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Author(s): Marc J. Hetherington and Elizabeth Suhay

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# Authoritarianism, Threat, and Americans' Support for the War on Terror

**Marc J. Hetherington** Vanderbilt University  
**Elizabeth Suhay** Lafayette College

*In the years following 9/11, surveys have revealed high levels of public support for policies related to the war on terror that, many argue, contravene long-standing American ideals. Extant research would suggest that such preferences result from the activation of authoritarianism. That is, the terrorist attacks caused those predisposed toward intolerance and aggression to become even more intolerant and aggressive. However, using data from two national surveys, we find that those who score high in authoritarianism do not become more hawkish or less supportive of civil liberties in response to perceived threat from terrorism; they tend to have such preferences even in the absence of threat. Instead, those who are less authoritarian adopt more restrictive and aggressive policy stands when they perceive threat from terrorism. In other words, many average Americans become susceptible to "authoritarian thinking" when they perceive a grave threat to their safety.*

Although antiwar activists and civil libertarians have expressed shock and dismay over the relatively widespread public support for those aspects of the war on terror that contravene long-standing American ideals, the scholarly evidence suggests that the views of the public post-9/11 ought not to be surprising. Scholars have long known that, while the vast majority of Americans support civil rights and liberties in the abstract, they are much less likely to support their application, especially the extension of rights to disliked and threatening groups (Marcus, Sullivan, Theiss-Morse, and Wood 1995; McClosky 1964; McClosky and Brill 1983; Prothro and Grigg 1960; Stouffer 1955; Sullivan, Pierson, and Marcus 1982). And, while the American public may not be inherently hawkish, it often responds aggressively to perceived foreign threats (Holsti 2004; Page and Shapiro 1992), with the war on terror no exception (Davis and Silver 2004; Huddy et al. 2005).

Changes in Americans' perceptions of threat are critical to understanding changes in aggregate levels of public sentiment toward the use of force (Holsti 2004; Page and Shapiro 1992) and civil liberties (Berinsky 2009; Mueller 1988). Yet, scholars have not provided a convincing

account of *which individuals* are responsible for threat-driven shifts in public opinion in these domains. Some research suggests that people with a specific personality type are primarily responsible for the public's reaction—and, some might say, *overreaction*—to threats; that personality type is authoritarianism. Some researchers argue that those who are more authoritarian than others become more likely to support prejudicial, restrictive, and/or aggressive government policies and actions in response to a range of moral or physical threats (Feldman 2003; Feldman and Stenner 1997; Lavine, Lodge, and Freitas 2005; Lavine et al. 2002; Rickert 1998; Stenner 2005).

Reflecting on Americans' reactions to 9/11, the notion that such threats could activate authoritarianism and result in greater aggregate hawkishness and support for restrictive government policy makes some sense. Those who are more authoritarian are more likely than others to obey authority, conform to conventional norms, and act aggressively toward outgroups (Altemeyer 1981, 1988, 1996); as a result, they also tend to be more hawkish and less concerned with protecting civil liberties than others, inclinations that the threat of terrorism may exaggerate.

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Marc J. Hetherington is Professor of Political Science, Vanderbilt University, Department of Political Science, Nashville, TN 37235 (marc.j.hetherington@vanderbilt.edu). Elizabeth Suhay is Assistant Professor of Government and Law, Lafayette College, 111 Kirby Hall, Easton, PA 18042 (suhaye@lafayette.edu).

The authors' names are listed alphabetically. Both contributed equally to the manuscript. The authors would like to thank Suzanne Globetti, Neil Malhotra, Dave Klein, Efrén Pérez, Liz Zechmeister, Cindy Kam, and Jonathan Weiler for valuable comments, and Mitch Seligson, who made part of the data collection possible. Our thanks also to the anonymous reviewers for their suggestions and constructive criticisms.

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This said, we find it more likely that the opinions of the *less* authoritarian are more susceptible to the threat of terrorism and other threats to public safety. The reason, as we see it, is simple: in “normal times,” authoritarians are already more inclined to hold hawkish opinions and oppose democratic principles, while the less authoritarian tend to support democratic principles and less confrontational foreign policies. Hence, when a threat to public safety strikes, authoritarians have little place to travel in terms of their opinions. But the rest of the populace does.

Using data from two public opinion studies, we find that the less authoritarian respond to perceived threat from terrorism by increasing support for government policies—whether a foreign war or the curtailment of civil liberties—that they believe will ensure safety and order. Thus, it is threat perceived by the less authoritarian that increases aggregate support for aggressive and restrictive government policies while simultaneously reducing the difference in preferences between the more and less authoritarian. These findings are important because they demonstrate that it is likely *not* fringe elements of society who are responsible for marked increases in support for aggressive foreign policy or decreases in political tolerance when the nation’s security is seriously threatened. Authoritarians tend to have such preferences regardless. Instead, the culprits are more likely to be found among the more moderate majority. This poses a greater threat to democracy than conventional wisdom suggests—a wide range of Americans will potentially support antidemocratic policies during threatening times.

## Understanding Authoritarianism

Authoritarianism was first introduced in comprehensive fashion by Adorno et al. (1950). These authors initially sought to better understand the psychological underpinnings of anti-Semitism, but eventually argued that there existed an antidemocratic, or “fascistic,” personality type that could explain anti-Semitism (and ethnocentrism more generally) as well as support for authoritarian leaders like Adolf Hitler. Despite its many original insights, this research program was heavily criticized for a range of methodological problems (see Brown 1965, chap. 10; Christie 1954; Hyman and Sheatsley 1954). As its reputation sank under the weight of these criticisms, so did the study of authoritarianism. However, the study of authoritarianism has resurged in recent decades. Altemeyer (e.g., see 1981, 1988, 1996), in particular, revitalized this area of study, conceptualizing authoritarian-

ism as a chronically accessible, learned social attitude with three covarying traits—submission to authorities, conventionalism, and aggression toward outgroups. Political scientists have since sought to clarify authoritarianism’s theoretical underpinnings. Feldman (2003) and Stenner (2005) argue that authoritarianism is, at root, a need for conformity to group norms; they also argue that it is not a consistently salient trait—as Altemeyer argues—but is, rather, activated under conditions of “normative” threat. According to these authors, when authoritarians perceive threats to conformity or the existing moral order, they seek to enforce conformity, in part through obedience to authority and aggression toward outgroups.<sup>1</sup>

We agree that conformity, obedience to authority, and outgroup aggression are important to understanding authoritarianism. Like Altemeyer, we also believe authoritarianism to be a consistently salient predisposition. As evidence, survey instruments over many decades of study have consistently turned up strong relationships between authoritarianism and a wide spectrum of opinions, including opposition to civil liberties and support for aggressive foreign policies (see, e.g., Adorno et al. 1950; Altemeyer 1981, 1988, 1996; Meehan, Van der Linden, and De Wette 1996). These survey-based studies of authoritarianism have rarely included experimental threat manipulations. Moreover, even when the timing of surveys makes for a kind of natural experiment insofar as a clear security threat is present at one time and not another, the results often run counter to the “activation” hypothesis (see, e.g., Kam and Kinder 2007).

