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## **Political Orientation Moderates Worldview Defense in Response to Osama bin Laden's Death**

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## BRIEF REPORT

## Political Orientation Moderates Worldview Defense in Response to Osama bin Laden's Death

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This study examined 480 Americans' psychological attitudes following Osama bin Laden's death. We tracked changes in how different participants responded to dissimilar others from the night of bin Laden's death for five weeks. Liberal participants reported lower worldview defense (i.e., a defensive reaction to uphold one's cultural worldview) immediately after bin Laden's death but then increased over time. Conservative participants reported greater worldview defense during each point of the study and did not significantly change over time. These temporal differences between liberals and conservatives were only present in the year of bin Laden's death and not in a comparison sample ( $N = 329$ ) collected 1 year prior. These findings demonstrate that the attitudes of liberals and conservatives may change in theoretically predictable ways following a major societal event.

*Keywords:* political psychology, field study, worldview defense, moral foundations theory

The death of Osama bin Laden was one of the most significant political events of 2011. Some people even took to the streets to celebrate the demise of a leader who organized the largest terrorist attack in American history. Indicators of his death were everywhere—newspaper headlines, Internet media outlets, TV programs, and Facebook status updates. Vendors even enjoyed a large increase in the sale of American flags (Rowell, 2011).

Bin Laden's death initiated a period of reflection on how the United States had changed in the decade since September 11, 2001. In a recent commentary, Morgan, Wisneski, and Skitka (2011) took a retrospective look at research on the psychological impact of 9/11, noting both positive and negative consequences. Among the positive reactions were a greater sense of social closeness and more prosocial behavior. Yet people also reacted with

misplaced aggression toward various ethnic and religious groups, and public support for war greatly increased. These reactions—both positive and negative—may be attributed to differences in how individuals defend their moral and cultural worldviews in the face of threats to cherished values (Morgan et al., 2011). When the architect of 9/11 died, some Americans may have experienced a surge of positive emotions and relief. Others might have felt scared, anticipating retaliation. Considering the wide variety of potential responses to bin Laden's death, it is unclear how the event altered Americans' perceptions of dissimilar others. For example, some individuals may have felt a surge of nationalism, which is associated with harsher attitudes toward outgroups (Skitka, 2005). Other individuals may have considered his death as a symbolic end to the threat of terrorism; these individuals could have experienced increased liking for outgroup members.

It is possible that people's responses to bin Laden's death depended upon their political orientation. Liberals and conservatives tend to draw on different moral foundations that stress different sets of values (Graham, Haidt, & Nosek, 2009). Liberals tend to prioritize values that protect individuals from harm and extend fairness to others more so than other values. Conservatives tend to draw on a broader set of values that include those stressed by liberals, but also loyalty to one's ingroup, authority/respect, and purity. Individuals would likely interpret news of a major political event such as bin Laden's death in light of their values and beliefs. Because liberals and conservatives rely on different values, reactions to bin Laden's death would likely be polarized according to one's political orientation. Indeed, when under threat, conservatives respond with harsher judgments of those who are different from them (Greenberg, Simon, Pyszczynski, Solomon, & Chatel, 1992). In contrast, when under threat, liberals actually show more liking for dissimilar others compared to conservatives (Greenberg et al., 1992). Researchers attribute this partisan polarization to

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liberals' focus on tolerance, which is an extension of the moral foundation of extending fairness to others. Studies like these, and others, suggest that the views of liberals and conservatives may wax and wane in the context of major value-based world events (see Van de Vyver, Houston, Abrams, & Vasiljevic, 2016 for an example of changing attitudes before and after the 2005 London bombings).

In the current study we examined how reductions in societal threat alter individuals' perceptions of outgroup members. We expected that when faced with the prospect of someone criticizing their cultural worldview, conservatives would evaluate that person negatively, and liberals would evaluate that person positively. Further, we expected that this polarization would be most salient immediately after bin Laden's death, and decrease over time as his death became less salient.

### The Present Research

In two large, cross-sectional Internet samples separated by 1 year, we measured how people's worldview defense varied according to the temporal proximity to bin Laden's death. We took advantage of an IRB-approved survey on worldview defense completed in 2010 in order to assess immediate changes in attitudes following bin Laden's death in 2011. In the primary sample, participants provided consent for a study ostensibly on "people's attitudes toward world events" that we posted the night Osama bin Laden died and left open for five weeks. By comparing participants who took the survey at a time of high event salience (i.e., in the hours and days immediately after his death) with participants who took the survey at a time of low event-salience (i.e., later that month), we were able to examine how attitudes changed depending upon the salience of bin Laden's death.

