

## The Influence of Psychological Security Maintenance on Political Decision Making

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### Summary and Keywords

People are strongly motivated to maintain psychological security, or equanimity, which causes them to process and act on information in ways that are favorable to protecting against anxiety (i.e., psychological “defense”). People rely on at least three interlocking mechanisms to maintain security—investment in social relationships, self-esteem, and meaningful worldviews—and these mechanisms perfuse nearly every aspect of life. By consequence, people’s political beliefs, attitudes, and leadership preferences reflect motivated efforts to maintain security. Research derived from terror management theory and related theories of security maintenance shows that security needs influence political decision making in three major ways. First, they amplify people’s affinity for political stances that affirm their preexisting worldviews and bolster their sense of belongingness, affiliation, and esteem. Second, security needs tend to draw people toward conservative viewpoints; however, a more potent consequence might be to harden or polarize existing political stances. Finally, security needs cause attraction to charismatic and powerful political personalities (i.e., politicians). Although the theoretical basis for these conclusions is strong, and there is research to support them, it remains challenging to apply this analysis to specific persons, situations, and political issues because it is not always clear which security-relevant facets within complex circumstances will be most salient or influential. Nevertheless, a security-based analysis of political decision making has impressive explanatory potential and helps observers to understand polarization and “tribal” tendencies in politics, among other things.

Keywords: political psychology, psychological security, terror management, worldview defense, conservative shift, political decision making

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Aristotle’s famous assertion that people are political animals rings true in more ways than one. It highlights the centrality of politics to human nature, but it also implies that humans’ political proclivity is fundamentally animalistic.

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That these things would be true does seem “natural”: politics is about taking care of the needs of a population, and given that our ancestors were an abjectly vulnerable species, tribal politics would have been much more than a trivial pastime. Indeed, the cooperative (and sometimes combative) activity of seeing to the protection and sustenance of tribe members could be viewed as central to the adaptations that allowed humans to survive across epochs.

It follows that the psychology of political decision making is predicated on and serves the purpose of satisfying safety and security needs (Maslow, 1943). In turn, given that a sense of security is a psychological end state that people are motivated to maintain as an indicator of safety (Bowlby, 1969), it should also be central to people’s political inclinations.

Most people would like to think that their political views are entirely reasonable and fact-based. And while people do *use* facts and reason to make judgments about social policy, which candidate will make a more effective leader, and so on, psychology research makes clear that political bias directs judgment and decision-making at least as much as the other way around (Kunda, 1990). In other words, people come to their political positions partly because those positions serve psychological functions, and then they spin their gears trying to justify the positions. Believing that cutting corporate taxes is the best way to stimulate the economy, for example, may be appealing as much for its consistency with an individualistic worldview as it is for its consistency with empirically validated economic principles.

A casual survey of political psychology research reveals a myriad of relevant motivational processes, but, in line with politics’ ancestral imperatives to assure safety and security, one of the more salient themes uniting several lines of research is the maintenance of *psychological security*. That is, political thought and activity revolves to a large extent around individuals’ efforts to maintain a sense of calm equilibrium; of freedom from anxiety, fear, or vulnerability to a variety of negative life outcomes. Of course, this can be seen as, and sometimes is, perfectly logical—solving the basic problems of protection and provision in a tumultuous world—but the link between political attitudes and actual outcomes can be tenuous at best; instead, there is an internal psychological logic regarding personal security maintenance that seems to govern people’s political decisions. In other words, those things that make people feel secure do not always have much to do with literal safety.

The present article provides an overview of threat-compensation (i.e., security maintenance)<sup>1</sup> theories that are well suited to an analysis of the influence of psychological security operations on political decision making. Next, it reviews a cross-section of research on the influence of psychological security motives on political beliefs and attitudes. The review focuses on three threads: (a) the appeal of political views to individuals’ worldviews and cultural affiliations, (b) the possibility of ideological asymmetries in the role of psychological security maintenance (e.g., a so-called “conservative shift” phenomenon), and (c) how psychological threat makes people susceptible to the allure of charismatic po-

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litical leaders. Finally, it considers limitations of the relevant research and potential future directions.

## Security Maintenance Theories and Research

One of the most influential large-scale theories to emerge in social psychology during the modern era is terror management theory (TMT; e.g., Solomon, Greenberg, & Pyszczynski, 1991), which serves as an apt starting point for a security-based analysis of political decision making. (The late anthropologist Ernest Becker, on whose work the theory is based, delivers trenchant insights into how existential insecurities foster worship of strong leaders and demagogues, in his book *The Denial of Death* [1973].) Following psychodynamic theories before it (dating at least back to Freud), TMT emphasizes defense against anxiety as a major mode of psychological operations that can help explain a wide range of phenomena that characterize people and set them apart from other animals. According to TMT, many such phenomena can be understood specifically as resulting from efforts to bolster individuals' self-esteem or beliefs about the world (i.e., worldviews) in order to prevent death anxiety.