We do not think threat unimportant to authoritarianism, however. Rather, we argue that the key traits thought to make up the authoritarian personality—obedience to authority, strict adherence to conventional norms, and aggression—may cohere<sup>2</sup> in large part due to chronic perceptions of threat, likely beginning early in life.

Evidence that authoritarians experience unusually high levels of anxiety, insecurity, and stress is extensive. Lipset (1959) notably theorized that one reason why authoritarianism was so prevalent among the working class was that those low in socioeconomic status experienced a disproportionate lack of economic and psychological security (see also Jost, Pelham, Sheldon, and Sullivan

<sup>1</sup> In other words, while these theories differ in some important respects from Altemeyer’s, the political opinions and behaviors of Feldman and Stenner’s authoritarians closely resemble his, but only when normative threat is present.

<sup>2</sup> From a theoretical perspective, this model of authoritarianism is accepted by many authoritarianism researchers (e.g., in addition to work by Altemeyer, see Stone, Lederer, and Christie 1992). Funke (2005) and Duckitt et al. (2010) provide empirical evidence for similar three-factor models of authoritarianism.

2003). In addition, Adorno et al. (1950) found that authoritarians tended to be more distrustful of others. This phenomenon holds true today. Among those at the minimum of the 2008 American National Election Study (ANES) authoritarianism scale,<sup>3</sup> 72% thought “most people can be trusted” and only 28% said “you can’t be too careful”; in contrast, 81% at the authoritarianism maximum said “you can’t be too careful” and only 18% said “most people can be trusted.”<sup>4</sup> Similarly, Altemeyer (1988, 168–69) found his RWA measure to be correlated at about .5 with a measure of how dangerous respondents considered the world to be (see also Duckitt 2001; Oesterreich 2005 for further evidence). Other research suggests a physiological basis to the relationship between authoritarianism and threat. Smith et al. (2009) found that those most opposed to illegal immigration and foreign aid as well as those most in favor of warrantless wiretapping (all preferences highly correlated with authoritarianism) exhibited a stronger startle reflex than others, a reflex which is associated with higher baseline fear levels (Hamm et al. 1997). Recent scholarship suggests that authoritarianism may actually be one way of coping with such stress (Dallago and Roccato 2010; Van Hiel and De Clercq 2009; see also Jost, Glaser, Kruglanski, and Sulloway 2003 for a complementary treatment of conservatism). Regardless, these findings suggest that authoritarians live in a stressful state of hypervigilance, which we believe explains in large part why authoritarians ought to express different preferences from nonauthoritarians during “normal times.”

Such chronic perceptions of threat may also be a root cause of known differences in cognitive style between those scoring high and low in authoritarianism. Those scoring high in authoritarianism tend to see the world in more “black and white” terms than others; they are rigid thinkers who are intolerant of ambiguity (Adorno et al. 1950; Altemeyer 1996; Napier and Jost 2009; Winter 1996).<sup>5</sup> Research from psychology tells us that chronic anxiety or stress can inhibit cognitive processes (see Evans and Schamberg 2009; LeDoux 1996) and lead to behavioral rigidity (LeDoux 1996, 249–50).

<sup>3</sup> We borrow our authoritarianism measure from the ANES; thus, their measure is almost identical to ours. See Data and Measurement.

<sup>4</sup> Note that, for some variables, minimum and maximum values make up a small percentage of the overall population. This is not so for authoritarianism, with more than a quarter of respondents at the poles.

<sup>5</sup> In the 2006 CCES data (discussed below), authoritarianism and a two-item intolerance of ambiguity index correlated at about .4. This measure included the following agree/disagree items: “There is a right way and a wrong way to do almost everything” and “Nothing gets accomplished in this world unless you follow a few basic rules.”

Finally, following Adorno, Altemeyer, Duckitt, and Oesterreich, among others, we argue that physical threats, not just normative ones, are relevant to authoritarianism.<sup>6</sup> We focus, in this article, on the relationship between authoritarianism and threat from terrorism. Authoritarians’ preoccupation with physical and moral danger helps to explain why key authoritarian traits covary. In their leaders, authoritarians seek protection from danger as well as direction when faced with uncertainty. In conventional norms, authoritarians are given proscriptions for how to behave and—assuming others follow those norms as well—the guarantee that others will behave in orderly and predictable ways. Finally, authoritarians’ aggression toward those who pose threats, whether threats to safety or to cultural norms, represents one very concrete approach to handling a perceived threat—by forcefully trying to eliminate it.

Researchers have shown authoritarianism to be correlated with a long list of variables consistent with the theoretical framework presented here: trust in authority figures; social conservatism; social punitiveness; support for military force; nationalism, ethnocentrism, prejudice, and anti-immigrant attitudes; and, finally, opposition to democratic values, civil rights and liberties, and human rights (Adorno et al. 1950; Altemeyer 1981, 1988, 1996; Eckhardt and Newcombe 1969; Lipset 1959; McFarland and Mathews 2005; Meloan 1993; Stellmacher and Petzel 2005; Tibon and Blumberg 1999). Many of these variables directly reflect various aspects of the war on terror, including its curtailment of civil liberties, its focus on military strength over diplomacy, and its privileging of executive prerogative.

## Threat, Authoritarianism, and Policy Preferences

Although authoritarians have been characterized as dangerous when contrasted with other citizens (e.g., Adorno et al. 1950; Stenner 2005), we argue that at least some of their beliefs and behaviors are not unusual, at least not when threat is widely perceived. One need only consider the near majority (and sometimes clear majority) support for controversial elements of the war on

<sup>6</sup> In other words, we believe that authoritarianism researchers should not restrict their focus to normative threat. Note that a number of scholars who propose that authoritarianism and threat interact in the way proposed by Feldman and Stenner argue that physical threats are also relevant to authoritarianism (see Lavine, Lodge, and Freitas 2005; Lavine et al. 2002; Merolla and Zechmeister 2009; Rickert 1998).



terror, such as warrantless wiretapping and preemptive war, to surmise that “authoritarian” preferences are not always fringe positions. In the absence of a threat perceived by a wide range of citizens, the opinions of the more and less authoritarian ought to differ a great deal. However, when a grave threat emerges, the opinions of the more and less authoritarian ought to converge with respect to policies perceived by citizens as grappling with that threat. Statistically, we expect a *negative interaction* between threat and authoritarianism.

