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# A Theory of Liberal/Conservative Divergence in Foreign Policy Preferences

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*Scholars of international relations have adopted prospect theory to explain how the frame of a policy outcome may influence the risk actors' preferences. However, few works examine how prospect theory's effects vary across individuals. Using original survey data, I find that conservatives tend to be more risk acceptant compared to liberals in the presence of a perceived threat - or threat cue, but that the risk preferences of liberals and conservatives tend to converge as the threat cue becomes explicit. Examining change in risk preferences across multiple frames, I provide evidence suggesting that over time, conservatives' capacity for risky behavior ebbs more slowly than is the case for liberals. This variation in risk preferences has important implications for the formation of foreign policy preferences, and may help explain why conservative preferences tend to vary less compared to those of liberals.*

Following the terrorist attacks on 9/11, a normally polarized U.S. electorate had a brief moment of near consensus regarding the sorts of foreign policy objectives the country ought to pursue. In 2002, the Chicago Council of Global Affairs found virtually no difference between liberals and conservatives in their support for combatting terrorism abroad. However, as more time passed following the attacks, liberal and conservative preferences for anti-terrorist activities began to diverge (Figure 1).

By 2004, liberal support for combatting terrorism was only 94% of conservative support. By 2008, this figure had fallen to 90%. Thus, even though both liberals and conservatives had had the same experiences following 9/11, liberal support for anti-terrorism as the centerpiece of U.S. foreign policy fell far quicker than conservative support. Moreover, this phenomenon of conservative foreign policy preferences being “stickier” than liberal preferences is not constrained to combatting terrorism. Nincic and Ramos find conservative foreign policy preferences to be less responsive to changes in the international environment, regardless if the preferences concern “support for the war in Iraq” or “combatting world hunger” (2010). What accounts for this divergence in foreign policy preferences?

I address this question by turning to prospect theory - the theory that the manner in which an outcome is framed influences the risk preferences of the actors pursuing it (Kahneman and Tversky, 1979, 1981). Specifically, I examine whether prospect's theory's underlying mechanism varies between liberals and conservatives. If we assume that the desirability of a policy option is partly determined by our tolerance for the risk associated with pursuing that option, then variation in risk preferences between liberals and conservatives may account for variation in foreign policy preferences.

Aside from the work of Lavine et al. (1999) and Kam and Simas (2010), the prospect theory literature tends to focus on the characteristics of the frame, but less on the attributes of the actor exposed to the frame. For this reason, I use Kam and Simas (2010) as a jumping off point to examine how prospect theory's underlying mechanism varies between liberals and conservatives. I find that in the presence of a threat cue, conservatives are consistently more risk acceptant compared to liberals, but that this difference

between the two ideological camps vanishes as the threat becomes more explicit. However, over time both liberals and conservatives tend to become less acceptant of risk, with liberal risk acceptance tending to decline more quickly than the risk acceptance of conservatives. I draw upon recent work in political psychology to explain why this divergence in risk preferences may be taking place, although a proper test of the casual mechanism is outside the scope of this study. I conclude by suggesting fruitful avenues for future research and discuss the implications of these findings for our understanding of foreign policy preference formation.

## RISK PREFERENCES IN CONTEXT

Multiple studies have shown that in the presence of an explicit mortal threat - also known as a mortality frame - survey respondents tend to become more risk acceptant compared to those who construe the threat in terms of potential lives saved (a survival frame) (Kahneman and Tversky, 1981; Kam and Simas, 2010). McDermott, Fowler, and Smirnov propose that this phenomenon is an artifact of the evolutionary process (2008). At times when an existential threat is present, it makes sense to increase one's tolerance for risk as the ability and willingness to engage in extreme behavior may make the difference between life and death.

Recent research by Boydstun and Ledgerwood appear to corroborate this interpretation (2014). Exposing subjects to both gain frames and loss frames, and alternating the sequence in which those frames are presented, Boydstun and Ledgerwood find that the greater tolerance for risk brought on by exposure to a loss frame is more resilient, or "stickier" compared to the relative risk aversion that is associated with a gain frame. If loss frames are associated with the possibility of losing one's life, then it makes sense that the effects brought on by a loss frame are more robust than those brought on by a gain frame. One implication is that the perceived possibility of losing one's life should invoke a larger increase in risk acceptance compared to the perceived possibility of losing property, money, and so forth. Kowert and Hermann find evidence supporting this prediction, although further investigation is necessary (1997).

Findings such as these have helped to advance the study of international relations by providing insight into how foreign policy preferences emerge. Nincic observes that the frame of a foreign policy objective - whether the objective is justified in terms of protecting or promoting U.S. interests - influences the probable level of public support for the initiative (1997). Based upon an analysis of U.S.-Central American relations during the 1980s, Perla extends this logic into a formal Framing Theory of Policy Objectives (FTPO) (2011). Kahneman himself suggests that the use of loss frames explains why the counsel of military hawks is often difficult to resist, resulting in suboptimal policies in Vietnam and Iraq (2006). In total, international relations scholars drawing upon prospect theory have advanced our understanding of how different frames carry consequences for public support towards foreign policy objectives. However, the literature has paid little attention to how different sets of actors may vary in their response to identical frames.

