The complicated but solvable threat-politics relationship

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Forum

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Popular models on the threat–politics association suggest that threats cause right-wing political preferences. Failed replications, crossnational variation, and examples of threats causing left-wing preferences suggest this relationship is more complicated. We introduce a model of the reciprocal threat–politics relationship that reconciles prior conflicting findings and raises new questions.

Famine, death, pestilence, and war: the world is threatening. Work on the psychology of **political preferences** (see Glossary) – broadly conceived as issue attitudes, political values, and ideological and partisan identities – suggests people's political preferences are rooted in their perceptions and feelings that something aversive is going to happen [1]. The idea is that people who are sensitive to **threats** show stronger psychophysiological and self-reported reactions to threats. They are more supportive of **right-wing political preferences** than **left-wing political preferences** because right-wing preferences address feelings of threat by providing a sense of certainty and encouraging threat-reducing policy responses (e.g., stiffer criminal penalties). Studies testing this idea use a variety of methods, including the experience of real-life events, experimentally inducing threats in a laboratory setting, and surveys assessing people's perceptions of threat. This work, however, does not tell the whole story.

Complicating the narrative

Key work underpinning the threat–politics association is not replicable. Psychophysiological indicators of threat have been used to assess a broad physiologically threat sensitivity trait [1]. However, independent laboratories across countries have found associations near zero between threat psychophysiology and right-wing political preferences [2,3]. Many self-reported associations between threat and right-wing political preferences have focused on the threat of terrorism (Box 1), which tends to be associated with right-wing preferences. This replicates [4]. However, for other self-reported threats (e.g., poverty and police violence), the relationship between threat and right-wing preferences reversed or did not emerge in a multinational study [4].

The real-life experience of threat, such as the experience of a terrorist attack or a pandemic, seems to have different effects on political preferences than the dominant perspective would suggest. Self-reported terrorism threat is associated with conservatism [4], whereas exposure to the 2017 Manchester Arena attack decreased support for Conservative Prime Minister Theresa May [5]. Exposure to coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) increased support for mainstream candidates in the USA and France [6], showing that the pandemic reduced support for both more extreme left-wing and right-wing candidates.

These empirical complications do not foreclose the study of threat's association with political preferences, but rather raise (many) questions.

A bidirectional threat–politics model

Older work (for an overview, see [1]) has suggested that right-wing political preferences are effective at addressing threats. We instead want to highlight the idea that there is no inherent link between threat and right-wing preferences. Threat is contextual [7]. Different political preferences are better suited for addressing different

threats [8,9] and some threats may not be addressed by political preferences at all (e.g., perhaps **personal threats** [10]). People who are threatened by a lack of healthcare may turn to leftist beliefs because people think they are suited for addressing the healthcare threat [8]. People who are sensitive to the experience of disgust support progressive policies (i.e., increase food safety spending) when the issue is framed as addressing the threat [9]. People who are threatened by COVID-19 may turn to mainstream candidates because people think they are better suited for addressing unknown pandemic effects [6]. And people who are threatened by terrorism may turn away from a conservative female leader because, as Holman and colleagues [5] suggest, sexist people do not see female leaders as addressing the threat.

The relatively simple idea that people adopt political preferences that they perceive to address the threat can lead to deceptively complicated patterns of results. This is because there are a variety of different types of threat (e.g., collective, personal, etc.) and different dimensions of political preferences (e.g., economic, cultural, security, partisanship, etc.). For example, whereas

right-wing preferences may be seen to help address terrorist threats in some situations, they may not be seen to help address threats from the police [cf. 4].

The notion that people adopt political preferences that are perceived to address the threat also helps explain why the threat–politics association varies crossnationally. This is for two reasons. First, what political preference is seen as addressing what threat will vary depending on the political and cultural climate in a country. Second, when threatened people search for information related to the cause of the threat [11], the content of the information they find will differ across countries and cause heterogeneity in the threat–politics relationship. These factors may produce the high degree of heterogeneity of the threat–politics relationship observed across countries [4].

Although threats can shape people's political preferences, their political preferences can also cause people to see issues and events as threatening and stressful. This may be because people search for information and express threats to justify issue preferences (e.g., justifying large police budgets with the threat of crime) and threats help people establish their credentials in political groups (expressing threats from immigrants to signal loyalty to radical right-wing parties). Bidirectional relationships between perceived threat and political preferences have been found in some

panel studies [12], but the precise mechanisms have not been considered.

A bidirectional threat–politics association may create a self-perpetuating spiral of perceptions of threat to politics to threat. The precise form this takes will depend on the type of threat and people's perception that a political preference can help address the threat. The model we sketched in Figure 1 leaves open many questions, including the role of precise mechanisms, possible interventions, and optimal study design.

Moving forward

Threats can be a motivating force for good (e.g., action redressing inequalities), but threats can also be mobilized to oppress. Testing when and how different mechanisms account for the threat–politics association across contexts is fundamental for future work because knowledge of these mechanisms could help develop interventions by politicians, activists, and community groups on the threat–politics link. These might be psychologically based interventions to minimize feelings of threat (e.g., emotional regulation strategies) or associate threats with different political preferences. However, structurally based interventions that target threat at its source, or a political culture that does not evoke threat as a core political strategy might be equally, if not more, effective. Regardless of the answer, intervention architects will need to consider if and how their work

can be used for potentially prodemocratic but also antidemocratic purposes.