This is not what recent scholars in political science have argued, however. Feldman and Stenner (1997; Feldman 2003; Stenner 2005) have been the most forceful in arguing that, whatever its distribution in the population, authoritarianism’s *manifestation* depends upon the existence of situational threat (see also Cohrs et al. 2005; Lavine et al. 2002; Merolla and Zechmeister 2009; Rickert 1998). Statistically, they argue that there is a *positive interaction* between authoritarianism and threat—the difference between the relevant political preferences of the most and least authoritarian increases in the presence of normative threat, specifically.<sup>7</sup>

Their empirical evidence is sometimes uneven, however. Stenner’s (2005) most compelling study—the Cultural Revolution Experiment—involves a relatively small sample of students, and the observed positive interaction in this study is achieved by using an unorthodox control (or contrast) group.<sup>8</sup> Further, despite their theoretical stance that the effects of authoritarianism ought to be only manifest under situational threat conditions, these authors quite often find a direct relationship between authoritarianism and various political attitudes and behaviors in addition to a positive interaction in response to threat (Feldman 2003; Feldman and Stenner 1997; Stenner 2005).

<sup>7</sup> Yet another relationship between authoritarianism and threat is possible. Canetti et al. (2009) argue that threat mediates rather than moderates the effect of authoritarianism on exclusionary policies. While we think mediation is theoretically plausible—insofar as those scoring high in authoritarianism perceive more threat from terrorism than those scoring low (which, in turn, affects war on terror preferences)—substantively, we found little mediation in our study. When we compared the parameter estimates for authoritarianism both in the presence and absence of perceived threat from terrorism, which is the first diagnostic step in a Sobel mediation test, the median difference in the coefficients was 0.005 in the logistic regression models and 0.026 in the OLS model.

<sup>8</sup> The “control” group received an unusual threat stimulus having to do with contact with alien life forms (Stenner 2005, 50). Later, Stenner reveals that this “alien life form” stimulus depresses the effect of authoritarianism on intolerance (see Figure 9.1.1, 279). Thus, the “control” condition may create a false impression that normative threat increases the effect of authoritarianism.

In addition, the concept of normative threat, which Feldman and Stenner (1997; Feldman 2003; Stenner 2005) operationalize as an individual’s acknowledgment of extant or growing ideological and social diversity, almost surely affects the more and less authoritarian differently. While diversity is threatening to authoritarians, it is often welcomed by nonauthoritarians. Thus, one probably cannot say that those at the top *and* the bottom of the authoritarianism scale are both responding to threat; what is a threat to those at the top is a cause for celebration among those at the bottom. What would happen if both authoritarians *and* nonauthoritarians truly felt threatened by the same stimulus?

In this study, we focus on people’s responses to perceived threats to their physical well-being, specifically. Mortality is a serious concern to nearly all people and tends to result in large mean shifts in attitudes (Greenberg, Pyszczynski, and Solomon 1986; Landau et al. 2004). The threat of harm from terrorism, which we examine below, plausibly threatens those across the authoritarianism distribution.

We argue that ordinary citizens who feel their safety is threatened will tend to support relatively “authoritarian” policies perceived as helping to ensure public safety, such as policies pursued as a part of the war on terror. Because they already tend to adhere rigidly to a broad class of aggressive and restrictive government policies that promote order and safety, authoritarians are unlikely to alter their political views considerably when more threat from terrorism (or related phenomena) is introduced. It is everyone else—those lower in authoritarianism—whom we expect to become more likely to champion “authoritarian” policies in response to perceived threat from terror. This creates a negative interaction between authoritarianism and threat, not a positive one. More generally, we theorize that researchers ought to expect negative interactions when examining threats that are genuinely threatening to authoritarians and nonauthoritarians alike in conjunction with policies that are (a) endorsed by authoritarians (not nonauthoritarians) under “normal” conditions but (b) perceived by many in the populace as necessary for mitigating extreme threats that arise.<sup>9</sup>

Our theoretical approach accords well with existing evidence on the ways in which citizens respond politically to threats. At the aggregate level, turbulent periods in the United States have tended to predate increases in authoritarian-friendly attitudes and policy

<sup>9</sup> The nature of our empirical evidence compels us to restrict our claims to the effects of physical threat (threat from terrorism, specifically); future research may wish to extend our findings to other types of threat.

outcomes, including larger police budgets and harsher prison sentences (Sales 1973), greater popularity of presidential candidates perceived to be “strong” leaders (McCann 1997), and increased support for censorship (Doty, Peterson, and Winter 1991). In several studies, experience with or the threat of terrorism, specifically, increased self-reported conservatism and support for President Bush, a leader with a reputation among many citizens for protecting security (Bonanno and Jost 2006; Landau et al. 2004; Willer 2004). Similarly, far-right political parties, such as the National Front in France, tend to attract more votes during tumultuous times than quiet ones (Mudde 2007). In each of these cases, authoritarians are among the usual supporters for such candidates, parties, and policies (e.g., Dow 1999; Sniderman, Hagendoorn, and Prior 2004). Hence, it is more likely the less authoritarian who come to support them during threatening times.

The ANES 2000-2002-2004 panel provides corroborating, microlevel evidence. September 11, 2001, provides a natural experiment because perceived threat from terrorism increased exponentially after it. If a positive interaction between threat and authoritarianism exists in this instance, then we would expect authoritarians to become more hawkish after 9/11. If we are correct, however, the preferences of the more authoritarian should have remained relatively constant and the preferences of the less authoritarian should have become more hawkish between 2000 and 2002. Respondents were asked whether they thought defense spending should be increased, decreased, or kept about the same both before and after September 11. Among those who scored at the authoritarianism maximum, 63% favored an increase in 2000, exactly the same percentage as in 2002 and statistically the same as in 2004. In contrast, those who scored low and in the middle of the distribution increased their support for defense spending in 2002 (relative to 2000), when the threat was at its highest, and decreased their support in 2004 (relative to 2002), as threat ebbed.<sup>10</sup>

## Data and Measurement

To test our hypothesis, we turn to two representative surveys of the U.S. population. The main survey we draw from is the 2006 Cooperative Congressional Election Study (CCES) conducted by Polimetrix, which surveyed more than 36,000 Americans during October and November of 2006. We administered our questionnaire online to

1,000 of those respondents. We also draw on items from the Americas Barometer Survey of the U.S. population, also conducted by Polimetrix in conjunction with the Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP) in 2008 (N = 1,500).<sup>11</sup>

## Measuring Authoritarianism

Devising a quality measure of authoritarianism has proven to be difficult. Scholars have long noted that Adorno and colleagues’ original F (for fascism) scale has methodological shortcomings, including poor reliability and response acquiescence (Altemeyer 1981).