International relations scholars have found that the prospect of loss tends to produce an increase in risk acceptance among voters, but does this phenomenon of increased risk acceptance vary across individuals? With a handful of exceptions, individual variation in prospect theory's effects has received relatively little scholarly attention compared to inquiry into frame type, or as Kam and Simas describe it, the literature has emphasized the study of the *message* at the expense of better understanding the *decision maker* (2010).

Seeking to address this gap in the scholarship, Kam and Simas note that individuals' vary in the extent of their risk acceptance. Moreover, repeated exposures to mortality and survival frames tends to attenuate the increase in risk acceptance induced by the framing language, allowing individuals' innate levels of risk acceptance to increase in salience over time.

The work of Kam and Simas suggests that prospect theory will effect the risk preferences of those with high risk acceptance differently than those with low risk acceptance. Similarly, the work of Lavine, Lodge, and Freitas suggests that individuals' preferences will vary as a function of their orientation towards authoritarianism (2005). Political psychology defines authoritarianism as an "ideological response intended to reduce high levels of perceived threat and anxiety" (Ibid; 220). It is worth noting that authoritarianism strongly correlates with political conservatism (Jost et al. 2003), the implication being that conservatives will react differently to threats compared to liberals. Interestingly, Kam and Simas find no statistically significant relationship between political ideology and the efficacy of mortality or survival frames.

However, there exists theoretical justification for expecting conservatism to positively correlate with risk acceptance despite Kam and Simas' findings. Multiple studies have shown that exposure to a perceived threat actually leads societies to become more conservative (Bonanno and Jost 2006; Janoff-Bulman and Sheikh 2006; Landau et al. 2004; McCann 1997). Kam and Simas themselves supplement this correlation by affirming the relationship between threat cues and risk acceptance. Taken together then, we might expect a positive correlation between risk acceptance and conservatism contingent on the presence of a threat cue.

**H<sub>1</sub>:** Risky behavior is positively correlated with conservatism in the presence of a threat cue.

## CHANGE IN RISK PREFERENCES ACROSS DIFFERENT FRAMES

To test the hypothesis I employ a series of equivalence frames. In the manner of Kam and Simas, each equivalence frame presents the survey respondent with two policy options that address a hypothetical outbreak of smallpox (2005). While the expected value of each of the policy options is the same, one option is certain while the other is conveyed in probabilistic terms. The dependent variable is the rate at which respondents select the probabilistic option, which I equate with a preference for risk.

I employ two different kinds of equivalence frames. In the survival frame, the threat to life is implicit as the emphasis is how best to save lives. In the mortality frame the threat is explicit, as the respondent knows that people will die, the only question being how many.

**Survival Frame:** CDC experts proposed two programs to try to minimize the consequences of a smallpox epidemic: If program A is adopted, 2,000 people will be saved. If program B is adopted, there is a 1/3 probability that 2,000 people will be saved, and 2/3 probability that no people will be saved.

**Mortality Frame:** CDC experts proposed two programs to try to minimize the consequences of a smallpox epidemic: If program A is adopted, 4,000 people will die. If program B is adopted, there is a 1/3 probability that nobody will die, and 2/3 probability that 6,000 people will die.

The primary independent variable is the respondent’s level of conservatism as measured on a 7-point scale of political ideology. Higher values correspond with conservative beliefs while lower values represent more liberal beliefs. Because mortality frames are much more effective at inducing risky behavior compared to survival frames, I include a dummy variable for frame type. The socioeconomic status of the respondent is a potential confounder, and so I include controls for education and household income. Lastly, I include a series of dummy variables to control for the respondent’s sex and race, the full model being as follows:

$$\begin{aligned} \text{Dependent Variable: (Selection of Riskier Option [0,1])} = & \beta_0 + \\ & \beta_1 (\text{Mortality Frame [0,1]}) + \beta_2 (\text{Conservatism [1,7]}) + \beta_3 (\text{Age}) + \\ & \beta_4 (\text{Education [1,6]}) + \beta_5 (\text{Household Income [1,9]}) + \beta_6 (\text{Female [0,1]}) + \\ & \beta_7 (\text{Hispanic [0,1]}) + \beta_8 (\text{Black [0,1]}) + \beta_9 (\text{Asian [0,1]}) + \epsilon \end{aligned}$$

I employ logistic regression to model the dichotomous outcome. For data I use an original data set collected from Amazon Mechanical Turk ( $n = 300$ ). Women, Hispanics, and Blacks are underrepresented while men, Asians, and the college-educated are over-sampled relative to the U.S. population. Summary statistics are displayed in Table 1 of the appendix. It bears noting that the sample is skewed towards the ideological left. The sample only contains 58 conservatives (those whose self-described political ideology is greater than 4 on the 7-point scale), but has 176 liberals. Results are contained in Table 2 in the form of odds ratios with z-scores displayed within the parentheses.<sup>1</sup>

Looking to the first Model I, we see that as expected, the presence of a mortality frame greatly increases the likelihood of the respondent selecting the riskier outcome. Of greater interest is the fact that conservatism has a positive and statistically significant odds ratio. Based on the results from Model I, a respondent who is extremely liberal has about a one third chance of selecting the riskier policy option after controlling for frame type and holding all other covariates at their means ( $\text{Pr} = 0.33$ ). In contrast, a respondent who is extremely conservative has nearly a two thirds chance of selecting the riskier policy option ( $\text{Pr} = 0.59$ ). Moving to Model II, we see that introducing the additional controls for sex and race appears to have no discernible effect on the strength of the relationship between conservatism and risky behavior.

