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THE THREAT OF TERRORISM AND SUPPORT FOR THE 2008 PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATES: RESULTS OF A NATIONAL FIELD EXPERIMENT

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ABSTRACT

How do concerns about terrorism affect the way Americans view the 2008 presidential candidates? How would an event that increases the prominence of terrorism, like a threat or attack, affect the 2008 election? Past theory and research are ambivalent on these questions. In this paper we empirically investigate the effects of exposure to a journalistic account of an imminent terror threat in a national (N = 1,282), internet-based field experiment. Overall, we find that exposure to terror threats increased concerns about "homeland security" without affecting candidate preferences. However, analysis of politically moderate respondents - a substantial subset of the total sample (40%) with a high rate of undecided, likely voters - showed that this group expressed significantly lower support for Senator John McCain when exposed to the terror threat than in the control condition. These findings converge with past research suggesting that Americans' views of the war on terror have changed significantly (Davis and Silver 2004) and that terror threats may serve as "anti-rally" events for candidates with unpopular foreign policies, especially among moderate or undecided voters (Bali 2007). We conclude by proposing a more general model of the effects of external threats on leader preferences suggested by past and present research.

INTRODUCTION

Since the attacks of September 11, 2001 (hereafter 9/11), terrorism has become an important issue in American presidential politics. Scholars and journalists agree that the threat of terrorism has played a significant role in shaping perceptions of President George W. Bush. After 9/11, all polls of President Bush's approval rating registered a large and immediate increase. According to Gallup poll data, the percentage of Americans reporting approval of Bush's job performance increased from 51% on September 10, 2001 to 86% in the poll released on September 15. This was the largest change between consecutive presidential approval polls ever documented by Gallup. Further, exit polling following the 2004 presidential election indicates that terrorism and national security were among the most commonly cited issues motivating Bush's supporters (CNN 2004), rivaling even the widely-publicized factor of "moral values." This evidence suggests that the effects of terrorism concerns on perceptions of the current presidential candidates could again play a significant role in the outcome of the 2008 presidential election. A presidential candidate's perceived ability to handle terrorist threats is likely now a major factor in his or her political viability.

Because of evidence that the threat of terrorism buttressed support for President Bush following 9/11, it is often assumed that support for 2008 presidential candidate John McCain is also driven in part by such concerns. This is a plausible assumption since Bush and McCain share a party affiliation and generally support the same policies on terrorism. In addition, Bush has endorsed McCain (Cooper and Bumiller 2008). In the Summer of 2008, McCain's chief campaign strategist, Charlie Black, noted that a terrorist attack on U.S. soil would be advantageous for the McCain campaign (Whitford 2008). This opinion is not unusual, as several political commentators have also argued that support for McCain and other Republicans would be increased if events made terrorism a more prominent issue to Americans (Weisman and Kornblut 2008; Gordon 2008; Scarborough 2008; Shear 2008).

But is this assumption, that McCain's support would be buttressed by the threat of terrorism in the same way Bush's was, accurate? Some evidence suggests that the connection between the threat of terrorism and support for Bush has weakened or even reversed since 9/11 (Davis and Silver 2004). In addition, the political landscape has changed substantially since Bush's first term, with support for Bush and the Iraq war declining tremendously. It is possible that views of Bush's approach to the "war on terror," one that McCain largely follows, have experienced a similar slide. Further, evidence from the aftermath of the 2004 Madrid bombing suggests it is possible that the "rally around the flag" effects of terror threats that many conjecture increased Bush's approval ratings throughout his first term (e.g., Willer 2004; Eichenberger et al. 2006) could have the opposite effect on candidates from an incumbent party associated with unpopular foreign policies (Bali 2007). More generally, uncertainty exists on exactly which of several possible theoretical mechanisms was responsible for the effect of terror concerns on support for Bush (Willer 2004; Orehek et al. 2008), complicating prediction of the future effects of the threat of terrorism.