The most widely used contemporary measure of authoritarianism is Altemeyer’s Right-Wing Authoritarianism (RWA) scale (Altemeyer 1981, 1988, 1996). Although the RWA scale strongly “predicts” intolerance, prejudice, support for right-wing parties, and the like (Altemeyer 1981, 1988, 1996), its success is in part due to the fact that scale items measure attitudes that are similar to the dependent variables the scale is supposed to predict (Feldman 2003; Feldman and Stenner 1997; Stenner 2005). Critics also argue that the RWA scale fails to distinguish between conservatism, especially social conservatism, and authoritarianism (Feldman 2003; Feldman and Stenner 1997; Stenner 2005).

The measure of authoritarianism we use, first employed by the ANES, addresses these concerns. The four-item authoritarianism index asks respondents to judge which of two desirable traits is more important for a child<sup>12</sup> to have: “respect for elders” versus “independence,” “obedience” versus “self-reliance,” “curiosity” versus “good manners,” and “being considerate” versus “being well-behaved.” This measure captures authoritarians’ emphasis on order and control, conformity, and obedience. The broad child-rearing values measured are fairly well divorced from political ideology and attitudes; therefore, the measure is unlikely to be conflated with social conservatism and is easily distinguished from the dependent variables.

The authoritarian response in each pair is scored 1 and the nonauthoritarian response 0. We combine the four items additively and take the mean for each

<sup>10</sup> These differences are statistically significant.

<sup>11</sup> Both samples are Internet-based samples in which respondents opt-in to the studies. Through the use of a two-stage sample matching technique, Polimetrix creates datasets that are nationally representative (e.g., see Vavreck and Rivers 2008).

<sup>12</sup> Note that the F scale, the RWA scale, and a newer authoritarianism scale introduced by Feldman (2003) all include items that address child-rearing values.

respondent.<sup>13</sup> The measure correlates highly with Altemeyer's RWA measure ( $r = .54$ ).<sup>14</sup>

## Measuring Threat

We focus on *physical threat* from terrorism due to its profound relevance to life and politics during the Bush administration in the years following 9/11. The war on terror was portrayed to the American public as an effort to keep them safe. Furthermore, we propose that the most relevant physical threat to support for war on terror policies is *personal* in nature, rather than sociotropic. The threat from terrorism aroused a great deal of anxiety and fear among Americans, emotions which tend to be the product of threats to self, not community (Lazarus 1991; LeDoux 1996).

Previous scholarship examining the effects of threat on authoritarianism has included both survey and experimental work. Survey researchers (Feldman 2003; Feldman and Stenner 1997; Rickert 1998; Stenner 2005) have generally attempted to measure perceived threat in a fashion similar to ours, albeit less direct.<sup>15</sup> Experimentalists (Lavine, Lodge, and Freitas 2005; Lavine et al. 2002; Merolla and Zechmeister 2009; Stenner 2005) have sought to vary the experience of threat exogenously, which has two disadvantages in the present context. First, these studies often assume that randomly assigned "threatening" conditions are equivalent to threat as perceived by the individual. However, such threat manipulations may be very threatening to those at one end of the authoritarianism spectrum but not the other (or, possibly, may be threatening to no one). The second problem is one of external validity; the relationship between exogenous threats created by the experimenter and real-world threats is too often unclear.

<sup>13</sup> The scale sample means for the two surveys are .53 and .59, and the Cronbach's alphas are .65 and .60, respectively. These reliabilities are acceptable for such a short scale.

<sup>14</sup> Data are from a nonprobability student sample from a large midwestern university ( $N = 226$ ). Our thanks to David Winter, who provided us with the data.

<sup>15</sup> Perceived threats in a survey design raise the possibility of endogeneity. However, we expect threat perceptions to precede the dependent variables and for any endogeneity to be minimal. For example, it seems unlikely that torture supporters will, *as a result of their policy opinions*, answer that they perceive a lot of threat from terrorism. If the degree of simultaneity is minimal, it is prudent not to pursue simultaneous equation modeling techniques. The estimates produced by such techniques are compromised when the effect of one endogenous variable on the other is conditional on an exogenous variable, which is the case with perceived threat and authoritarianism.

We asked respondents, "How worried are you that you personally might become a victim of a terrorist attack?" The four response options were coded to range from 0 ("Not at all worried") to 1 ("Very worried"). The means for the threat measure were .33 in the 2006 survey and .30 in the 2008 survey.<sup>16</sup>

Because authoritarianism and threat from terrorism make up the key interaction in our models, we want to address potential concerns that these two measures are operationally indistinct. The two variables are correlated, as one might expect. That said, the correlation (Kendall's tau-b) is only .16 in 2006 and .18 in 2008, suggesting that perceptions of threat from terrorism and authoritarianism are separable.<sup>17</sup> Many who score low in authoritarianism report feeling significant threat from terror and vice versa. For example, in 2006, approximately 25% of those who reported being "somewhat" or "very" threatened by terrorism were low in authoritarianism (0 or 1 "authoritarian" responses).<sup>18</sup> A negative interaction between these variables with respect to preferences on civil liberties and the use of force will reflect the opinions of many Americans.

## Dependent Variables

We queried our samples about a range of government efforts (real and hypothetical) to combat terrorism. The first set of questions measured support for civil liberties, including whether respondents endorsed federal government surveillance of phone calls and emails without court warrant, the installation of video cameras in public places, public criticism of the president regarding terrorism (reverse scored), media self-censorship regarding covert government efforts to fight terror, the torture of terror suspects "caught red-handed," and, finally, making it mandatory for citizens to carry national identity cards.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Note that people's self-assessments of perceived threat are not simply partisan rationalizations, with Republicans deducing from elite dialogue that they should express more fear about terrorism because their party's leaders do. In fact, partisanship was only weakly correlated with the threat measure ( $r = .08$  in 2006, and  $r = .07$  in 2008).

<sup>17</sup> Kendall's tau-b is appropriate when testing the association between an interval scale and an ordinal scale variable.

<sup>18</sup> Complete data are included in the Supporting Information.

<sup>19</sup> All questions included dichotomous response options except for the item on national identity cards, which included a 7-point response scale ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree." The first four questions are from the CCES; the last two are from the Americas Barometer Survey. Question wording is in the Supporting Information.



In the main, Americans' disposition toward limits on civil liberties is somewhat mixed. Seventy-one percent supported the use of video cameras in public places. Similarly, 65% of Americans thought the media should not report information about secret methods the government is using to fight terrorism. Americans were less likely to support the use of wiretaps without a warrant and national ID cards; 47% believed wiretaps to be an acceptable tool in the fight against terrorism, and more Americans opposed ID cards (50%) than supported them (37%). Forty-eight percent of Americans were willing to endorse torture if a terrorist is caught "red-handed." Finally, most Americans believed that people should *not* censor themselves in talking about the president's performance on the issue of terrorism; only 23% of Americans suggested citizens refrain from criticizing the president. Taken together, these results elucidate a key point—the "authoritarian" policy options are not, by any stretch of the imagination, fringe positions in the American public.