Our model does not make distinctions between different types of threat. This is because we assume the key factor is if people see a political preference as addressing a threat. That is, we do not assume that there is anything intrinsic to the type of threat that connects it with political preferences. In threat–politics research, some scholars suggest all threats operate similarly [1], whereas others make increasingly fine-grained distinctions between threats (e.g., personal versus collective, [10]; violence, poverty, police, and surveillance threats [4]). This is not currently a factor in our model. Onraet and colleagues [10] have proposed a distinction between personal threats (e.g., internal to the person, stress, and anxiety) that are relatively disconnected from political preferences compared with **collective threats** (e.g., external to the person, threatening outgroups, and terrorism) that are associated with political preferences. From our perspective, the key question is whether a person perceives a political preference as addressing a particular threat. This may fall along personal and collective threat dimensions but may also vary more idiosyncratically from person to person. Such idiosyncratic variation would not be captured using current methods.

Our model also does not address why there is no direct link between physiological threat and political preferences [2,3], despite those who have claimed otherwise [1]. We see three largely untested possibilities for why physiological threat does not have a direct effect on political preferences. First, the more reflective measures of threat may correlate with self-reported measures of political preferences, while the more autonomous physiological responses correlate with other, more automatic, measures of political preferences [13]. Second, physiological and self-reported responses might interact with each other. People
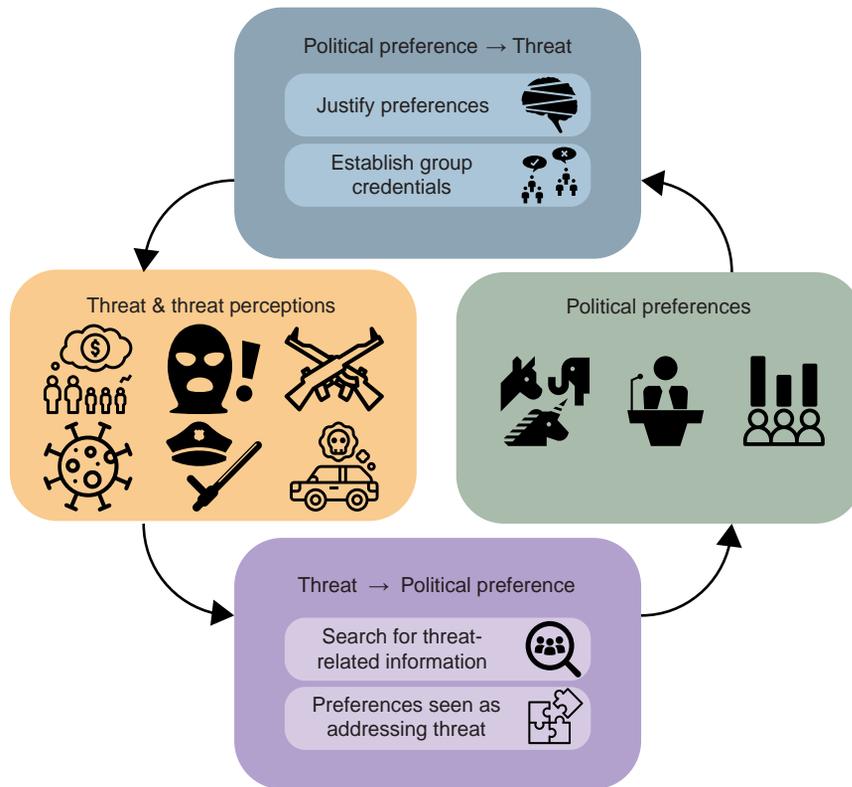
Figure 1. The reinforcing spiral between threats and political preferences. Threats and threat perceptions cause political preferences if preferences are seen as addressing the threat and because of the search for threat-related information. Political preferences cause threat perceptions because the threats help justify preferences and establish group credentials. Icons for threats and threat perceptions represent a range of possible threats, including, but not limited to, crime, poverty, war, disease, environmental degradation, and police violence. Icons for political preferences represent a range of political preferences, including party identification, candidate support, and issue attitudes.

who have a strong physiological threat response and are aware of the threat might be the people who especially connect the threat to political preferences (for a related argument, see [2]). Third, physiological responses to threats might have different meanings for different people. As Tsakiris *et al.* [14] suggest, physiological responses could become connected to political preferences once politicians (or news media, peers, etc.) provide meaning to the physiological response by labeling it as threat.

A new era of threat–politics research will require an integrative approach. Triangulating between cross-sectional surveys [4,9], panel studies [12], laboratory studies [2,3], and natural [5] and randomized experiments [8,9], as well as other methods (e.g., experiencing sampling, in-depth interviews) will allow researchers to estimate the threat–politics association and embed that knowledge in people's context. Regardless of the methodological approaches, research should focus on a diverse range of threats across a variety of political and group contexts (Box 1) [3,4]. Moreover, to improve the transparency and replicability of the literature on the threat–politics link, we hope to see more well-powered and preregistered studies.

The association between threat and political preferences is complex, but once we embrace the complexity, we believe that it is a solvable puzzle.

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