This positive relationship between conservatism and risky behavior goes against the conventional wisdom that conservatives are risk averse. A variety of studies have shown a robust, albeit small negative correlation between conservatism and risky behavior. Kam and Simas observe this negative relationship in the 1972 National Election Survey (NES) ( $R^2 = 0.106$ ), as well as the World Values Survey (WVS) ( $R^2 = 0.16$ ) (2010). In their meta-analysis of over 88 different studies (2003), Jost et al. find that conservatives tend to avoid uncertainty (i.e. risk) ( $R^2 = 0.18$ ). Within their own data set, Kam and Simas observe a negative relationship between conservatism and their composite measure *risk*

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<sup>1</sup>The reader may note that 21 observations were dropped from the initial sample size of 300. All missing data is due to 21 respondents selecting “don’t know” when asked their political ideology. Difference-in-means tests between the subset with missing data and the rest of the sample suggests that the respondents who did not declare their ideology have less education ( $p = 0.06$ ) and less household income ( $p = 0.09$ ) compared to respondents with complete data. As a robustness check, I assume that those with undeclared ideology are moderates (*conservatism* = 4) and run the models again. There is a modest increase in the odds ratio for *conservatism* 1.21→1.23, but no significant changes to the results.

*acceptance* ( $\beta = -.018, p < 0.00$ ).

Interpreting these results, we can see that risk preferences are highly dependent on context. Note that the strongest correlation found between risk preferences and political ideology had an  $R^2$  of only 0.16. When Kam and Simas control for the respondent's innate level of risk acceptance, the relationship between risky behavior and political ideology lapses into statistical insignificance (2010). Within the same study, the authors find frame type to be nearly twice as powerful a predictor of risky behavior compared to a respondent's innate level of risk acceptance. Risk preferences are context dependent, which suggests that the difference in findings between the studies just cited and the Mechanical Turk data as the difference between asking a respondent to describe their level of risk acceptance in a neutral setting, versus actually measuring risky behavior in the presence of a threat cue.

Unpacking these results further, I run additional models using only survival frames and mortality frames. Effectively halving the sample size ( $n = 138$ ), we see that the positive relationship between conservatism and risky behavior persists in the context of a survival frame (Model III), but falls out of significance in the model that only uses mortality frames (Model IV). Table 3 explains why this is the case. I dichotomize political ideology and conduct a series of difference-in-means tests. Looking at the first row we see, aggregating across all respondents, that the mortality frame induces an approximately 22 point increase in the probability of selecting the riskier of the two response options. Moving to the second row, we see that this relationship is even more pronounced among liberals, the probability of selecting the riskier option increasing by approximately 28 points. In contrast, the third row shows that the change in frame made no statistically significant difference in the probability of a conservative selecting the riskier of the two options. Finally, looking to the forth row - the differences between liberals and conservatives - we see that within the context of a survival frame, conservatives were 25 points more likely than liberals to select the riskier of the two options, but shifting to the mortality frame, no statistically significant difference between liberals and conservatives exists. Liberals and conservatives appear to vary in the risk preferences when the emphasis is on saving lives, but the two ideological poles appear to converge in their patterns of risky behavior when death is a forgone conclusion.

## DISCUSSION

The hypothesis predicted a positive correlation between conservatism and risky behavior - a pattern that emerged in the context of survival frames (lives saved), but not within mortality frames (deaths averted). While the evidence appears to affirm the hypothesis, the strength of the affirmation depends on how we interpret the treatment effects of the two different frames. One interpretation is that survival frames do not constitute a treatment, but mortality frames do. If this is the case, then the findings are anomalous since the predicted relationship between conservatism and risky behavior only emerged in survival frames, i.e. the absence of a treatment. Such an interpretation would directly contradict the negative correlation between conservatism and risk acceptance observed by Kam and Simas in their own data, as well as the NES and WVS data.

A more plausible interpretation is that both survival frames and mortality frames constitute a treatment, but that this treatment varies in strength. An existential threat is present in both types of frames. The difference is that the threat is implicit when the respondent attempts to save lives in the context of a survival frame, but is explicit

when the respondent attempts to minimize deaths in a mortality frame. In other words, survival frames treat the respondent with a threat cue of lower intensity than a mortality frame. If this is the case, then the results suggest that conservatives are more sensitive to threats compared to liberals. This accords with the literature that conservatives are both more sensitive to threat cues (Oxley et al. 2008), and are motivated by threat avoidance to a greater extent than are liberals (Carney et al. 2008; Janoff-Bulman 2009; Jost et al. 2003, 2007; Jost and Amodio 2011).

All told, we can explain the divergence in risk preferences between liberals and conservatives as a function of conservatives' greater sensitivity to threat cues. In contrast, a more explicit threat in the form of the mortality frame causes the risk preferences of liberals and conservatives to converge, as liberals experience the same increase in risk acceptance that the conservatives experience with the more implicit threat.