TMT comes to this view in part from attempting to explain something social psychologists have long probed: the causes of inter-group conflict. From TMT's perspective, one of social groups' vital functions is to consensually validate specific culturally shared beliefs about the nature of the world, humans' role within it, ethical standards, the supernatural, and so on. These beliefs typically depict existence as ultimately meaningful and, often, enduring—in the literal sense of transitioning toward some form of afterlife. Such a depiction counteracts the natural sense of chaos, helplessness, and despair that might otherwise arise in people who, aware of their inevitable mortality and evolutionarily predisposed to fear it, would be prone to chronic, debilitating anxiety (or even terror) if unmoored from a set of assuaging beliefs. According to TMT, worldviews allow people to strike an optimal emotional balance, not by eliminating existential fear and anxiety (which would be maladaptive), but by allowing for the *management* of these unsettling emotions. But worldviews are only effective if they are firmly believed, and belief is easily undermined by the presence of contradictory worldviews, as held, for example, by members of other social groups. Hence, out-groups and their members threaten the psychological safety net provided by individuals' own culturally established standards, values, and beliefs, which creates enmity that can only be resolved by derogating, dismissing, or—in extreme cases—destroying the “opposition.” In sum, TMT explains inter-group conflict as a logical and necessary outcome of adherence to cultural worldviews that serve the essential psychological function of mitigating existential anxiety. Groups of people compete with adversarial fervor against other groups of people in order to win an ideological struggle in which they are deeply emotionally invested.

In a related vein, many diverse psychological processes appear oriented toward maintaining a global sense of self-worth, or self-esteem (e.g., Pyszczynski et al., 2004). People's desire to be liked or loved by others, to achieve socially valued goals and embody socially

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valued characteristics, and to process information in ways that are favorable to their own self-concept can all be understood (at least in principle) in light of an overarching self-esteem motive (Hart, 2014B; Tesser, 2000). As with cultural worldviews, TMT explains the “need” for self-esteem as a matter of defense against death anxiety—in part because of a connection between self-esteem and worldviews. Specifically, TMT posits that self-esteem serves as an indicator of the extent to which one is living up to the prescribed standards and values of the worldview, hence “qualifying” a person for immortality. This can be literal, as in the case of a practicing Christian who adheres to religious doctrine to earn a spot in heaven. But it can also be symbolic: people who contribute to society their creative products, offspring, social relationships, accomplishments, or other enduring legacy items “feel good about” themselves; according to TMT, this good self-feeling reflects a sense that they will live on in some form—at least in the minds of others—after they are physically dead. In this way, self-esteem is another psychological antidote to death anxiety.

In short, TMT explains two ubiquitous social psychological phenomena—inter-group conflict and the need for self-esteem—as stemming from the overarching need to manage the potential for death anxiety. Put another way, the need for psychological security (created by awareness of and aversion to mortality) sets in motion an array of goal striving that in turn explains many human activities, including the topic of the present volume, politics. Without these defenses, TMT suggests, people would be literally unable to function in adaptive ways because they would be beset by panic.

As to empirical evidence, readers may consult Solomon, Greenberg, and Pyszczynski (2015) for a relatively comprehensive presentation of research based on TMT. In general, the research supports the *mortality salience hypothesis*, that thoughts of mortality cause people to defend their worldviews and self-esteem; and the *anxiety buffer hypothesis*, that bolstered worldviews and self-esteem buffer against death anxiety. Worldview and self-esteem defenses manifest in a variety of ways, including inter-group biases (e.g., stereotyping or discriminating against out-group members while increasing the valuation of in-group members), self-serving biases (e.g., attributing failures to external circumstances while attributing successes to oneself), goal striving (e.g., trying to enhance one’s social status or accomplishments), and general strengthening of anxiety-buffering attitudes (e.g., affirming or trying to confirm one’s preexisting values, or construing events in optimistic ways).

## Fluid Compensation and the “Security System”

In the decades after TMT was introduced, many psychologists’ conceptions of security maintenance broadened (see Hart, 2014B, for an overview; see also Jonas et al., 2014). In particular, by the early 21st century, many theorists concluded that death anxiety is but one of an array of semantically linked but conceptually distinct psychological threats that cause insecurity and that the modes of defending against this insecurity go beyond shoring up self-esteem and worldviews.