As a result, it remains in question how terrorism concerns will affect support for presidential candidates John McCain and Barack Obama in the 2008 election. In the sections that follow we review past empirical research on the threat of terrorism and views of the president. We then

present the methods and results of a national field experiment designed to investigate the impact of terror threats on support for the 2008 presidential candidates. Finally, we discuss the implications of these findings and limitations of the present research.

PAST RESEARCH

Terror and Support for Bush

Terrorism has become arguably the most significant political issue of the past decade in the United States. Efforts to combat terrorism are among the most prominent factors in domestic perceptions of the president, as well as international perceptions of the U.S. Concerns regarding terrorism were cited as the motivation for the ongoing military operations in Iraq and Afghanistan. The Patriot Act, perhaps the most significant legislation on Americans' rights and liberties in decades, was passed in service of the fight against terrorism. More recently, the interrogation tactics and detention policies used by the U.S. in the fight against terrorism have led to substantial domestic and international criticism of the U.S. government. Thus, terrorism lies at the center of contemporary American politics.

Accordingly, since 9/11 a substantial amount of research has investigated how terrorism and policy responses to terrorism influence public opinion in the contemporary U.S. As noted above, past research has linked the threat of terrorism with support for President Bush. For example, a time-series analysis showed that government issued-terror warnings were followed by increases in Bush's Gallup approval level between 2001 and 2004 (Willer 2004). More recently, Nacos et al. (2006) analyzed the effect of media reports indicating a high threat of terrorist attack (e.g., video tapes of Osama Bin Laden, public pronouncements of risk by U.S. administration officials, and changes to the Department of Homeland Security's color-coded Threat Level) on presidential approval. They found that these threat messages both increased fear of terrorist attacks and support for Bush.

In addition, past experimental research also supports the link between the threat of terrorism and support for President Bush. Working in the Terror Management Theory tradition (hereafter, TMT), Landau et al. found that reminders of 9/11 led to greater support for Bush (2004). They attribute these results to the effects of "mortality salience" more generally, arguing that reminders of one's own death generate greater preferences for resolute leaders who are perceived as strong defenders of the country; leaders who can "deliver us from evil." Supportive of this, they also demonstrate that having experimental participants write short essays about death produced increased support for Bush and decreased support for then Democratic presidential candidate John Kerry, results which parallel the effects of terrorism reminders (Landau et al. 2004).

Theoretical Mechanisms

While the above studies have linked terror concerns and support for Bush, it remains unclear what mechanism(s) are responsible for the relationship. Depending on what underlying mechanism drove the relationship between these two variables, we would predict different effects of terror threats on candidate preferences in the 2008 election. First, it could be that

external threats simply increase support for standing leaders. This mechanism is consistent with the finding that President Jimmy Carter's popularity increased after the Iranian attack on the U.S. embassy in 1979, just as Bush's popularity increased after 9/11 (Orehek et al. 2008). Such a "rally around the flag effect" where significant international crises lead to increased support for standing U.S. presidents was once taken for granted in political science (Mueller 1970; Kernell 1978), but more recently have come under question (Brody 1991). If this is the reason terror threats buttressed Bush's popularity, then it is likely that there would be no effect for Obama or McCain since neither is an incumbent.

Another possibility is that the threat of terrorism increases preferences for aggressive, retaliatory foreign policy, such as Bush's. This interpretation is consistent with Social Identity Theory (Tajfel 1981; Tajfel and Turner 1986), which would argue that the salience of perceived threats from an out-group should increase animosity towards the out-group. Recent research has shown that Americans who report the greatest concerns about terrorist attacks tend to support military attacks against Iran, the ongoing war in Iraq, and the use of nuclear weapons in a series of hypothetical scenarios (Willer, Feinberg, and Laurison 2008). Research on "high-exposure" survivors of the 9/11 attacks shows that they tended to increase in both conservatism and desires for revenge and militarism (Bonnano and Jost 2006). These findings are consistent with more general findings that the perception of security threats from outside the U.S. is related to support for military action (e.g., Huddy et al. 2005; Kam and Kinder 2007). If terror threats lead to increased preferences for aggressive foreign policy, then it would suggest that they would lead to greater support for McCain since he is more associated with such an approach than Obama.