Figure 2 captures this implication visually. As first described by Kahneman and Tversky (1979), the Cartesian plane pictured here displays how much perceived utility an individual receives by minimizing loss as opposed to increasing gains. The greater the amount of perceived utility, the more risk the individual will be willing to undertake to achieve the outcome. Prospect theory predicts that the perceived utility of a one unit decrease in the likelihood of a loss will be greater than the perceived utility of a one unit increase in the likelihood of a gain. Kahneman and Tversky depict this by drawing the utility function on the left side of the Y-axis (the domain of prospective losses) as having a greater slope than the right side of the Y-axis (the domain of prospective gains). Imagine that the dotted line represents the utility function of an individual who potentially stands to gain or lose some material benefit  $x$ . According to the theory, the individual will place greater value on avoiding the loss of  $x$  compared to gaining  $x$ , and as a consequence will incur relatively greater risk in avoiding the potential loss.

Now imagine that we are no longer talking about material losses and gains, but the potential to gain and lose a life. As before, the side left of the Y-axis denotes the domain of losing a life (i.e. a mortality frame) whereas the right side of the Y-axis represents the potential gain of a life (i.e. a survival frame). In this context, there is an existential threat, although the clarity of the threat varies by frame type. Conservatives (the black line) experience an increase in their utility as a consequence of being more sensitive to threats, whereas liberals (the grey line) experience no such change. Moving from right to left and entering the domain of the mortality frame, the utility functions (and by implication, the risk preferences) of liberals and conservatives converge.

Returning to the question of foreign policy preferences, this pattern of risk preference convergence matches what we observed in the Chicago Council of Global Affairs data. Note that in Figure 1, at no point does liberal support for anti-terrorist activities exceed that of conservatives. If risk preferences inform foreign policy preferences, then one of the reasons why this may be the case is because conservatives are more sensitive to the terrorist threat, and consequentially have a greater tolerance for the risks associated with anti-terrorist activities. Following the attacks on 9/11, liberal and conservative support for anti-terrorist activities converge. At no point in U.S. history has the extent of the terrorist threat been more explicit, thus the terrorist threat resembles a mortality frame - a "treatment" powerful enough to overcome liberals' relative lack of sensitivity. Comparisons between the terrorist threat and the mortality frames previously discussed are not merely academic, but have a firm basis in the realities of foreign policy making. As Vice President Cheney put it, "if we make the wrong choice, then the danger is that

we'll get hit again.”<sup>2</sup>

The evidence presented thus far helps explain why conservative support for anti-terrorist activities exceeds that of liberals, and why the preferences of liberals and conservatives converged in the wake of the 9/11 attacks. However, a question still remains regarding the subsequent divergence of preferences over time. Why did conservative support for combatting terrorism decrease more slowly than liberal support?

Boydston and Ledgerwood's recent work on the durability of different framing effects suggest a possible explanation. By exposing participants to both loss and gain frames in varying order, Boydston and Ledgerwood find that the increase in risk acceptance brought on by a loss frame is more enduring relative to the increase in risk aversion brought on by a gain frame (2014). This leaves us to ask whether this phenomenon holds constant across the political spectrum. If conservatives are more sensitive to threat cues compared to liberals, we should expect such sensitivity to influence both the intensity and *duration* of framing effects. In other words, if both liberals and conservatives are exposed to a threat cue, we might expect the increase in risk acceptance to last longer for conservatives than for liberals.

**H<sub>2</sub>:** Once exposed to a perceived threat, the increase in risk acceptance among conservatives will endure longer than the increase in risk acceptance among liberals.

## CHANGE IN RISK PREFERENCES ACROSS TIME

To test the hypothesis I use data provided by Kam and Simas from their 2010 study of innate risk preferences. Kam and Simas expose participants to one survival frame and one mortality in a randomized order. They find that the relationship between the respondent's innate level of risk acceptance and the likelihood of selecting the riskier policy option weakens from the first frame to the second. The resulting data set has 761 observations. Summary statistics are displayed in Table 1.

Recall the earlier assumption that both survival frames and mortality frames constitute a “treatment” of varying strength, the treatment being some form of threat cue. In the case of the Kam and Simas data, this threat is a hypothetical outbreak of smallpox. Continuing with this assumption, we are interested in measuring the extent to which the is treatment effect persists from one frame to the subsequent frame. In other words, we should expect the change in risk preferences brought on by the first frame to influence the choice of policy options within the second frame. Specifically we are interested in whether conservatives carry more risk acceptance with them when they encounter the second frame. In contrast, the null hypothesis predicts that change in conservative risk preferences over time will mimic the change in liberal risk preferences over the same period.

We are interested in change in the respondent's risky behavior. To model this dependent variable, I code a respondent's selection of the riskier of the two policy options within the first frame as  $T_1 = 1$ . Similarly, if the respondent selected the riskier of the two policy options within the second frame, then  $T_2 = 1$ . I then subtract  $T_1$  from

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<sup>2</sup>Taken from Vice President and Mrs. Cheney's remarks at a town hall meeting in Des Moines, Iowa, September 7<sup>th</sup>, 2004, <http://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2004/09/20040907-8.html>.

T<sub>2</sub>. The resulting dependent variable captures whether the respondent’s choices became riskier from the first frame to the second, where a “1” indicates a shift in favor of the riskier policy option, a “-1” denotes a shift away from the riskier policy option, and a “0” represents no change between frames.