In a comparison sample, existing data from the same survey posted 1 year prior to bin Laden's death were examined to see whether the temporal changes in worldview defense were specific to the aftermath of his death. The comparison sample (collected in 2010) was collected as part of the original IRB application and was statistically compared to the primary sample (collected in 2011).

### Method

#### Participants

**Primary sample.** Participants were 480 online Americans (64.1% female; 76.1% Caucasian/White, 8.6% Black or African American, 7.8% Asian, 3.4% Hispanic/Latino, 4.1% mixed or other races;  $M_{age} = 34.54$ ,  $SD = 12.99$ ) recruited through Amazon's Mechanical Turk (MTurk), which is a reliable and valid source of psychological data (Buhrmester, Kwang, & Gosling, 2011). MTurk allowed for rapid survey posting following bin Laden's death and was the method of data collection by the existing IRB-approved study. Participation was limited to those in the United States, and participants were compensated \$0.25. Recruitment took place from Sunday, May 1, 2011 (the night Osama bin Laden died, within 2 hours of the announcement) through Monday, June 6, 2011. Participation rates were high across weeks (Week 1, May 1–7:  $n = 93$ ; Week 2, May 8–14:  $n = 138$ ; Week 3, May 15–21:  $n = 84$ ; Week 4, May 22–28:  $n = 65$ ; Week 5, May 29–June 6:  $n = 100$ ). bin Laden's death was not mentioned anywhere in the survey.

**Comparison sample.** Participants were 329 online Americans (69.2% female; 73.9% Caucasian/White, 4.9% Black or African American, 7.4% Asian, 6.4% Hispanic/Latino, 7.4% mixed or

other races;  $M_{age} = 33.68$ ,  $SD = 13.39$ ) on MTurk. Participation was limited to those in the United States, and participants were compensated \$0.25, as in the primary sample. Recruitment took place from Friday, May 14, 2010 through Friday, June 4, 2010, approximately 1 year prior to the death of Osama bin Laden and the collection of the primary sample. Participation rates were high across weeks (Week 1, May 14–20:  $n = 76$ ; Week 2, May 21–27:  $n = 94$ ; Week 3, May 28–June 4:  $n = 159$ ).

### Procedure and Materials

**Date of study completion.** For the primary sample, temporal distance from bin Laden's death was measured in days since May 1, with lower values reflecting survey completion closer in time to bin Laden's death. For the comparison sample, time was measured continuously from the beginning to the end of the data collection (May 14 = 1; June 4 = 22).

**Political orientation.** At the end of the survey, participants answered two questions about the extent to which they would describe themselves as (a) liberal and (b) conservative (1 = *Not at all*; 7 = *Extremely*). The items were highly negatively correlated,  $r = -.66$ ,  $p < .001$ , so they were recoded and averaged. Higher values indicate greater conservatism.

**Worldview defense.** Participants read two counterbalanced essays about the United States ostensibly written by two foreigners (one pro-United States, one anti-United States; Greenberg et al., 1992). The pro-United States essay praised the opportunities for success in America; the anti-United States essay criticized the greed and lack of sympathy of Americans. Participants evaluated the truth of each essay, their agreement with each essay, and rated the author's likability, intelligence, and knowledge. Higher scores indicated more positive evaluations. The essay evaluations were averaged and served as measures of *worldview-consistent* (pro-United States essay;  $\alpha = .93$ ) and *worldview-inconsistent* (anti-United States essay;  $\alpha = .87$ ) opinions. Worldview defense was defined as the difference between these measures (i.e., a difference score: worldview-consistent evaluations minus worldview-inconsistent evaluations). Higher scores mean that participants evaluated the worldview-consistent author more positively than the worldview-inconsistent author (i.e., they had greater worldview defense; Chopik & Edelstein, 2014; Schmeichel et al., 2009). As in prior research, a larger discrepancy between how much people like someone who validates their worldview (a similar other) and how much people dislike someone who challenges their worldview (a dissimilar other) serves as a proxy for the defense of their cultural worldview (Greenberg et al., 1990; Schmeichel et al., 2009). Copies of the pro- and anti-United States essays are available from the first author upon request and online at <http://www.tmt.missouri.edu/materials.html>.