The second set of two questions asked Americans for their views on foreign policies that the president and others had sought to link to the war on terror, including the best way to ensure peace (military strength vs. good diplomacy) and whether Congress should vote to begin withdrawing U.S. troops from Iraq.<sup>20</sup> Americans leaned in the "liberal" direction in response to both questions, with 61% favoring Iraq withdrawal and 57% favoring diplomacy over force.

## Empirical Results

We first examined the relationship between authoritarianism and the eight dependent variables. The results of this analysis appear in Table 1, and the expected patterns emerge. The differences between the more and less authoritarian are always large. The correlations suggest a strong relationship between authoritarianism and all six civil liberties variables, ranging from a low of .17, with respect to the torture item, to .40 with respect to the media censorship item. We find a similar pattern for the two questions asked in the 2006 CCES survey about the use of force and the war in Iraq. The correlations for authoritarianism and these items are .15 and .23, respectively.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Both foreign policy questions are drawn from the CCES.

<sup>21</sup> Here, we use "etas" to measure association when the dependent variables are dichotomous—seven of the eight—and Pearson's *r* in the case of support for national identification cards. Eta is an appropriate measure of association between two variables when one is interval scale and the other is dichotomous.

We can also report that the interaction between authoritarianism and threat seems to work as we hypothesize. Regardless of whether authoritarians perceive threat from terrorism, their opposition to civil liberties and hawkishness is relatively high. Among high authoritarians (those providing three or four authoritarian responses to the child-rearing battery) who perceived significant threat from terrorism, 84% favored media censorship; a statistically indistinguishable 81% of high authoritarians who did *not* perceive significant threat also favored media censorship. Similarly, 56% of high authoritarians who perceived significant threat from terrorism favored force over diplomacy, while a statistically indistinguishable 52% of high authoritarians who did not perceive significant threat also favored force. (Full results are not reported due to space considerations and are available from the authors upon request.)

In contrast, levels of threat appear to powerfully condition the preferences of the less authoritarian. Among those who provided either 0 or 1 authoritarian responses to the child-rearing battery and who perceived little threat from terrorism, only 37% favored media censorship. But for low authoritarians who perceived significant threat, that percentage nearly doubled, to 68%. Similarly, only 26% of low authoritarians who did not perceive much threat from terrorism supported the use of force over diplomacy. But among low authoritarians who felt significant threat from terrorism, 49% favored force over diplomacy. Taken together, these results suggest strong evidence for the hypothesized negative interaction between threat and authoritarianism.

## Multivariate Models

We next turn to testing more rigorously whether the impact of authoritarianism decreases as threat from terrorism increases. In order to investigate this hypothesis, we estimate eight models. For each of the dependent variables, we code the more restrictive/forceful response as 1 and the less restrictive/forceful response as 0.

Our key independent variables are the four-item authoritarianism battery and the threat measure. To understand the effect of perceived threat on the predictive power of authoritarianism, we include an interaction term between threat and authoritarianism. We expect authoritarianism and threat to carry positive signs: the most authoritarian (when threat = 0) and the most threatened (when authoritarianism = 0) will be more likely to restrict civil liberties and more supportive of the use of force. However, we expect the interaction term to carry a negative sign: as perceived threat increases, those "high"



TABLE 1 Percent Supporting Reductions to Civil Liberties and the Use of Force, by Authoritarianism

|                                 | Support<br>Warrantless<br>Wiretapping | Support<br>Video<br>Cameras | Oppose<br>Criticizing<br>the<br>President | Support<br>Media<br>Censorship | Support<br>the Use of<br>Torture | Support<br>National<br>ID Cards | Oppose<br>Iraq<br>With-<br>drawal | Favor<br>Strength<br>over<br>Diplo-<br>macy |
|---------------------------------|---------------------------------------|-----------------------------|---|--------------------------------|----------------------------------|---------------------------------|-----------------------------------|---|
| Minimum<br>Authoritarianism     | 20%                                   | 52%                         | 8%  | 27%                            | 26%                              | 23%                             | 27%                               | 22%   |
| Midpoint of<br>Authoritarianism | 47%                                   | 69%                         | 19%                                       | 69%                            | 45%                              | 32%                             | 38%                               | 45%   |
| Maximum<br>Authoritarianism     | 60%                                   | 79%                         | 33%                                       | 79%                            | 56%                              | 49%                             | 47%                               | 54%   |
| Correlation                     | .29                                   | .22                         | .25                                       | .40                            | .17                              | .23                             | .15                               | .23   |

Source: All CCES (2006) except Torture and National ID Cards from Americas Barometer by LAPOP (2008).

and “low” in authoritarianism should adopt increasingly similar positions on civil liberties and the use of force. Our theoretical framework also suggests that the effect of threat will be largest on the less authoritarian and smallest on the more authoritarian; in other words, the negative interaction will mainly be driven by changing preferences in response to threat among those low in authoritarianism.

We also include a number of control variables, including party identification and ideology. Both are positively correlated with authoritarianism, and both are likely positively correlated with our dependent measures as well.<sup>22</sup> We also include measures of race (African American) and ethnicity (Hispanic), along with gender, age, and education. All independent variables (including controls) are scaled on the 0–1 interval.

Because all of the dependent variables are dichotomous choices except for the question on national identity cards,<sup>23</sup> we use logistic regression to estimate relationships in all but the national identity card analysis (for which we use OLS).

<sup>22</sup> We use a 7-point party identification scale similar to the one used by the ANES. High values represent Republicans. Our ideology measure is a 5-point scale, ranging from extremely liberal to extremely conservative. Since authoritarianism is positively correlated with both party and ideology, failing to include in the model interactions between those variables and threat has the potential to bias the estimate for the interaction between authoritarianism and threat. When we include these interactions, however, they are hardly ever statistically significant and never affect the substance of the results we report here. Hence we do not include them in our final specification.

<sup>23</sup> This variable has been recoded onto the 0–1 interval.

Multivariate Results

The results for the six civil liberties items appear in the first six columns of Table 2. For all six models, the so-called “main effect” of authoritarianism (the effect of authoritarianism when threat is zero) is positive and statistically significant. Among those who say they “are not worried at all” that they will be personally affected by terrorism, the more authoritarian are more likely to support wiretaps, video camera surveillance, media censorship, torture, and national ID cards and to oppose criticizing the president. The so-called “main effect” of perceived threat is also positive and significant. This means that, among those who score lowest in authoritarianism, perceived threat from terrorism is linked to opposition to civil liberties.