To explain this trichotomized outcome I employ an ordinal logic model very similar to the logistic model used earlier. Again, I control for education and household income, although the Kam and Simas data set only has 4 response options for education (compared to 6 within the Mechanical Turk data), while household income has 19 response options (compared to 9 for the Mechanical Turk data). Age, sex, and race are all controlled for, although the Kam and Simas data do not have a specific response category for Asians. Because we are using both survival frames and mortality frames, I no longer control for frame type, but instead include a dummy variable to denote whether the respondent is presented with a mortality frame first and then a survival frame, or vice versa. The biggest difference between the two data sets is the introduction of a new control - *risk acceptance*. Using a battery of seven questions, Kam and Simas construct a composite measure of individuals’ innate tendency to accept risk. They find that higher risk acceptance increases the likelihood of the respondent choosing the riskier of the two policy options for both frames, but has no statistically significant relationship with *change* in risk preferences. The complete model is below.

$$\begin{aligned} \text{Dependent Variable: (Change in Risky Behavior Between Frames [-1,1])} = & \beta_0 + \\ & \beta_1 (\text{Mortality Frame 1st, Survival Frame 2nd [0,1]}) + \beta_2 (\text{Conservatism [1,7]}) + \\ & \beta_3 (\text{Risk Acceptance}) + \beta_4 (\text{Age}) + \beta_5 (\text{Education [1,4]}) + \\ & \beta_6 (\text{Household Income [1,19]}) + \beta_7 (\text{Female [0,1]}) + \beta_8 (\text{Hispanic [0,1]}) + \\ & \beta_9 (\text{Black [0,1]}) + \epsilon \end{aligned}$$

The results from the ordinal logic are contained in Table 4 in terms of odds ratios, with the z-scores shown in the parentheses. A Brant test reveals the failure of the parallel regression assumption for the covariate *household income*. Running models III and IV without household income produces little change in the results.

The sequence of frames is the most powerful predictor of risky choices by far, while *risk acceptance* is statistically insignificant in all models, striking home the importance of context in shaping risk preferences. Depending on the model specification, the odds ratios for conservatism vary from 1.1 to 1.13. Holding all other covariates at their means, individuals who are extremely liberal have an estimated probability of  $\approx 0.128$  of behaving in a riskier fashion at time 2 compared to Time 1. For those who are extremely conservative, the estimated probability of shifting towards riskier choices is  $\text{Pr} \approx 0.215$ .

However, our focus is the erosion of risky behavior, not its increase. Just as conservatives have a relatively higher likelihood of shifting towards riskier choices at Time 2 compared to liberals, conservatives are less likely to experience a decrease in risk-taking behavior, as Figure 3 makes clear. In Figure 3 the X-axis is the 7-point scale of political ideology, while the Y-axis is the predicted probability of the respondent shifting away from riskier choice between Time 1 and Time 2. Examining the different box plots, we can see that individuals who are extremely liberal have about a 1 in 4 chance of making a less risky choice at Time 2 compared to Time 1 ( $\text{Pr} \approx 0.25$ ). In comparison, those who are extremely conservative are approximately ten percentage points less likely than liberals to experience a similar shift away from risky behavior ( $\text{Pr} \approx 0.15$ ).



## CONCLUSION

This article asks whether the threat-induced increases in risk acceptance predicted by prospect theory vary between individuals of different political ideology. I propose that such variation offers insight into policy preference formation, specifically why the public appetite for such risky activities as combatting terrorism abroad tends to converge in the wake of an unambiguous threat, only to subsequently diverge along partisan lines. The evidence presented in this paper suggests three distinct points of variation between the risk preferences of liberals versus those of conservatives.

**I:** Conservatives tend to be more risk acceptant than liberals in the context of a threat cue.

Past inquires regarding the relationship between political ideology and risk preferences have yielded mixed evidence. The emerging consensus within political psychology is that conservatives tend to be risk averse (Jost et al. 2003, 2007; Carney 2008). However, Wildavsky and Dake show that subject matter is key, as conservatives are actually *more* tolerant of risk pertaining to technological innovation relative to liberals (1990). More recent studies by Kam and Simas affirm that the choice of language matters even more, with frame type being two to three times more powerful a predictor of risky behavior than individuals' intrinsic levels of risk acceptance (2010).

Risk preferences appear to be highly context specific, as shown by the relatively weak (but statistically robust) correlations between conservatism and risk aversion identified in the ANES and WVS data sets. Introducing a threat cue into the decision making calculus tends to increase the risk acceptance of all actors, with conservatives' risk acceptance exceeding that of liberals' regardless of the manner in which the threat is presented.

**II:** The risk preferences of conservatives tend to be stickier than those of liberals in the presence of a threat cue.

This phenomenon appears in the difference-in-means tests between survival frames and mortality frames. Table 3 shows that the likelihood of selecting the riskier policy option increases as respondents move from survival frames to mortality frames. However, the increase for liberals is more than double that of conservatives. While both frame types influence conservatives' risk preferences, only mortality frames induced significant increase in risky behavior among liberals.

Both frame types contain a threat cue. However, the threat cue is weaker in the survival frame than in the mortality frame. This suggests that conservatives' greater sensitivity to the survival frame may imply a greater sensitivity to threats in general. One consequence of this greater sensitivity is that conservative risk preferences are less likely to change relative to liberals' so long as some form of threat cue is present.

A new model based on data from Kam and Simas' 2010 study provides evidence that this may be the case. Controlling for both the order at which frames were presented, as well as the respondents' intrinsic risk acceptance, the results suggest that conservatives have a greater likelihood vis-à-vis liberals of experiencing an increase in risk-taking behavior following exposure to multiple frames. Similarly, conservatives are less likely than liberals to experience a decrease in risk-taking behavior in the same duration.