### Results

#### Preliminary Analyses

Order of essay presentation (pro- vs. anti-United States) did not interact with any variables ( $ts < .85$ ), so data were collapsed across order for analysis. Table 1 presents zero-order correlations and study descriptives. Replicating previous research, more conservative participants reported higher worldview defense overall

Table 1  
Correlations Among Primary Study Variables

Variable	1	2	3	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
1. Time		.02	.11	13.05	6.27
2. Political orientation	-.04		.28**	3.41	1.62
3. Worldview defense	.06	.35**		1.15	2.07
<i>M</i>	18.30	3.54	1.35		
<i>SD</i>	11.34	1.69	1.96		

Note. Primary sample ( $N = 470\text{--}480$ ) reported in bottom diagonal. Comparison Sample ( $N = 320\text{--}329$ ) reported in upper diagonal.

\*  $p < .05$ . \*\*  $p < .01$ .

than more liberal participants in both samples (Greenberg et al., 1992). Worldview defense and political orientation were unrelated to date at the bivariate level in both samples. In both samples, the mean of worldview defense was above zero, indicating an overall preference for the pro-United States author. Worldview defense did not differ between the samples,  $t(788) = 1.38, p = .17$ .

### Multivariate Analyses

A regression-based moderation analysis examined the main effects of date and political orientation, and their interaction, on worldview defense in the primary sample. In other words, we examined the effect of political orientation on worldview defense as time progressed from closer to bin Laden's death until 5 weeks later. Date and political orientation were mean-centered before computing the interaction term.

The main effect of political orientation found that conservatives reported higher worldview defense overall compared to liberals,  $\beta = .57, p < .001$ . This was qualified by a significant Date  $\times$  Political orientation interaction,  $\beta = -.25, p = .001$ .<sup>1</sup> As seen in Figure 1, more liberal participants reported lower worldview defense immediately after bin Laden's death and higher worldview defense later in the study. Conservative participants showed high worldview defense over the entire study and did not change over time. Worth noting, worldview defense was positive for both liberals and conservatives at every point in the study, but the relative difference between the groups changed over time. There was no main effect of date on worldview defense,  $p = .11$ .<sup>2</sup>

### Analysis of Comparison Sample

Identical regression analyses were conducted with the comparison sample. As in the primary sample, conservatives reported greater worldview defense,  $\beta = .33, p < .01$ . Date of study completion was unrelated to worldview defense,  $p = .20$ . Importantly, the Date  $\times$  Political orientation interaction was not significant,  $p = .40$ .

We then combined both samples (total  $N = 809$  participants) to test whether sample source (primary vs. comparison) moderated the association between date and political orientation in predicting worldview defense (a 3-way, Date  $\times$  Political orientation  $\times$  Sample, interaction). This 3-way interaction more directly tests whether the interaction between date and political orientation was present in one sample (after bin Laden's death) but not in the other sample (prior to bin Laden's death). Indeed, the 3-way interaction was significant,  $\beta = .24, p = .02$ . Thus, the temporal differences

between liberals and conservatives were not present a year prior to bin Laden's death in 2010 but were present immediately after bin Laden's death in 2011.

### Discussion

We found that liberal participants reported lower worldview defense immediately after bin Laden's death but then increased over time. Conservative participants' worldview defense did not significantly change over time. Further, these temporal differences were not found 1 year prior to bin Laden's death. By identifying how ideology might predict changes in attitudes toward outgroup members who criticize one's worldview, results from the current study provide some preliminary insight into the contextual antecedents of intergroup peace and conflict.

We can only speculate why this polarization by political party declined at later points in the study. This major event could have temporarily made people more attentive to their values or provided them with the opportunity to reexamine their place in the world and how they interact with others who have different values from them. For example, perhaps liberal participants' values of tolerance (e.g., extending fairness to others; preventing harm) could have been more salient immediately after bin Laden's death and less so later, explaining why liberal participants showed less worldview defense initially but more worldview defense later. These values may not have been as accessible among participants who took the survey later on in the study; thus, they might not have reacted in such a tolerant way toward dissimilar others. There is some evidence that liberals tend to shift their attitudes more dramatically toward conservative positions following a threat (van Leeuwen & Park, 2009). In the current study, liberals showed the lowest levels of worldview defense after the death of Osama bin Laden. Based on the results of the current study (and others), it may be that liberals' values are *differentially sensitive* to major events—becoming more conservative after increases in threat and more liberal after reductions in threat.

Conservatives appeared to be less affected by the death of bin Laden. One potential explanation for the null effects observed among conservatives could be their broad endorsement of moral foundations and values. Conservatives stress the same moral foundations as liberals (leading to the prediction of greater tolerance), but they also stress more foundations related to ingroup/loyalty and authority/respect (leading to the prediction of lower tolerance). Thus, the pull of two seemingly incompatible moral foundations when confronted with criticism from an outgroup member may lead some conservatives to report greater tolerance and other conservatives to report less tolerance, yielding an overall null effect. Alternatively, conservatives' values may be more stable and

<sup>1</sup> A follow-up analysis suggested that the results were primarily driven by the pro-United States essay (Political orientation  $\times$  Date interaction:  $\beta = -.14, p = .09$ ) rather than the anti-United States essay ( $\beta = .02, p = .85$ ).