In a related vein, some research in the TMT tradition asserts that the threat of terrorism led to increased support for Bush because he offered literal and symbolic protection from external threats that increased Americans' mortality concerns (Landau et al. 2004). This reasoning suggests a more general relationship between external threats and preferences for leaders who are expected to be strong defenders of the country. If this mechanism underlies the relationship between terror threats and candidate preferences then it is likely that terror threats would lead to greater support for McCain given his greater emphasis on military defense than Obama.

Alternatively, it could be that terror threats buttressed Bush's popularity because such threats increase preferences for charismatic leaders (Cohen et al. 2005). Also, working in the TMT tradition, Cohen et al. found in a 2004 experiment that making the topic of death salient led experimental participants to support President Bush more and Senator Kerry less (2005). They interpreted these results as consistent with other data suggesting that mortality concerns lead to preferences for charismatic leaders who offer respite from the distress produced by death anxiety (Cohen et al. 2004). It is impossible to say definitively which of McCain or Obama is perceived as more charismatic, and there is almost certainly not a consensus perception among Americans. However, it seems that Obama is more frequently described in these terms (e.g., Bennis and Zelleke 2008; Walsh 2008). If most Americans share this view, then it is possible that this mechanism would lead Obama's support to be enhanced by terror threats.

But still another possibility is that the relationship between terror threats and preferences for leaders has changed in the years following 9/11. For example, Davis and Silver (2004) found that immediately after 9/11 survey respondents in Michigan who were most concerned about

terrorism tended to support Bush. However, by Spring of 2004 respondents most concerned about terrorism tended to oppose Bush, a result suggesting that segments of the public may have tired of the Bush Administration's "war on terror." Thus, it is possible that the threat of terrorism may lead to preferences for a different approach to combating terrorism, a possibility suggested by some political commentators (Miller 2008; Carle 2008; Rich 2008). The notion that most Americans would prefer a new approach to combating terrorism is also consistent with the enormous drop in support for both President Bush and the Iraq war over the last several years, both of which are strongly associated with the "war on terror." It could be that terror alerts, by bringing these preferences to the forefront of people's thinking, could have the function of increasing preferences for leaders who advocate a new approach to combating terrorism. If this is the case then it is likely that terror threats would lead to less support for McCain, and perhaps greater support for Obama. Whereas McCain is largely associated with the same foreign policies as Bush, in particular support for the Iraq war, Obama's foreign policies are in many ways different, including opposing the Iraq war and advocating diplomatic relations with Iran.

The plausibility of this mechanism is further supported by the effect of the Madrid bombing in 2004 on the Spanish national elections. As opposed to the above-cited findings on the "rally effect" of external threats on support for standing leaders, and other theories that would have predicted greater support for conservative candidates, the Madrid bombing was instead followed by a surprising electoral upset of the incumbent, conservative party. Research shows that the bombing led to shifts in support and high turnout among moderate and liberal voters who opposed the incumbent government's foreign policies, policies associated with a militant approach to combating terrorism and participation in the Iraq war (Bali 2007). This research showed that the bombing had the effect of making these foreign policy concerns more focal to potential swing voters (Bali 2007). A similar scenario is possible in the contemporary U.S. where terror threats could have an "anti-rally" effect (Eichenberger et al. 2006; Bali 2007) of reminding many Americans of their discontent with the Iraq war and associated foreign policies, leading to diminished support for candidates associate with those policies.