Taken together, the findings paint a picture of conservatives having a greater sensitivity to threat cues. This greater sensitivity causes conservatives to experience an increase in risk acceptance with a threat cue of relatively low intensity. However, as the threat becomes clearer, liberals experience a similar increase in risk acceptance, effectively “catching up” to conservatives and causing the differences in risk preferences between the two ideological camps to disappear. The risk preferences of liberal and conservatives are out-of-sync with one another. This may explain why the foreign policy preferences of liberals and conservatives vary in their responsiveness to changes in the international environment.

Future research will need to explore the question of external validity. In order to better replicate the findings of Kam and Simas, I borrow their framing language concerning a hypothetical outbreak of smallpox. However, foreign policy objectives vary in the intensity of their threat cues relative to the smallpox scenario. At the same time, foreign policy objectives vary greatly in their subject matter. Future studies should incorporate a broader range of hypothetical scenarios to determine the extent of concurrence between actual foreign policy preferences and the findings presented here.

This study has sought to explain one possible source of foreign policy preferences, with direct implications for our understanding of public opinion. However, these findings may also shed light on the actual crafting of foreign policy. Extending the scope of these findings to explain foreign policy decision-making, we must make at least one of the following two assumptions. The first assumption is that the samples used are representative enough to provide inference regarding the decision-making processes of political elites. This may be the case, but there are numerous differences between voters and political elites that I have not accounted for here. Future studies will need to control for the fact that political elites tend to be older, wealthier, better educated, and possibly more *ambitious* than the typical U.S. citizen. Ambition is likely to confound any assessment of risk preferences, so future works will need to control for this personality attribute.

The second assumption concerns the question of the electoral connection. If the first assumption is untenable given the available evidence, inference regarding the actual crafting of foreign policy may still be possible if we are willing to assume that political elites have a sufficiently strong electoral connection to their constituencies (Mayhew 1974). Unfortunately, there is little consensus in this regard. All told, differences in risk preferences between liberals and conservatives represent an important component to our understanding of foreign policy preferences. However, the question of whether such differences play a role in the actual crafting of foreign policy is likely to prove a difficult, albeit rewarding puzzle for the near future.

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## APPENDIX

**Table 1: Summary Statistics**

|                               | <b>Mechanical<br/>Turk<br/>(2014)</b> | <b>Kam and<br/>Simas<br/>(2008)</b> | <b>U.S.<br/>Population</b> |
|-------------------------------|---------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|----------------------------|
| <b>% With College Degree:</b> | 41.62%                                | 29.5%                               | 35.3%                      |
| <b>Mean Household Income:</b> | \$44,951                              | \$46,406                            | \$51,017                   |
| <b>Mean Age:</b>              | 28.5                                  | 48                                  | 35.3                       |
| <b>% Female:</b>              | 33.92%                                | 50%                                 | 50.76%                     |
| <b>% White:</b>               | 79.07%                                | 74.5%                               | 72.4%                      |
| <b>% Hispanic:</b>            | 3.3%                                  | 10.02%                              | 16.04%                     |
| <b>% Black:</b>               | 4.4%                                  | 10.1%                               | 12.6%                      |
| <b>% Asian:</b>               | 10.57%                                | -                                   | 4.8%                       |
| <b>Observations:</b>          | 300                                   | 761                                 |                            |

**Table 2: Odds Ratios of Selecting the Riskier Option**

|                        | I                 | II                | III                | IV                  |
|------------------------|-------------------|-------------------|--------------------|---------------------|
| <b>Frames<br/>Used</b> | All<br>Frames     | All<br>Frames     | Survival<br>Frames | Mortality<br>Frames |
| Conservatism           | 1.21**<br>(2.36)  | 1.21**<br>(2.27)  | 1.31**<br>(2.03)   | 1.12<br>(0.99)      |
| Mortality Frame        | 3.09***<br>(4.27) | 3.16***<br>(4.27) | -                  | -                   |
| Age                    | 0.99<br>(-0.54)   | 0.99<br>(-0.38)   | 0.97<br>(-1.06)    | 1.01<br>(0.61)      |
| Education              | 0.86<br>(-1.53)   | 0.85<br>(-1.58)   | 0.97<br>(-0.20)    | 0.75**<br>(-2.06)   |
| Household Income       | 0.9*<br>(-1.84)   | 0.9*<br>(-1.7)    | 0.87<br>(-1.5)     | 0.93<br>(-0.86)     |
| Female                 | -                 | 0.85<br>(-0.53)   | 1.09<br>(0.2)      | 0.68<br>(-0.93)     |
| Hispanic               | -                 | 1.56<br>(0.91)    | 2.21<br>(1.11)     | 1.17<br>(0.24)      |
| Black                  | -                 | 1.5<br>(0.77)     | 2.54<br>(1.14)     | 1.0<br>(0.0)        |
| Asian                  | -                 | 2.03<br>(1.45)    | 1.93<br>(1.01)     | 2.226<br>(1.07)     |
| $\alpha$               | 0.65<br>(-0.63)   | 0.57<br>(-0.78)   | 0.46<br>(-0.69)    | 2.18<br>(0.82)      |
| Observations           | 279               | 276               | 138                | 138                 |
| Log-Likelihood         | -172.12           | -168.48           | -75.03             | -90.63              |
| B.I.C.                 | 378.03            | 393.17            | 194.40             | 225.61              |