<sup>2</sup> An alternative explanation is that bin Laden's death might have served a terror-management function, thus leading to changes in worldview defense among liberals and conservatives in an effort to reduce existential anxiety (Greenberg, Simon, Pyszczynski, Solomon, & Chatel, 1992). A measure of death-related thoughts was included in both samples but death-thought accessibility did not moderate any of the effects reported in text,  $ps > .40$ , suggesting that this possibility is unlikely.

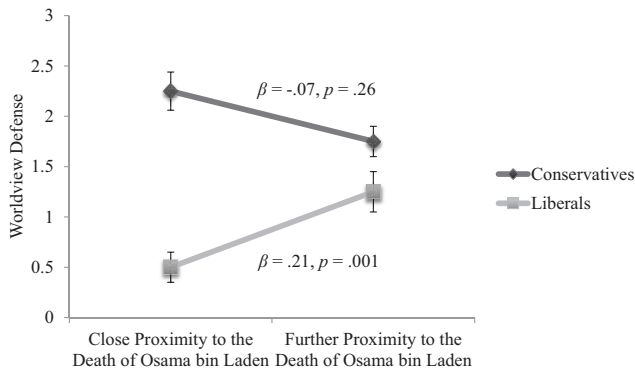


Figure 1. The relation between political orientation, proximity to the death of Osama bin Laden, and worldview defense.

less sensitive to major events. Unfortunately, we did not directly manipulate or measure the accessibility of moral values, the relative importance placed on them, or perceptions of threat. Future research can examine if varying the accessibility of moral values leads to similar political polarization as found in this study.

As with any cross-sectional study, our data cannot speak to causal relationships among the measured variables. It is possible, for example, that bin Laden's death may have shifted actual political orientations in a similar way as found after 9/11 (Huddy & Feldman, 2011; Lambert, Schott, & Scherer, 2011; Morgan et al., 2011; Pyszczynski, Solomon, & Greenberg, 2003). However, if so, there should have been significant correlations between the day of survey completion and political orientation. Since these two variables were unrelated, this possibility is unlikely. Correlational studies also leave open the possibility of third variable explanations. Indeed, because we took advantage of a previously IRB-approved study to measure the effects of bin Laden's death immediately after it happened (i.e., starting that evening), we could not include several measures that would have helped us to better understand why these effects occurred (e.g., measures of the accessibility of moral foundations or Schwartz's value orientations, participants' feelings about the operation that killed bin Laden, perceived threat). Of course there was no way to expect that such an event would occur, nor could we apply for an IRB amendment and add measures in time. Future research can design more controlled experiments in which the mechanisms outlined here can be more formally tested, and also measure other possible confounding variables (socioeconomic status, education, religiosity, immigration status).

Although we can rule out some alternative hypotheses, a host of other explanations could explain the polarization of worldview defense among liberals and conservatives. For example, bin Laden's death could have emphasized the sitting president's military accomplishments or have filled some individuals with antiwar sentiments, thus leading to an increase in liberal-based values of fairness and protecting others from harm. This hypothesis could be supported by the null effect observed among conservative participants. Conversely, other participants may have interpreted bin Laden's death as a different type of threat—a reminder of existing terrorist threats, of evil in the world, or reinforce an "us versus them" mentality. For example, individuals may have been skeptical about the murky details surrounding bin Laden's death, or may have feared retaliation against the

United States from bin Laden's allies. However, if bin Laden's death did serve as a function of general threat, we should have observed a main effect of time (or even a significant effect of time among conservatives) on worldview defense similar to the effects found in other studies examining the onset of threat (Doty, Peterson, & Winter, 1991). It is therefore more likely that major events such as bin Laden's death arouse different values and reactions from different people, which likely affects their attitudes. Nevertheless, feelings of threat have also led to the similar polarizing effects found in the current study (Greenberg et al., 1992; Van de Vyver et al., 2016).

The present study extends research on political orientation by providing preliminary evidence for how individuals behave when their cultural worldviews are challenged. We have documented important differences in how people responded in the immediate aftermath of bin Laden's death. These novel findings advance perspectives on how individuals respond to major societal events and may have implications for promoting peace and reducing conflict with dissimilar others who challenge our core values.

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