Hypotheses

As above, a variety of predictions for the effects of terror threats on support for the 2008 candidates are plausible. It could be that terror threats only increase the support for standing leaders, in which case neither Obama nor McCain's support would be affected. It could be the case that terror threats would increase support for McCain, and decrease support for Obama, since the former is likely perceived as a strong defender of the country and espouses aggressive, retaliatory foreign policies. On balance, we think the majority of empirical and theoretical evidence supports this prediction. Finally, it could be that terror threats will lead to greater support for Obama, and less support for McCain. This could occur either because terror threats lead to preferences for charismatic leaders, and Obama is perceived as more charismatic, or because terror threats bring to the fore Americans' discontent with the Iraq war and Bush's approach to combating terrorism, policies largely shared by McCain.

METHODS

Overview

To evaluate these competing hypotheses we conducted a national field experiment testing the effects of terror alerts on support for the 2008 candidates. Our choice of methodology was based on the following considerations. While survey research using representative samples offers insights on populations of substantial interest, correlational analysis is limited in its ability to evaluate causal claims, like the ones we wish to test. Meanwhile, laboratory experiments, by controlling extraneous variables, offer substantial advantages for rigorously testing causal claims (Lovaglia 2003; Lucas 2003). However, laboratory experiments are often conducted on convenience samples that do not allow statistical generalizations to larger populations of interest. General population experiments combine the advantages of these two methods (Sniderman and Grob 1996) allowing us to carefully evaluate causal claims about a large population of interest, in this case the U.S. electorate.

In late May/early June of 2008 study participants were randomly assigned to either be exposed to a journalistic account of an imminent terror threat or not. All respondents were then asked a series of questions measuring (1) their degree of support for President Bush, (2) their preferences among the 2008 U.S. presidential candidates, and (3) their prioritization of various political issues in their upcoming vote for president.

Sample

We conducted our survey-based experiment on a random sample ($N = 1,282$) of a nationally representative respondent panel. The panel was recruited by Knowledge Networks through random digit dialing, and respondents were offered a free internet TV service ("Web TV") in exchange for their participation in occasional internet based surveys. The demographic characteristics of the respondent panel were engineered to align closely with those of the U.S. population as measured by the U.S. Census Bureau. Knowledge Networks also provided post-stratification weights derived from an iterative proportional fitting or "raking" process which aligns the demographic characteristics of the respondent data with the benchmarks of age, gender, race, region, education level and metropolitan/rural residency identified by the most recent Current Population Survey.[1] Respondents to our survey were invited to participate via email through a password protected email account and did so after filling out an electronic consent form. Slightly more than half of our sample was randomly assigned to the control condition ($N=645$). The rest were randomly assigned to the treatment condition ($N=637$).

Control Variables

Knowledge Networks maintains demographic data on all individuals in their panel. Prior to the experiment respondents were asked a number of demographic and attitudinal questions. Table 1 gives information on the variables we used in analysis.

Table 1: Demographic and Other Variables Used as Controls in Analysis.

Variable Name	Variable coding specifications	Mean (SD)
Male	Dichotomous measure of gender	47% Male
Age	Continuous measure of age in years	48 (16.3)
Race/Ethnicity	White, non-Hispanic	75.9%
	African American, non-Hispanic	8.0%
	Hispanic	9.5%
	Multiracial, non-Hispanic	2.7%
	Other, non-Hispanic	3.8%
Education	Less than a High School Diploma	10.5%
	High School Diploma	32.5%
	Some college or Associates Degree	29.6%
	B.A. Degree	17.8%
	Graduate or Professional School	9.5%
Log of Income	Respondents were asked to indicate their income using a discontinuous scale ranging from '0 to \$5000' to 'more than \$175,000.' We converted this to a continuous scale using the midpoints of each of the 19 answer choices (and \$200,000 for the final interval). We then took the natural log of that converted income variable.	10.78 (.83)
Region	Respondent's region was derived from their state of residence. We used a simple conceptualization of region consisting of four dummy variables: South; Northeast; Midwest; West[2]	
	South	35.6%
	Northeast	20.1%
	Midwest	21.4%
	West	23.0%
Political Ideology	Conservative	36.0%
	Moderate	39.7%
	Liberal	24.3%