Z-scores in parentheses.  $p < 0.1$  \*;  $p < 0.05$  \*\*;  $p < 0.01$  \*\*\*

Source: Amazon Mechanical Turk, 2014 (n = 300)

**Table 3: Probability of Selecting the Riskier Option  
Across Frame Type and Political Ideology**

|                         | Survival<br>Frame | Mortality<br>Frame | $\Delta$  |
|-------------------------|-------------------|--------------------|-----------|
| <b>All Respondents:</b> | 0.293<br>(150)    | 0.52<br>(150)      | 0.227 *** |
| <b>Liberals:</b>        | 0.188<br>(85)     | 0.472<br>(91)      | 0.284 *** |
| <b>Conservatives:</b>   | 0.439<br>(41)     | 0.578<br>(38)      | 0.139     |
| $\Delta$                | 0.25***           | 0.1                |           |

Note:  $n = 300$ , with 176 self-described liberals and 79 conservatives.

Source: Amazon Mechanical Turk, 2014 ( $n = 300$ ).

Number of observations in parentheses.  $p < 0.01$  \*\*\*

**Table 4: Odds Ratios of Respondent Becoming More Risk Acceptant Between Frames (Ordinal Logit)**

(Increase in Risk Acceptance = 1; No Change = 0; Decrease in Risk Acceptance = -1)

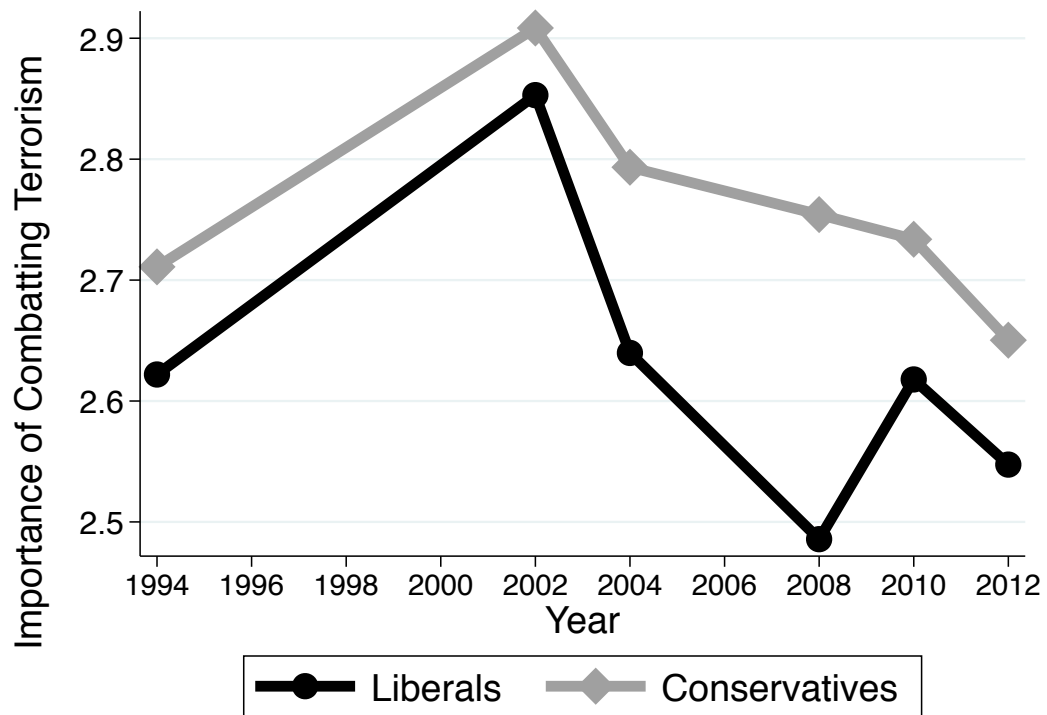
|                                     | I                  | II                | III               | IV                |
|-------------------------------------|--------------------|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|
| Conservatism                        | 1.1*               | 1.13**            | 1.1*              | 1.12**            |
|                                     | (1.95)             | (2.23)            | (1.92)            | (2.21)            |
| Risk Acceptance                     | 1.42               | 1.35              | 1.41              | 1.34              |
|                                     | (0.75)             | (0.62)            | (0.72)            | (0.6)             |
| Age                                 | 0.99               | 0.99              | 0.99              | 0.99              |
|                                     | (-0.19)            | (-0.31)           | (-0.15)           | (-0.27)           |
| Education                           | 1.04               | 1.04              | 1.02              | 1.02              |
|                                     | (0.59)             | (0.57)            | (0.38)            | (0.33)            |
| Household Income                    | 0.98               | 0.98              | -                 | -                 |
|                                     | (-0.58)            | (-0.67)           |                   |                   |
| Female                              | -                  | 1.18              | -                 | 1.18              |
|                                     |                    | (1.09)            |                   | (1.12)            |
| Hispanic                            | -                  | 0.71              | -                 | 0.72              |
|                                     |                    | (-1.31)           |                   | (-1.28)           |
| Black                               | -                  | 0.7               | -                 | 0.72              |
|                                     |                    | (-1.33)           |                   | (-1.25)           |
| Survival Frame →<br>Mortality Frame | 6.48***<br>(10.22) | 6.14***<br>(9.78) | 6.4***<br>(10.22) | 6.06***<br>(9.77) |
| $\alpha_1$                          | -0.28              | -0.25             | -0.23             | -0.18             |
| $\alpha_2$                          | 3.18               | 3.24              | 3.23              | 3.31              |
| Observations                        | 741                | 722               | 741               | 722               |
| Log-Likelihood                      | -616.59            | -597.43           | -616.76           | -597.65           |
| B.I.C.                              | 1286.06            | 1273.84           | 1279.78           | 1267.7            |

A Brant test found *Household Income* to violate the parallel regression assumption.