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Specifically, research suggests that people are made to feel insecure (or secure) for existential/epistemic, relational (i.e., interpersonal), and self-esteem-related reasons, among others. Existential and epistemic insecurities include not only those surrounding death anxiety but also anxiety about the meaning of life (roughly encompassing the worldview construct), the extent to which one can exert control over one's life, and having a clear sense of personal identity (Koole, Greenberg, & Pyszczynski, 2006). Relational insecurities come from concerns about being accepted or loved by others. And self-esteem insecurities relate to concerns about being a worthy person. According to this broadened view of psychological threats, people are susceptible to feeling insecure when they ponder their own health and well-being; life's meaning; the extent of their personal agency; their own personal characteristics; their affiliation to particular groups; the quality of their close relationships; and their reputation, abilities, and social status. In particular, negative appraisals in any of these domains are likely to create at least a temporary sense of insecurity or anxiety, if not outright fear, anger, sadness, and other negative emotions. By contrast, positive appraisals are likely to create a sense of security and well-being—facilitating goal- and growth-oriented as opposed to defensive activity.

One of the more interesting nuances of a broadened theory of psychological security maintenance is the notion that the various sources of security and insecurity are linked not only by virtue of their ability to affect people's subjective sense of security, but also by their deep ontological structure. For example, determining that life is ultimately meaningless also suggests that one's relationships and self are without value. Judging one's close relationships to be failing has negative implications for the meaning (and especially the perceived goodness) of life, and one's sense of agency. And judging oneself to be a failure (or failing) implies, again, that life is neither good nor fair, and that one is not the kind of person who deserves or is likely to receive love and affection. Meanwhile, when one domain of security is bolstered, it has salutary implications for the other domains.

An explanation of the developmental and functional origins of these deep interrelationships goes beyond the scope of this article (but see Hart, 2014B, 2015; Hart, Shaver, & Goldenberg, 2005, for more details). Suffice it to say that given an overarching need for security, events in practically any important area of life are immediately relevant to other areas. More to the point, there is a degree of interchangeability, overflow, or *fluid compensation* that characterizes the relationships between existential/epistemic, relational, and self-esteem processes. Some refer to this dynamic network of interrelations as the *security system* (Hart et al., 2005, although others have slightly different interpretations; see Jonas et al., 2014). The system's overarching goal is security maintenance, and it activates and deactivates different elements or mechanisms within the system as necessary and appropriate to respond to ongoing events and concerns.

Research supports this conceptualization. When people ponder the end of a romantic relationship or are made to feel ostracized (i.e., they experience insecurity from a relational threat), they take steps to elevate their self-esteem (Hart et al., 2005), defend their worldview (Hart et al., 2005; McGregor, Nail, Marigold, & Kang, 2005), and become temporarily more inclined toward religiosity (Aydin, Fischer, & Frey, 2010), including reporting a

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closer relationship to God (Laurin, Schumann, & Holmes, 2014). Self-esteem threats activate desire for commitment in close relationships (Hart et al., 2005) as well as discrimination against out-group members, a form of worldview defense (Fein & Spencer, 1997). And various kinds of worldview threats activate both relational and self-esteem defenses; examples include the finding that cognitive dissonance increases people's motivation to view themselves positively (Tesser, 2000) and the finding that activating the concept of meaninglessness leads people to defend themselves by reporting higher self-esteem and sense of belonging (Van Tongeren & Green, 2010).

Conversely, when security is temporarily enhanced or chronically elevated as a result of a person's stable psychological resources (e.g., secure attachment, high self-esteem, optimism, religiosity), defensive inclinations are mitigated. This can explain myriad findings, including that interpersonal touch or dispositional attachment security reduces existential concerns (Koole, Tjebk A Sin, & Schneider, 2014; Mikulincer, Florian, & Hirschberger, 2003); thinking about a supportive and loving relationship reduces prejudice and discrimination (Saleem et al., 2015); feeling closer to God compensates for romantic relationship fears (Laurin et al., 2014) and reduces fear and depression at the end of life (Edmondson, Park, Chaudoir, & Wortmann, 2008); the feeling of belonging is associated with higher self-regard (Reitz, Motti-Stefanidi, & Asendorpf, 2016) and increases the perceived meaning of life (Lambert et al., 2013); and affirming cherished values inhibits self-esteem defense and cognitive dissonance reduction (Tesser & Cornell, 1991). In general, security is experienced as energizing and increases people's growth- and exploration-orientation (Luke, Sedikides, & Carnelley, 2012), which is incompatible with defensiveness.

Additional examples abound, and there are more than a few nuances omitted here.<sup>2</sup> But the general picture in the threat-defense literature supports the conclusions that (a) people become insecure from a broad range and variety of threatening experiences, and (b) they defend themselves using a correspondingly varied range of tactics.