In each of the six models, the authoritarianism \* threat interaction is negative, as expected, and the coefficients reach statistical significance (at least  $p < .05$ ) in all but one instance (support for video cameras in public places,  $p = .188$ , one-tailed).<sup>24</sup> The effects are substantively large as well. We plot predicted probabilities to illustrate the effect of the authoritarianism \* threat interaction on support for two variables: wiretapping and media censorship. We estimate probabilities for males who are not Black or Hispanic; we fix party identification, ideology,

<sup>24</sup> This is likely the case because public support for video cameras in public spaces was popular among respondents regardless of level of authoritarianism; fully 52% of those low in authoritarianism were supportive, as was 71% of the general public. Americans may have accepted this particular antiterror measure regardless of perception of threat because it is perceived as not especially intrusive.

TABLE 2 Explaining Preferences for Civil Liberties and the Use of Force

|   | Support<br>Warrant-<br>less<br>Wiretap-<br>ping | Support<br>Video<br>Cameras in<br>Public<br>Places | Oppose<br>Criticizing<br>President | Support<br>Media<br>Censorship | Support<br>Use of<br>Torture | Support<br>National<br>ID Cards | Oppose<br>Iraq With-<br>drawal | Favor<br>Strength<br>over<br>Diplomacy |
|---|---|--|------------------------------------|--------------------------------|------------------------------|---------------------------------|--------------------------------|--|
|   | Param. Est<br>(Std. Err.)                       | Param. Est<br>(Std. Err.)                          | Param. Est<br>(Std. Err.)          | Param. Est<br>(Std. Err.)      | Param. Est<br>(Std. Err.)    | Param. Est<br>(Std. Err.)       | Param. Est<br>(Std. Err.)      | Param. Est<br>(Std. Err.)              |
| Intercept                               | −4.653***<br>(0.432)                            | −1.150***<br>(0.304)                               | −4.826***<br>(0.510)               | −3.121***<br>(0.379)           | −2.351***<br>(0.257)         | 0.124***<br>(0.037)             | −3.884***<br>(0.397)           | −4.830***<br>(0.439)                   |
| Authoritarianism                        | 2.059***<br>(0.448)                             | 1.299***<br>(0.366)                                | 1.836***<br>(0.528)                | 2.504***<br>(0.431)            | 1.192***<br>(0.293)          | 0.214***<br>(0.044)             | 0.960*<br>(0.427)              | 1.829***<br>(0.456)                    |
| Perceived Threat from<br>Terrorism      | 2.619***<br>(0.615)                             | 1.183*<br>(0.519)                                  | 1.885**<br>(0.752)                 | 2.512***<br>(0.600)            | 2.867***<br>(0.513)          | 0.429***<br>(0.075)             | 2.894***<br>(0.595)            | 3.296***<br>(0.627)                    |
| Authoritarianism *<br>Threat            | −2.225**<br>(0.950)                             | −0.763<br>(0.859)                                  | −1.957*<br>(1.068)                 | −1.706*<br>(1.001)             | −2.253***<br>(0.719)         | −0.180*<br>(0.107)              | −2.466**<br>(0.915)            | −3.039***<br>(0.967)                   |
| Party ID                                | 3.011***<br>(0.324)                             | 0.600*<br>(0.293)                                  | 1.608***<br>(0.327)                | 1.926***<br>(0.337)            | 1.210***<br>(0.206)          | 0.061*<br>(0.033)               | 2.846***<br>(0.313)            | 2.439***<br>(0.314)                    |
| Ideology                                | 2.960***<br>(0.500)                             | 0.571<br>(0.416)                                   | 2.198***<br>(0.513)                | 2.621***<br>(0.484)            | 1.676***<br>(0.293)          | 0.039<br>(0.046)                | 2.118***<br>(0.473)            | 3.105***<br>(0.516)                    |
| Age                                     | 0.124<br>(0.448)                                | 0.786*<br>(0.394)                                  | 0.536<br>(0.468)                   | −0.532<br>(0.443)              | −0.264<br>(0.267)            | 0.177***<br>(0.041)             | 0.234<br>(0.430)               | 1.121**<br>(0.450)                     |
| Education                               | −0.309<br>(0.337)                               | 0.184<br>(0.295)                                   | −1.335***<br>(0.376)               | −0.524<br>(0.334)              | −0.209<br>(0.209)            | −0.086**<br>(0.032)             | 0.284<br>(0.325)               | 0.089<br>(0.341)                       |
| Gender (Female)                         | 0.353*<br>(0.182)                               | 0.434**<br>(0.159)                                 | 0.844***<br>(0.189)                | 0.774***<br>(0.182)            | −0.214*<br>(0.122)           | 0.005<br>(0.019)                | −0.615***<br>(0.173)           | −0.345*<br>(0.178)                     |
| Race (African American)                 | 0.124<br>(0.306)                                | 0.479<br>(0.293)                                   | −0.209<br>(0.410)                  | 0.245<br>(0.302)               | −0.187<br>(0.200)            | −0.013<br>(0.031)               | −0.119<br>(0.332)              | −1.417***<br>(0.414)                   |
| Ethnicity (Latino)                      | −0.503*<br>(0.280)                              | 0.037<br>(0.241)                                   | −0.277<br>(0.313)                  | −0.216<br>(0.272)              | −0.056<br>(0.185)            | 0.007<br>(0.029)                | −0.481*<br>(0.277)             | −0.179<br>(0.277)                      |
| R <sup>2</sup> or Pseudo R <sup>2</sup> | .38   | .09  | .21                                | .32                            | .19                          | .14                             | .32                            | .38                                    |
| No. Cases                               | 952   | 948  | 949                                | 942                            | 1417                         | 1422                            | 950                            | 946                                    |

Source: All CCES (2006) except Torture and National ID Cards from Americas Barometer by LAPOP (2008).  
Note: All equations were estimated using logistic regression except the National ID Cards equation, for which we used OLS.  
\*p < .05, \*\*p < .01, \*\*\*p < .001, one-tailed tests. We use one-tailed tests of significance because we have posited hypotheses with clear directional claims with respect to the key variables of interest (authoritarianism, threat, and their interaction) as well as party identification and political ideology.

education, and age at their sample means. We then allow threat, authoritarianism, and its interaction to vary across their ranges.<sup>25</sup>

The predicted probabilities of supporting media censorship appear in Figure 1a. Notice that the lines representing those low in authoritarianism are much steeper

than those representing those high in authoritarianism. While authoritarians support media censorship regardless of whether they believe themselves to be personally at risk from terrorism, nonauthoritarians reject media censorship when they perceive little or no threat but support it *just as much as authoritarians do* when they are “very worried” about being affected by terrorism. For example, those who are least authoritarian are about 20% likely to support media censorship when they perceive no threat from terrorism, whereas the most authoritarian are about 80% likely to support media censorship under these conditions; however, among those who are “very worried” about terrorism, the least authoritarian are about 80%

<sup>25</sup> Regarding the other variables in the model, as expected, party and ideology have large effects, at least for the variables on which party and ideological elites have taken clear positions for identifiers to follow (all but video cameras and national identification cards). The demographic variables generally perform poorly, although gender tends to have a positive and significant effect on the dependent variables.