Z-scores in parentheses. p < 0.1 \*; p < 0.05 \*\*; p < 0.01 \*\*\*

Source: Kam and Simas, 2010

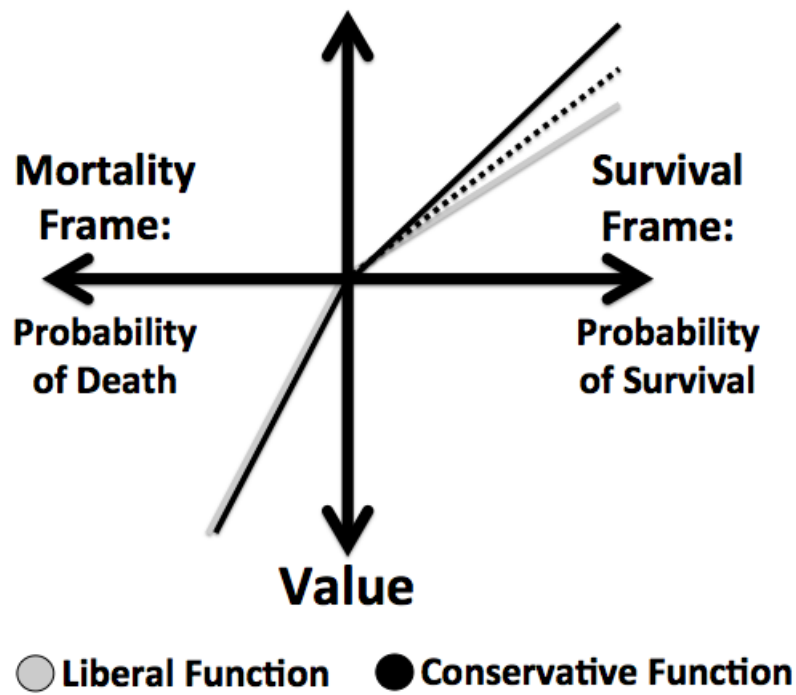
**Figure 1: Divergence in Foreign Policy Preferences:  
Importance of Combatting Terrorism**



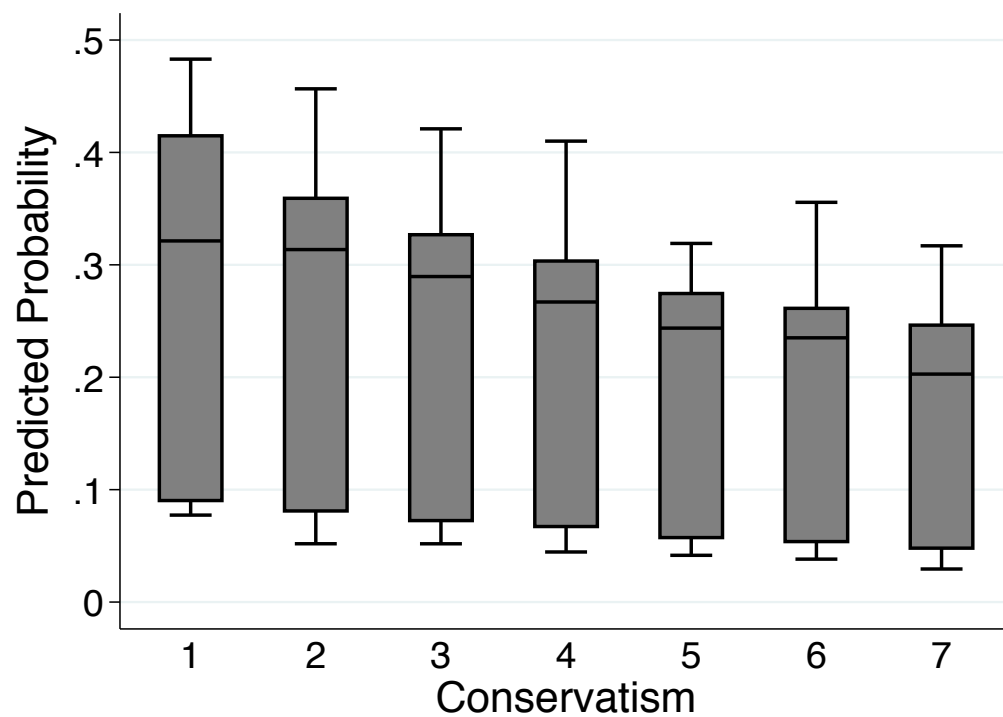
Source: Chicago Council on Global Affairs



Figure 2: Utility Functions of Liberals and Conservatives by Frame Type



**Figure 3: Predicted Probabilities of A Decrease In Risky Behavior by Level of Conservatism**



Source: Ordinal logit. Data from Kam and Simas, 2010