Experimental Manipulation

To test the effect of exposure to terror threats on respondents' evaluations of the presidential candidates, we used a priming technique meant to increase the prominence of terrorism concerns. We disguised our terror threat prime in a survey battery regarding the importance and newsworthiness of various news articles. Respondents in the control condition were asked to rate the importance of two news articles: one about the introduction of a California bill to create

state-administered savings accounts for every child born in California and one about promising developments in health care internet technology that might improve hospital quality and efficiency. Respondents in the treatment condition were asked to rate the importance of those two articles and a third about a recent terror threat:

Adapted from an Article Published in *The New York Times*:

"Osama bin Laden and his chief lieutenants, operating from hideouts suspected to be along the Afghanistan Pakistan border, are directing an Al Qaeda effort to launch an attack in the United States sometime this year, senior Bush administration officials said on Thursday. Bush administration officials as well as the Department of Homeland Security are cautioning the public to be ready for the possibility of a massive attack, perhaps on the scale of the September 11, 2001 attacks. "What we know about this most recent information is that it is being directed from the highest levels of the Al Qaeda organization," said a senior official at a briefing for reporters. He added, "We know that this leadership continues to operate along the border area between Afghanistan and Pakistan."...Counterterrorism officials have said for weeks that they are increasingly worried by a continuing stream of intelligence suggesting that Al Qaeda plans to carry out a significant terrorist attack on United States soil this year."

This article was adapted from an actual *New York Times* article (Johnston and Stout 2004), with language regarding the "possibility of a massive attack, perhaps on the scale of the September 11, 2001 attacks" added to increase the impact of the manipulation. After exposure to each news article, respondents were asked to indicate how much the "article offers important information that most Americans ought to be aware of," with their responses given on a 6 point scale ranging from "Strongly Agree" to "Strongly Disagree."

Dependent Measures

After rating the importance of news articles, respondents were asked several questions designed to assess our dependent variables, ostensibly in an unrelated survey of political attitudes. *Support for Bush* was measured with the question, "Do you approve or disapprove of the way President Bush is handling his job as president?" Respondents gave their responses on a 6-item scale ranging from "Strongly Disapprove" to "Strongly Approve." The mean for this measure was 2.7 indicating that, on average, the population "moderately" to "slightly" disapproved of the way Bush was handling his job in late May/early June of 2008.

We next assessed *support for the 2008 candidates* via a single question: "If the 2008 presidential election were held today, who would you vote for?" Respondents chose from among the following options: "Illinois Senator Barack Obama;" "Arizona Senator John McCain;" "Another Candidate;" "Undecided;" or "I do not plan to vote in the 2008 election." The means for each outcome of this variable closely hewed to those of polls at the time of our survey, indicating a statistical tie between the front running Democrat and Republican. Mean support for John McCain was 32%; for Barack Obama was 31%; and 11% preferred "Another Candidate"[3]. Undecided respondents constituted 18% of our sample, and 8% reported that they did not plan to vote.

Finally, we also surveyed what issues respondents reported would be most important to them in deciding who they would vote for in the 2008 presidential election. We asked respondents to, "please rank the following issues according to how important they will be to you as you decide who you will vote for this November in the presidential election." The five issues respondents were asked to weigh were: "the economy," "homeland security," "the war in Iraq," "immigration," and "moral values." Order of presentation was randomized for each respondent. Overall, "the economy" and "the war in Iraq" were respondents' highest ranked issues ($M_s = 4.3$ and 3.3 , respectively, with higher numbers indicating higher priority).