## **(In)security in Political Decision Making**

The relevance of all this to the psychology of political decision making is that politics is both a potential source of psychological insecurity and a mode of defense (i.e., a source of security). Based on the relevant theory and research, one would expect that people experience threats to their sense of belonging, self-esteem, or belief in a particular worldview whenever their political stances are challenged—for example, because someone disagrees with their political views, attacks a favored political candidate, or because their favored candidate or political party experiences electoral losses. Likewise, people should become more invested in their political ideologies when they experience psychological threat in any important domain, including their close relationships, their self-esteem, and their worldviews (not to mention intimations of their own mortality). A cross-sectional review of research demonstrating these and related processes reveals that the bulk of the literature can be organized into three strands: (a) worldview validation and group affilia-

tion, (b) conservative shift and political extremism, and (c) the appeal of charismatic leaders.<sup>3</sup>

## Worldview Validation and Group Affiliation

The present article treats politics-as-worldview-defense as a heterogeneous category, comprising (among other things) any efforts to affirm or reinforce beliefs that are important either because their content is explicitly soothing or because they provide security by connection or extension to other beliefs or affiliations. From a fluid compensation perspective, in-group affiliation—of which political partisanship certainly counts as an example—serves security needs via social validation of one's worldview, but it also likely satisfies belongingness needs, meaning that it can influence relational and self-esteem motives.

As with worldview defense more generally, politically relevant beliefs are likely to vary based on individual factors including demographics, personality, and one's social milieu, and this variance may also reflect differences in what people find threatening versus soothing. Libertarian ideology may offer a sense of security to individuals whose security concerns revolve around personal freedom, but it might cause feelings of insecurity among individuals for whom belongingness and community are more important. Feminist ideology might augment security for an educated woman but undermine it for a working-class man.

However, people come to their political worldviews in many ways (e.g., it could be a simple matter of adopting the beliefs of one's parents or peers; Jennings, Stoker, & Bowers, 2009), so what is probably most important in terms of security maintenance is affirmation of one's preexisting worldviews, more or less regardless of their content or implications (i.e., it is comforting simply to feel reassured that one's sense of the world is valid; Heine, Proulx, & Vohs, 2006). One concrete example of this process in the political realm, then, is when a person responds proactively or reactively to psychological threats by aligning with a party, candidate, or policy that provides security by affirming the person's preexisting worldviews. This is likely a major reason why political messages so often contain patriotic or nationalistic themes, which appeal to nearly everybody: One of the first and most-replicated TMT findings is the effect of mortality salience on evaluations of pro- and anti-American statements; American college students first threatened by reminders of their mortality subsequently expressed markedly more bias in favor of pro-American sentiments than Americans who have not been so threatened (Greenberg et al., 1994; see Burke, Martens, & Faucher, 2010, for a review). A similar phenomenon applies for criminal justice policies that relate to people's moral beliefs; one common finding is that people react to psychological threat by recommending harsher penalties to moral transgressors, such as a prostitute (Proulx & Heine, 2008; Proulx, Heine, & Vohs, 2010; Rosenblatt et al., 1989).

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Patriotism and upholding the rule of law are relatively uncontroversial, however (at least in their banal form; at the extremes they are prioritized differently depending on one's political orientation). Religious sentiments, by contrast, begin to divide the electorate, sometimes sharply. Whereas mortality salience and other psychological threats have been shown to generally increase religiosity and the appeal of religious concepts (e.g., Norenzayan & Hansen, 2006), research also shows that psychological threat exacerbates preference for individuals who share one's own religious background compared to individuals who do not (e.g., Christians versus Jews; Greenberg et al., 1990). Therefore, it seems likely that political issues with religious implications will be more persuasive to religiously affiliated constituents who are operating under higher situational or dispositional insecurity.

Here we begin to see how psychological security concerns are relevant to political stances on social issues. The permissibility of same-sex marriage and abortion, for example, are hot-button issues that divide some religious constituencies from their more secular counterparts. If religion is a paramount security-providing worldview, then applying its tenets in the arena of public policy is ripe territory for impassioned worldview defense.

Along similar lines, foreign policy, immigration, and some criminal justice issues play into people's moral values and priorities. In one study of American college students, mortality salience increased conservative students' support for extreme military action (e.g., preemptive strikes, use of nuclear weapons) against adversaries including Iran and North Korea, but the effect was not observed among liberals (Pyszczynski et al., 2006). Presumably, this is because an aggressive military policy is consistent with a conservative worldview, but not a liberal one (it may also be due to conservatives' greater sensitivity to threat; see Jost, Glaser, Kruglanski, & Sulloway, 2003). In another study, individuals high in authoritarianism (which is linked with political conservatism) who were in favor of capital punishment responded to mortality salience with greater interest in reading pro-capital punishment opinions while eschewing anti-capital punishment opinions, which in turn led to entrenchment of their original attitudes (Lavine, Lodge, & Freitas, 2005). No such effect occurred among individuals low in authoritarianism.<sup>4</sup>

More broadly, any category or group with which some people are affiliated and others are not is likely to spawn political clashes; namely, the ubiquitous and oft-maligned "identity politics." Put simply, people are prone to hewing closely to their salient group affiliations—including whatever values or policy issues pertain to those groups—as an antidote to insecurity. This is most obviously relevant to political orientation, explaining "tribal" behavior at that level, but it should also extend to the more granular (though sometimes overlapping) categories of race, gender, sexuality, union membership, disability, social class, and geography. It may help explain, for example, negative attitudes toward immigrants (e.g., Greenberg et al., 1994).