FIGURE 1a Threat Decreases Effect of Authoritarianism on Support for Media Censorship

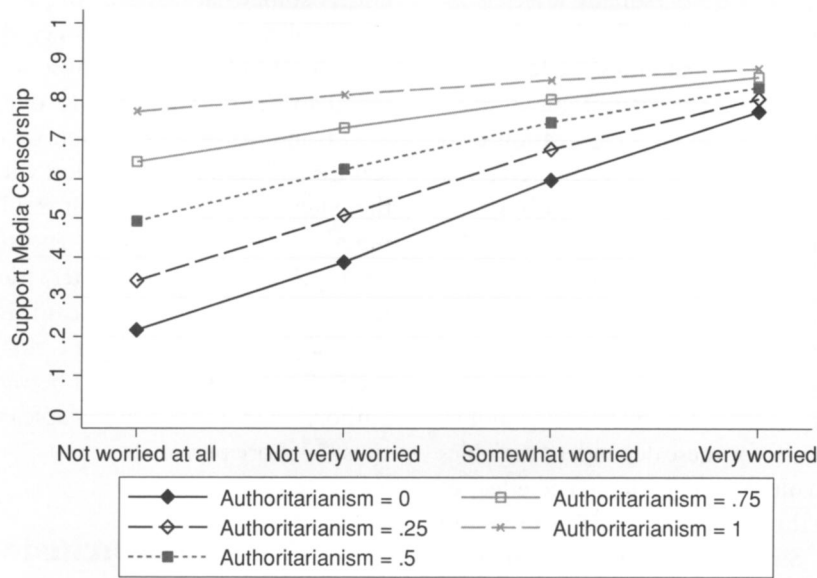
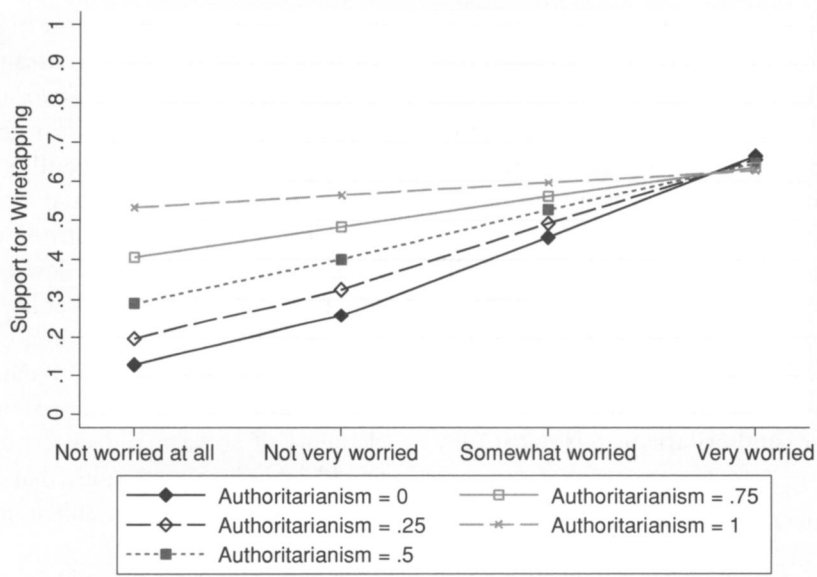


FIGURE 1b Threat Decreases Effect of Authoritarianism on Support for Wiretapping



likely to support censorship, whereas the most authoritarian are about 90% likely to support it (a statistically insignificant difference). Perceived threat from terrorism reduces the effect of authoritarianism.

The predicted probabilities for supporting warrantless wiretapping are in Figure 1b. Among respondents who report no concern that they will be personally affected by terrorism, those at the maximum in

authoritarianism are about five times as likely to endorse warrantless wiretapping than those at the minimum; however, among respondents who report considerable concern that they will be personally affected by terrorism, authoritarianism provides no leverage at all on opinions, with the predicted probabilities clustering together in the upper right-hand corner of the figure.<sup>26</sup> Similarly, the OLS results in the national identification card equation demonstrate that, in the absence of perceived threat from terrorism, those scoring at the authoritarianism maximum are about 21 percentage points  $(.214 - (.180 * 0) = .214)$  more supportive of the policy. But, when threat is at its maximum, the difference shrinks to a statistically insignificant 3 percentage points  $(.214 - (.180 * 1) = .034)$ .

Turning to our analyses of the two foreign policy items, the regression results for these dependent variables appear in the last two columns of Table 2. The effect of authoritarianism when threat is zero is again positive and statistically significant. Similarly, perceived threat from terrorism is also clearly linked to support for an aggressive foreign policy when authoritarianism is at its minimum. With respect to the authoritarianism \* threat interaction terms, the coefficients are again negative, as expected, and both coefficients are statistically significant ( $p < .01$ ).<sup>27</sup>

Again, the findings are of substantive, as well as statistical, significance. In Figure 2, we demonstrate the shape of these interactions graphically, plotting predicted probabilities to illustrate the effect of the interaction on preferences for the use of military strength over diplomacy. (The Iraq withdrawal results follow the same pattern.) Again, we estimate effects for males who are not Black or Hispanic, with party identification, ideology, education, and age fixed at their means.

Among people who say they are “not worried at all” about being affected by terrorism, authoritarianism has its usual positive relationship with hawkish foreign policy; however, that relationship begins to disappear as threat increases. Whereas the difference between the lowest and highest categories of authoritarianism is statistically

significant among those “not worried at all” as well as those “not very worried” about being affected by terrorism, it is not statistically significant among those who are either “somewhat worried” or “very worried.”<sup>28</sup>

Finally, recall that we focused on *personal* physical threat in these analyses because we expected this type of threat to be most relevant to our dependent variables. This is indeed the case. When we add sociotropic physical threat<sup>29</sup> and its interaction with authoritarianism to the equations, the pattern of results for personal threat remains largely unchanged, and the coefficients on sociotropic threat and the interaction term are inconsistent, and generally insignificant. It seems that believing that the country is in danger is not sufficient to diminish the difference in preferences between the most and least authoritarian. In our studies at least, the perceived threat must be more personal.

