

When God and Government Collide: A Pre-Post Study of Evangelicals Surrounding the US Supreme Court Decision on Same-Sex Marriage

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Introduction

- Over the past several decades, secularization as well as support for same-sex marriage has greatly increased in the US
- This dramatic shift has led some Evangelicals to perceive themselves as being “under attack” or oppressed, especially by the LGBTQ community
- Compensatory control theory (Kay et al., 2008) suggests that when people’s personal control is threatened, they search for a source of external control to restore order
- Research has shown both greater support for **religion** (Kay et al., 2010) and greater support for **government** (Jost & Hunyady, 2002; Kay et al., 2008) under threat
- However, we argue that Evangelicals feeling threatened by shifting social attitudes should cling more closely to religious beliefs, and become more system-critical (i.e., less system-justifying)

Hypotheses

- We predict that individuals who perceive an increase in threat (from W1 to W2) will increase in fundamentalist beliefs and religious self-identity, and decrease in religion as quest
- We also predict that they will decrease in system justification and have more negative attitudes toward the US Supreme Court (SCOTUS)
- However, in this population, we do **not** predict that increased perceived threat will predict greater support for free speech
- Some theories of threat and defense accord special role for **anxiety**; we tested anxiety as a mediator in these relationships as an exploratory research question

Participants & Procedure

- 400 US Evangelical Christians from Mechanical Turk
- Gender: 59% women, 41% men
- Race: 81% White, 9% Black, 4% Hispanic, 6% all other races
- Denomination: 43% Baptist, 18% Pentecostal, 12% Non-denominational, 27% all other denominations
- Two waves of data collection:
 - Wave 1: June 10 – 18, 2015
 - (SCOTUS decision: June 26, 2015)
 - Wave 2: June 29 – July 3, 2015

Measures

Perceived threat:

- 13 items measuring perception that Christians are under attack (W1 $\alpha = .94$, W2 $\alpha = .97$)
 - E.g., “If society keeps going the way it currently is, the Christian faith might soon be criminalized”
 - “Christians are the most oppressed minority in America today”

Religious identity:

- Religious Fundamentalism scale (Altemeyer & Hunsberger, 2004; 12 items; W1 $\alpha = .89$, W2 $\alpha = .96$)
- Religion as Quest scale (Batson & Schoenrade, 1991; 12 items; W1 $\alpha = .84$, W2 $\alpha = .86$)
- Religious Collective Self-Identity scale (Burris & Jackson, 2000; 4 items; W1 $\alpha = .89$, W2 $\alpha = .90$)

System attitudes:

- System Justification scale (Kay & Jost, 2003; 8 items; W1 $\alpha = .85$, W2 $\alpha = .85$)
- Censorship and Freedom of Speech scale (Altemeyer, 1996; 4 items; W1 $\alpha = .71$, W2 $\alpha = .66$)
- Perceived legitimacy of SCOTUS (10 items; W1 $\alpha = .94$, W2 $\alpha = .95$)
 - E.g., “The U.S. Supreme Court can usually be trusted to make decisions that are right for the country as a whole”

Anxiety:

- State anxiety from State-Trait Anxiety Inventory (Marteau & Bekker, 1992; 6 items; W1 $\alpha = .88$, W2 $\alpha = .90$)

Conclusions

- Increases in perceived threat from before to after the SCOTUS ruling predicted more system critical attitudes:
 - Decreased system justification
 - More negative perceptions of SCOTUS
 - Contrary to predictions, decreased support for free speech
- Increases in perceived threat also predicted greater reliance on more extreme forms of religious identity:
 - Increased fundamentalism
 - Decreased quest orientation
 - Increased religious collective self-identity
- Some evidence for a role of anxiety between threat and system justification, but no evidence that anxiety mediated the effect of threat on religious identity

Results

Analysis:

- Assessed whether changes (from W1 to W2) in perceived threat predicted changes (from W1 to W2) in system attitudes and religious identity
- Regressed W2 threat on W1 threat, saved residuals to get residualized W2 scores; same process for each DV
 - W1 threat = “Baseline threat”
 - Residualized W2 threat = “Change in threat”

Table 1. Standardized regression coef. predicting changes in system attitudes and religious identity

Change in DV	Baseline Threat	Change in Threat
System justification	-.03	-.11*
Legitimacy of SCOTUS	-.34***	-.51***
Support for free speech	.02	-.24***
Fundamentalism	.10*	.66***
Religion as quest	-.09	-.26***
Religious self-identity	.14**	.43***

Table 2. Indirect effects of change in threat through change in anxiety

Dependent Variable	B	95% CI
System justification	-.05**	[-.09, -.02]
Legitimacy of SCOTUS	-.04***	[-.06, -.02]
Support for free speech	-.03*	[-.07, -.004]
Fundamentalism	.02	[-.01, .05]
Religion as quest	.01	[-.02, .03]
Religious self-identity	.03	[-.004, .07]

Figure 1: Mediation model diagram

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graph LR; A[Change in Threat] --> B[Change in Anxiety]; A --> C[Change in DV]; B <--> C;
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Implications

- This research provides insight into how psychological threat and defensive responses play out in real-world situations and over time
- Knowing how groups react to a perceived loss of power in society can help us to understand the multiple avenues groups can take to respond to threatened identities
- Although research on defense has shown greater support for religion and government under threat, such endorsement of the status quo may change when the source of threat is government itself
- Free speech may be a double-edged sword, and groups seeking to **regain** lost power may be less supportive of free speech than historically oppressed groups trying to gain influence
- Anxiety may provide a mechanism for some forms of defensive reactions to threat, but further work is needed to determine when and how it operates