The scope of these findings' implications cannot be overstated. If any belief or group affiliation is susceptible to calcifying in defensive response to psychological threat and insecurity, then virtually all politics can be understood at least partly in this light. Of course,



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some political issues and messages are likely to resonate more with some kinds of people than others, regardless of whether they are ideologically relevant. In fact, this observation has led to a spirited debate in the world of political psychology about whether there is an ideological asymmetry in the relevance of security maintenance to political decision making.

## **Conservative Shift and Political Extremism**

On one side of the debate are researchers who argue that that security concerns are more prominent among political conservatives, and in fact are the basis of conservative ideology (Jost et al., 2003). According to this view, political conservatism reflects enhanced existential and epistemic anxieties and is, compared to liberalism, aptly designed to assuage them. The idea is that the normative defensive response to psychological threat and insecurity is directed toward cognitive stances that promote a feeling of security: desire for cognitive closure (e.g., intolerance of uncertainty and ambiguity), to uphold the status quo (e.g., Jost, Banaji, & Nosek, 2004), to adhere to religious principles, and to promote one's in-group over other groups (i.e., by becoming more prejudiced, xenophobic, or discriminatory), all of which are more characteristic of political conservatism. It is not controversial that several of these tendencies more closely resemble conservative political ideology compared to liberal political ideology—empirical evidence supports the putative relationship between them. Political conservatism has been associated not only with dogmatism, intolerance of uncertainty, resistance to change, system justification, and inter-group bias (Jost et al., 2003), but also with more direct indicators of psychological insecurity such as death anxiety and perception of a dangerous world (e.g., Hennes, Nam, Stern, & Jost, 2012; Jost et al., 2003), disgust sensitivity and fear of contamination (Terrizzi, Shook, & McDaniel, 2013), and a bias toward believing threatening information (Fessler, Pisor, & Holbrook, 2017). Some of the evidence even supports the complete dynamic process by which distal threats (e.g., death anxiety, uncertainty aversion, and dangerous-world perceptions) lead to specific beliefs that in turn result in allegiance to generally conservative affiliations and causes.

Moreover, some studies provide experimental evidence of a normative (i.e., uniform) shift toward conservatism in response to psychological threat. For example, the effect of mortality salience on punishment of moral transgressors, stereotyping (Schimel et al., 1999), inter-group bias, and endorsement of strong military responses (Hirschberger, Pyszczynski, & Ein-Dor, 2009; Weise et al., 2008) could be construed as reflecting a shift toward conservative policy stances in response to psychological threat. Similarly, mortality salience was found in several studies to increase both conservative and liberal participants' liking of conservative U.S. president George W. Bush (e.g., Landau et al., 2004), and an international Ebola threat apparently led voters to prefer Republican candidates in the 2014 federal elections (Beall, Hofer, & Schaller, 2016).

In a related vein, some research suggests that security is associated with more liberal inclinations. For example, studies have found that relationship security stopped people

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from supporting, after being reminded of their own mortality, extreme military responses to terrorism (Weise et al., 2008) or the war in Iraq (Gillath & Hart, 2010). (Pacifism, even in the face of threat, is, of course, associated with a liberal orientation.) Priming people with relationship security has also been found to reduce inter-group bias (Mikulincer & Florian, 2000). Meanwhile, dispositional attachment security is inversely related to right-wing authoritarianism and endorsement of social inequality (Weber & Federico, 2007).

However, this picture of political conservatives as *particularly* frightened and defensive creatures within a generally frightened and defensive species, though not necessarily disparaging, is not exactly flattering, leading, perhaps, to questions about its objectivity. More importantly, it has been criticized on conceptual and empirical grounds (e.g., Greenberg & Jonas, 2003). For one thing, ideological rigidity, support for the status quo, tolerance of inequality, and inter-group bias could be cited as features of the political *left* within certain historical and cultural contexts (Greenberg & Jonas, 2003; van Prooijen, Krouwel, Boiten, & Eendebak, 2015).