## Conclusion

Overall, the empirical analyses handsomely support our main proposition. Attitudes related to the war on terror are structured by authoritarianism; however, this structure breaks down when we concentrate our gaze on the portion of the public experiencing high levels of threat with respect to terrorism. The opinions of those low in authoritarianism resembled those high in authoritarianism when those low in authoritarianism perceived significant threat from terrorism. Using two large opinion surveys of Americans, we observed a clear negative interaction between perceived threat and authoritarianism on a range of dependent variables associated with the war on terror.

Although we provide strong evidence that perceptions of threat cause those low in authoritarianism to adopt more “authoritarian” policy views, our study suffers from the usual limitations inherent in the analysis of cross-sectional survey data. Future scholarship that explores this interaction should combine the best elements of surveys and experiments. Ideally, scholars would introduce a stimulus that is threatening to citizens across the authoritarianism spectrum to a nationally

<sup>26</sup> Note that, in Figures 1a and 1b, the differences in predicted probabilities between the lowest and highest (as well as between the second lowest and second highest) categories of authoritarianism are statistically significant with respect to each of the two lowest threat categories and are *not* statistically significant with respect to each of the two highest threat categories. We used Long’s SPost program in Stata to calculate predicted probabilities and their standard errors at each level of threat and authoritarianism.

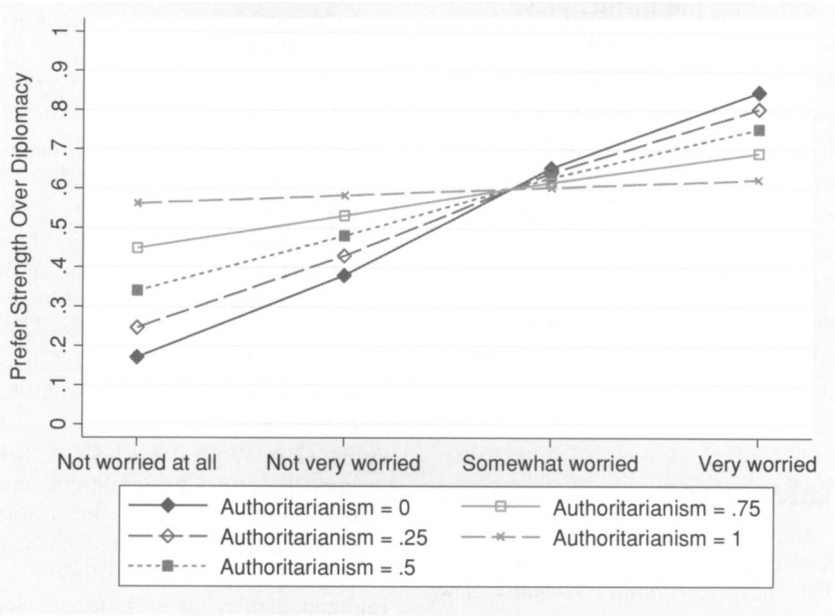
<sup>27</sup> Again, the partisan and ideological variables perform as expected, with parameter estimates several times their standard errors. The demographic variables are somewhat more predictive in these two models than in the previous six, and here being female has a clear *negative* effect on the dependent variables.

<sup>28</sup> The lines in the figure appear to suggest that, among those who are “very worried,” the less authoritarian are more hawkish than the more authoritarian. However, because this is the least popular perceived threat response, the size of the standard errors around the actual predicted probabilities are very large. As a result, the difference does not even approach statistical significance. Again, we used Long’s SPost program in Stata to calculate the predicted probabilities and their standard errors.

<sup>29</sup> This question read as follows: “How likely do you think it is that there will be another terrorist attack in the United States within the next few months?”



FIGURE 2 Threat Decreases Effect of Authoritarianism on Preference for Military Strength over Diplomacy



representative sample while also carefully tracking the degree to which the manipulation successfully causes participants to perceive threat. Where possible, researchers may wish to measure both self-reported perceived threat as well as physiological responses in order to track the stimulus’ success in arousing threat, especially among those scoring lower in authoritarianism.

The negative interactions between threat and authoritarianism presented here provide leverage on the original question that motivated Adorno et al. (1950), namely, what types of individuals are susceptible to antidemocratic thinking? Under “normal” circumstances, these percentages tend to be relatively low in advanced democracies, with those expressing such attitudes disproportionately scoring high in authoritarianism. Our findings suggest, however, that authoritarians do not deserve all the attention when a higher percentage of people adopt antidemocratic and hawkish preferences during threatening times. When people perceive grave threats to their safety, most individuals are susceptible to “authoritarian thinking.”

Indeed, the interaction we uncover poses perhaps a greater threat to democracy than the literature on authoritarianism implies. To be sure, Adorno et al. (1950) identified a troubling minority of the population whose preferences are anathema to democratic norms. However, if serious threats only brought out the worst instincts in them—a group that is fairly small in number, relatively

low in socioeconomic status on average, and often politically marginal—norms of democracy would be relatively safe. According to this line of thinking, antidemocratic policies would always find some support, and that support might be particularly fierce during threatening times; however, opposition to democratic norms would likely not develop into a majority view.

Our findings suggest something much more dangerous to democracy. When ordinary people perceive a grave threat to their safety, they are susceptible to adopting antidemocratic preferences regardless of whether they score high in authoritarianism. In this rendering, antidemocratic preferences can quickly become popular, mainstream positions under the right circumstances. Indeed, to a certain extent, this has been the experience in post-9/11 America, with support for preemptive war, torture, wiretapping without warrant, and the like sometimes enjoying majority support. Our interpretation seems to square well with support for authoritarian policies in the United States during other threatening times as well (Doty, Peterson, and Winter 1991; McCann 1997; Sales 1973). It also might explain high levels of support for a “strong state” and chronically low levels of political tolerance in much of the developing world, where threats to physical well-being are much more common than in the United States.

While catastrophic events understandably cause fear, a media culture that is biased toward sensational coverage

of terror-related events, not to mention politicians who realize that they can benefit by exaggerating threats (see Lupia and Menning 2009), serves to exacerbate and prolong the public's fears and, thus, put further pressure on democratic norms. Such tendencies among the media and strategic politicians may be why the percentage of Americans who express the worry that they will be personally affected by terrorism has declined only slightly since 9/11 (see Merolla and Zechmeister 2009, chap. 1 for the time trend). It is worth considering just how much more support antidemocratic policies might receive if the country experienced a series of attacks, rather than just one. In the end, it is not just people with an authoritarian personality who would be potential threats to democracy under those circumstances; it would be all of us.

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**Supporting Information**

Additional Supporting Information may be found in the online version of this article:

- **Wording of Dependent Variables**
  - Civil Liberties Battery
  - Foreign Policy Battery
- **Association between Authoritarianism and Perceptions of Threat**

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