very</th>
<th>Somewhat</th>
<th>Not</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. The physical degeneration involved</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. The pain involved in dying</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. The intellectual degeneration of old age</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. That your abilities will be limited as you lay dying</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. The uncertainty as to how bravely you will face the process of dying</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Your lack of control over the process of dying</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. The possibility of dying in a hospital away from friends and family</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Scoring:** Each 7-item subscale is summed separately, with higher scores indicating greater fear of death.
APPENDIX C

Big-5: Ten-Item Personality Inventory

Instructions

Here are a number of personality traits that may or may not apply to you. Please write a number next to each statement to indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with that statement. You should rate the extent to which the pair of traits applies to you, even if one characteristic applies more strongly than the other.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Disagree strongly</th>
<th>Disagree moderately</th>
<th>Disagree a little</th>
<th>Neither agree nor disagree</th>
<th>Agree a little</th>
<th>Agree moderately</th>
<th>Agree strongly</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

I see myself as:

1. _____ Extraverted, enthusiastic.
2. _____ Critical, quarrelsome.
3. _____ Dependable, self-disciplined.
4. _____ Anxious, easily upset.
5. _____ Open to new experiences, complex.
6. _____ Reserved, quiet.
7. _____ Sympathetic, warm.
8. _____ Disorganized, careless.
9. _____ Calm, emotionally stable.
10. _____ Conventional, uncreative.

Scoring: Extraversion: 1, 6R; Agreeableness: 2R, 7; Conscientiousness: 3, 8R; Emotional Stability: 4R, 9; Openness to Experience: 5, 10R (“R” indicates revere-scored item). Higher scores indicate greater extent of the five-factors.
APPENDIX D

Death-Thought Accessibility

SAMPLE WORD COMPLETION TASK

We are simply pre-testing this questionnaire for future studies. Please complete the following by filling letters in the blanks to create words. Please fill in the blanks with the first word that comes to mind. Write one letter per blank. Some words may be plural.

Thank you.

1. BUR ___ D
2. PLA ___
3. ___ OK
4. WAT ___
5. DE ___
6. MU ___
7. ___ NG
8. B ___ T LE
9. M ___ J R
10. P ___ TURE
11. FL ___ W R
12. GRA ___
13. K ___ GS
14. CHA ___
15. KI ___ ED
16. CL ___ K
17. TAB ___
18. W ___ DOW
19. SK ___ L
20. TR ___
21. P ___ P R
22. COFF ___
23. ___ O SE
24. POST ___
25. R ___ DI ___

Scoring: All bolded words indicated possible death targets. Sum the number completed out of the possible 6-items for each participant.
APPENDIX E

Absolute and Relative Identification

Absolute Identification

Instructions

Please indicate how much you identify with each of the following:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Not at all</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>Extremely</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Democrats</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Republicans</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Americans</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Males</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Females</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Relative Identification

Do you identify more with your political party (1) or the United States (7)?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Identify with political party</th>
<th>Identify with United States</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX F

Blind and Constructive Patriotism

Instructions

On the following statements please indicate how much you agree or disagree with each.

Please don’t think too much about your response as we are interested in ‘gut level’ reactions.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Disagree strongly (1)</th>
<th>Disagree moderately (2)</th>
<th>Disagree a little (3)</th>
<th>Agree a little (4)</th>
<th>Agree moderately (5)</th>
<th>Agree strongly (6)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

Blind Items:

1. People who do not wholeheartedly support America should live somewhere else.

2. The United States is virtually always right.

3. I would support my country right or wrong.

4. The anti-Vietnam war protesters were un-American.

5. For the most part, people who protest and demonstrate against U.S. policy are good, upstanding, intelligent people. (R)

6. I believe that U.S. policies are almost always the morally correct ones.

7. If another country disagreed with an important United States policy that I knew little about, I would not necessarily support my country’s position. (R)

8. People should not constantly try to change the way things are in America.

9. I support U.S. policies for the very reason that they are the policies of my country.
10. There is too much criticism of the U.S. in the world, and we its citizens should not criticize it.

11. It is un-American to criticize this country.

12. We should have complete freedom of speech even for those who criticize the country. (R)

Constructive Items:

1. People should work hard to move this country in a positive direction.

2. If you love America, you should notice its problems and work to correct them.

3. If I criticize the United States, I do so out of love for my country.

4. I oppose some U.S. policies because I care about my country and want to improve it.

5. I express my love for America by supporting efforts at positive change.

6. My love of country demands that I speak out against popular but potentially destructive policies.

Scoring: All 18-items will be randomly ordered together. Items on each scale will be numerically converted to corresponding number values and summed together. Higher scores will indicate higher Blind and Constructive Patriotism respectively. All “R” items are reverse coded.
APPENDIX G

University of Colorado
Colorado Springs

Institutional Review Board (IRB) for the Protection of Human Subjects

Date: 2/17/2015

IRB Review

IRB PROTOCOL NO.: 15-130
Protocol Title: Personality and Attitudes Relating to Political Preference
Principal Investigator: Alex Darrell
Faculty Advisor if Applicable: Tom Pyszczynski
Application: New Application
Type of Review: Expedited
Risk Level: No more than Minimal Risk
Renewal Review Level (If changed from original approval) if Applicable: N/A No Change
This Protocol involves a Vulnerable Population: N/A (No Vulnerable Population)
Expires: 16 February 2016

*Note, if exempt: If there are no major changes in the research, protocol does not require review on a continuing basis by the IRB. In addition, the protocol may match more than one review category not listed.

Externally funded: ☒ No ☐ Yes
OSP #: 
Sponsor: 

Thank you for submitting your Request for IRB Review. The protocol identified above has been reviewed according to the policies of this institution and the provisions of applicable federal regulations. The review category is noted above, along with the expiration date, if applicable.

Once human participant research has been approved, it is the Principal Investigator’s (PI) responsibility to report any changes in research activity related to the project:

- The PI must provide the IRB with all protocol and consent form amendments and revisions.
- All advertisements recruiting study subjects must also receive prior approval by the IRB.
- The PI must promptly inform the IRB of all unanticipated serious adverse (within 24 hours). All unanticipated adverse events must be reported to the IRB within 1 week (see 45CFR46.103(b)(7)). Failure to comply with these federally mandated responsibilities may result in suspension or termination of the project.
- Renew study with the IRB prior to expiration.
- Notify the IRB when the study is complete.

If you have any questions, please contact Research Compliance Specialist in the Office of Sponsored Programs at 719-255-3903 or irb@uccs.edu

Thank you for your concern about human subject protection issues, and good luck with your research.

Sincerely yours,

Michele Okun, PhD
IRB Reviewer

www.uccs.edu/~rench/irb.html
Version 2/12/13

1420 Austin Bluffs Parkway, Colorado Springs, CO 80918
719-255-3221 phone 719-255-3706 fax