Regardless of whether conservative ideology is especially well-suited to mitigating psychological insecurity, even if one accepts the conservative-shift findings as far as they go in a statistical sense (see Jost, 2017, for the latest and largest analysis), an important caveat lies in remembering that worldview defense is a heterogeneous phenomenon. True, psychological threat may cause a conservative shift in the sense of increasing the need for order structure, closure, and the like, but it also causes, quite prominently, the defense of preexisting beliefs and values. Hence, the more momentous outcome emerging from security-maintenance processes might be one of political extremism and a susceptibility to confirmation bias (Greenberg & Jonas, 2003). In other words, one should not expect a uniform or inevitable conservative shift among individuals who are under situational or dispositional threat, but also (or instead) a move toward extremity—that is, polarization.

Indeed, most studies suggest that psychological threats such as mortality salience and uncertainty tend to harden or exacerbate people's existing political attitudes (e.g., Castano et al., 2011, McGregor, Zanna, Holmes, & Spencer, 2001). One large-scale study examining the relation between political orientation and derogation of out-groups found that *both* liberals and conservatives (i.e., political extremists) derogated out-groups more so than moderates, and this was due to greater economic anxiety and political socioeconomic fear. Finally, based on a meta-analysis of studies examining the effect of mortality salience on political attitudes, Burke, Kosloff, and Landau (2013) concluded that "conservative shifting often gives way to worldview defense when additional components of a participant's worldview are rendered salient in some manner" (p. 196).

In sum, a fair reading of the relevant literature leads to the conclusion that security maintenance processes engender both conservative-shift and worldview-defense responses. In some cases, psychological insecurity nudges people toward more conservative attitudes and policy and candidate endorsements (and that security has the opposite effect). But the more likely and consequential outcome of psychological security operations is for peo-

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ple to become more extreme or more calcified in their preexisting political beliefs, attitudes, and affiliations. One implication of this is that ambient threats or fear-based political messages are likely to “rally the base” and turn out voters on the basis of salient issues that are important sources of psychological security; otherwise, threat is likely to benefit conservative issues and politicians, all else being equal. Ultimately, much more research will be necessary to address the nuance in this area with appropriate depth and rigor.

## The Appeal of Charismatic Leaders

Another implication of the conservative-shift and worldview-defense/extremism literature is that policies and politicians that increase people’s sense of control, certainty, stability, and the like should be particularly appealing during times of threat and among people who are feeling insecure (who also may be more likely to be conservative). It turns out that a particular kind of political personality plays directly into these dynamics, namely, the charismatic leader (or candidate). TMT’s theoretical muse Ernest Becker (1973) devotes a whole chapter at the crux of *The Denial of Death* to “The Spell Cast by Persons”—the central point of which is made most succinctly in a line where Becker paraphrases Freud: “It is not so much that man is a herd animal . . . but that he is a horde animal led by a chief” (p. 132).

The point is that whereas herd animals gain their safety, and hence security, from numbers, people (and likely other primates) derive theirs also from a dominant leader, an “alpha” figure who serves as a strong, confident, protective figure. Becker argued that people naturally transfer their childhood attachment to the protection and guidance of their caregivers onto political leaders and other influential individuals in adulthood, regarding the latter in much the same way as a child regards a parent: as both a “safe haven” in times of threat and a “secure base” from which to operate in the world (cf. Bowlby, 1969). A similar phenomenon has been explored in the context of people’s relationship to God (e.g., Kirkpatrick, 2005), and the archetype of a tribal or societal parent (usually father) figure or messiah guiding the masses is obviously a familiar one across cultural and historical contexts ranging from the town hall to the world’s great religions.

Aside from the practical benefits of having a single person in charge of group decision-making, Becker argues that the charismatic figure is alluring because of the aura of power, even omnipotence, that such a figure embodies and projects, and the resulting sense of security felt by followers taken in by the vaguely (or sometimes literally) supernatural qualities of the most compelling personalities. There does not seem to be agreement about the precise qualities that constitute charisma; however, apropos the present topic, it seems likely that projected confidence, strength, in-group favoritism, and the ability to articulate a vision of a meaningful world are likely some of them. Indeed, the literature on charismatic leadership dating back to Weber (e.g., 1968) points to charismatic leaders’ tendency to rally followers around a collective identity in pursuit of common moral goals (e.g., House & Howell, 1992).

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Hero worship, for Becker, is a salve for people's feeling of vulnerability because not only do they gain a sense of being protected and cared for, but by virtue of affiliation with the leader, they also enjoy a certain feeling of specialness, as they share in the person's power, accomplishments, and other attractive qualities, which, as we have seen, is a potent security booster via self-esteem. In keeping with the present review, charismatic leaders also can be a source of worldview validation and a sense of belonging. They typically espouse the group's exceptionalism ("We are the ones we've been waiting for," then-presidential candidate Barack Obama said to cheers at a rally in February, 2008). They attempt to craft their messages to appeal to the sensibilities of the broadest possible audience ("There is not a liberal America and a conservative America," said Obama in the 2004 Democratic convention keynote speech. "There is the United States of America.") And by virtue of creating a following, they are creators of a *sui generis* social group to which one can become attached.

Following on Becker's analysis, TMT research has provisionally validated the notion that charismatic leaders are appealing to people in an insecure mental state. In one study, mortality salience increased people's admiration for a hypothetical gubernatorial candidate depicted as offering "a grand vision [and] self-worth through identification with the leader and the leader's vision" (Cohen et al., 2004, p. 847). By comparison, a more pedestrian, "task-oriented" candidate—though preferred overall to the charismatic one—did not garner any more or less admiration in the mortality salience condition. A subsequent study refined this finding, showing, again, that mortality salience increased people's admiration for a charismatic candidate, but only if the candidate shared participants' political orientation (mortality salience decreased admiration of candidates who were either uncharismatic or did not share participants' political orientation; Kosloff, Greenberg, Weise, & Solomon, 2010).

Relative to other areas of research on the role of psychological (in)security on political decision making, the research regarding charismatic leaders is scant. However, it is also an area with a considerable theoretical foundation and intuitive appeal. Observers of American politics have noted a pronounced and perhaps increasing tendency to imbue the presidency with immense power, responsibility, and high expectations (e.g., Healy, 2008), and it is not difficult to discern similar trends throughout the world and throughout history. Perhaps humans' unique proneness to insecurity is to blame; Becker (1973) cautioned that it was responsible for the rise of demagogues and authoritarians, who tend to embody charismatic characteristics.

## **Final Considerations and Conclusion**

In the field of psychological security maintenance, which illuminates how people's ongoing defense against psychological threats explains myriad social and cognitive phenomena, there is a rich theoretical basis from which to interpret the ways that people process and act on political information. In light of this fact, the relevant empirical literature is

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surprisingly limited, at least if one considers that much of the research is more suggestive than it is a direct examination of political decision making per se.

It is clear, then, that much more research is needed to develop these lines of inquiry. One limitation to such research is that specific political issues and candidates usually combine security-relevant factors in complex ways. For example, an incumbent head of state represents the in-group to the extent that he or she is the chief representative of a country. However, the individual may also be an out-group member to the extent that he or she differs on some identity-related dimension from particular groups of voters (e.g., because of political party, race, gender, age, religious affiliation, region of upbringing, etc.), which seems certain to be the case. Similarly, the head of state represents the status quo but may also espouse a vision of change for the future direction of the country. And so on. Therefore, in any given case it is difficult to predict or discern the precise effect that any psychological threat might have on evaluations of a politician. The same sort of difficulty applies to social policies.

This caveat may be best represented in four studies that failed to find almost any effect predicted by two prominent theories, TMT and social justification theory (Sterling, Jost, & Shrout, 2016). This is important to keep in mind when assessing specific political circumstances and personalities. Sometimes, counteracting effects may offset so that the net effect is null even though complex security maintenance processes are indeed operating beneath the surface.

To take one historical example, political pundits and scholars alike grappled with a pertinent question in the days before the 2004 U.S. presidential election, when Osama bin Laden released a video reminding voters of the threat of terrorism. Would the terror reminder help George W. Bush, the incumbent president who was in charge of the country's "war on terror?" Or would it help his opponent, John F. Kerry, who was a veteran of the Vietnam War and thus could fairly be seen to represent military strength, by reminding voters that Bush had failed to capture bin Laden? The answer was not and is not obvious.

Another example came in the week prior to the 2012 U.S. presidential election, when a massive hurricane dubbed "Sandy" swept over the Northeast United States. Some pundits declared that this would be to the advantage of incumbent President Barack Obama, who was allowed to "look presidential" in the aftermath of the storm while he oversaw recovery efforts and garnered a bipartisan photo-op with New Jersey Republican governor Chris Christie. Others pointed to political science research suggesting that voters might "blame" incumbent leaders for natural disasters (presumably non-consciously; Gasper & Reeves, 2011). According to a security maintenance perspective, contrasting predictions could also be made in this scenario. A conservative-shift effect of a threatening disaster such as a deadly hurricane might benefit Obama's challenger, Republican governor Mitt Romney. By contrast, if compensatory control processes were dominant—wherein people respond to feeling powerless by increasing support for benevolent governments (Kay et al., 2008)—the storm might benefit Obama (whose leadership during and after the storm was widely approved; Gallup, 2012). To the extent that Obama was the more charismatic

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candidate and represented the status quo (and hence continuity and stability), TMT and system justification theory would also predict a benefit to him (Sterling et al., 2016).

Here again emerges the difficulty of forming clear-cut predictions or retrospective interpretations of political outcomes. A comprehensive analysis of examples such as these requires more than just a theoretical framework and some suggestive research. What is probably necessary are ambitious, large-scale studies employing methods to assess politicians and policies on the many dimensions that are relevant to psychological security, combined with some sort of assessment of which dimensions are most relevant or salient to citizens. It will probably be necessary to combine experimental methods designed to manipulate the salience of different issues, and to instill different levels of psychological insecurity, with longitudinal designs that measure such things across time as they occur in a naturalistic context (see Hart, 2014A, for an example looking at the influence of Hurricane Sandy on the 2012 U.S. presidential election).

In addition to these theoretical and methodological challenges, there are lingering limitations to existing research that remain unresolved. Foremost is that most of the research has been conducted on so-called WEIRD (Western, educated, industrialized, rich, and democratic; Henrich, Heine, & Norenzayan, 2010) populations. This creates obvious barriers to generalizing the results. (There is, at least, some cross-cultural research—see Burke et al., 2013, for a relevant meta-analysis—but still primarily using WEIRD samples).

Another methodological issue lies in an inherent mismatch between the theoretical process of psychological security maintenance and the observation of it. Namely, it is presumed that people's defensive protections against anxiety operate more or less constantly—in other words, people *maintain* their self-esteem, and the integrity of their worldviews and relationships, proactively and in an ongoing fashion; by contrast, research focuses on reactive responses to identifiable threats. Consider dental hygiene as an analogy. People brush their teeth to protect against dental health problems, and given the conscious and logical nature of the process, it is evident to all that the behavior is protective and preventative; it is *explained* by the desire to protect and prevent (problems). It would be absurd to test that explanatory theory exclusively by first telling people that they have a cavity and then measuring whether they subsequently brush their teeth more often or vigorously. Perhaps they would and perhaps they wouldn't, but either way it would be a rather oblique way of validating the point. The cavity cannot be prevented. And yet that is essentially the approach that we take in studying psychological security maintenance: examining it almost exclusively as a reaction to threat instead of ongoing preventative activity, even though it is probably more preventative than reactive. Because the process is presumably non-conscious (and often illogical), and develops gradually, as a habit, during childhood and adolescence, it is difficult to imagine alternative empirical approaches—so this particular limitation persists as an area begging for innovation.

### Conclusion

Despite shortcomings, it seems clear that a security maintenance analysis holds much promise in explaining a broad range of political phenomena. And although the complex and singular nature of specific historical examples defies the most rigorous and satisfying empirical analyses, it is tempting, and perhaps useful, to attribute the periodic ebbs and flows of trends such as political polarization and the popularity of demagogues, nationalists, and dictators to fluctuations in societal and geopolitical security concerns—for example, economic insecurity (e.g., recessions), terrorism, wars, and other threatening circumstances.

Of course, threats and uncertainty are constant, and so must be, to an extent, insecurity. The unfortunate implication of this is that political polarization will tend to increase as time goes on in a pluralistic (global) societal context. As people manage anxiety by investing in their ideological enclaves, confirmation bias will likely be enhanced as it becomes easier for people to consume information that affirms their worldviews and to ignore or dismiss contradictory information. One would assume that the Internet and social media amplify this trend. On the bright side, perhaps practical solutions, too, to ideological entrenchment and the potentially pernicious allure of charismatic but dangerous political figures can be found somewhere in the understanding of the role of psychological security maintenance.

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## Notes:

(1.) Although the terms “[psychological] threat” and “(in)security” are often (and understandably) used interchangeably, here the term “threat” is used to refer to a stimulus and “insecurity,” and “security” to psychological states arising from a response to stimuli.

(2.) For the sake of clarity, these specific findings are described here in generalized terms, as though they are universal and unambiguous. However, it is worth noting that in several cases there may be only one or two studies supporting the generalized conclusion; in other cases, the findings hold only or mainly for a subset of a study’s sample.

(3.) It is important to note that although most of the research on the influence of threat and insecurity on political psychology comes from a terror management perspective—and thus specifically examines the effect of mortality salience on political processes—many studies demonstrate that other kinds of psychological threats produce similar effects (see Hart, 2014, for a review). Indeed, TMT’s own tenets predict that threats to terror-assuaging structures should elevate death-thought accessibility, which would in turn produce mortality salience effects. There is no reason to expect that this would not be true in the realm of politics. Nevertheless, readers should keep in mind that, although the present article generalizes mortality salience effects to the effects of psychological threat and insecurity more broadly, more research is needed to validate the generalization.

(4.) Interestingly, individuals high in authoritarianism who were *not* in favor of capital punishment reacted to mortality salience in the opposite way. This demonstrates how threat-defense dynamics can sometimes be complicated with regard to political attitudes—in this case, high authoritarianism predicted worldview defense (i.e., preference for attitude-consistent messages), and low authoritarianism did not. However, it would be a mistake to assume that mortality salience would always lead authoritarians to more positive attitudes toward capital punishment, because authoritarians who initially opposed it actually became more rigid in their opposition to it.

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