RESULTS

Manipulation Check

We first checked whether our manipulation of exposure to a journalistic account of an imminent terror threat had the intended effect of increasing the prominence of concerns about terrorism in respondents' minds. Indeed, respondents who were randomly assigned to the terror threat condition reported a higher average priority ranking of "homeland security" ($M = 2.96$), as compared with respondents assigned to the control condition ($M = 2.74$; $t = 2.09$, $p < .05$).

Support for Bush

Though our focus here is on support for the 2008 candidates, we first asked survey respondents about their degree of support for President Bush. We found no significant difference in degree of support for Bush between the terror threat condition ($M = 2.69$) and the control condition ($M = 2.73$; $t = -0.05$, $p > .05$). Because random assignment to conditions may not have succeeded in eliminating effects of demographic characteristics on support for Bush, we also analyzed the effect of the treatment using multinomial regression while controlling for several demographic variables.

Table 2 gives results of regression models predicting support for Bush [4]. Model 1 is a baseline model providing results only for control variables, including measures of gender, race/ethnicity, education level, age, income, and what region of the country the respondent resided in. The baseline model shows African Americans tended to support Bush less than other respondents, as did people with graduate degrees. Model 2 adds a measure of our experimental manipulation and again shows no effect of exposure to terror threats on support for Bush ($p > .90$).

Table 2: OLS Coefficients for Regression of Support for Bush by Demographic Variables and Exposure to Terror Threat Manipulation.

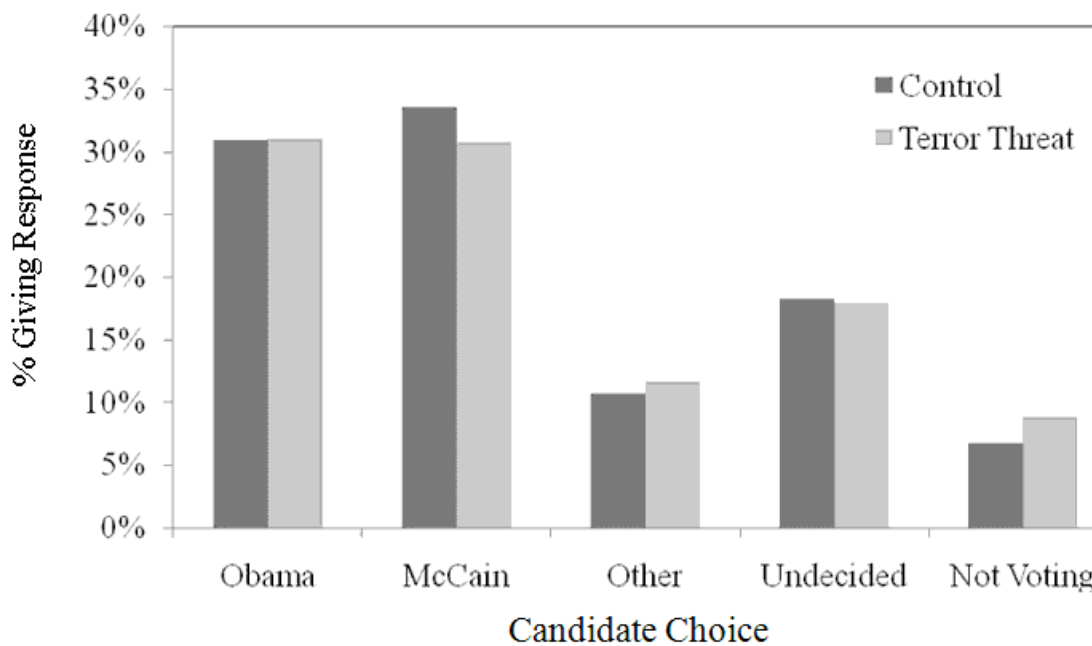
Variable	Model 1 Control	Model 2 Terror Threat
MALE	0.025 (0.113)	0.025 (0.113)
AGE	-0.000 (0.004)	-0.000 (0.004)
ETHNICITY		
African American	-1.096*** (0.164)	-1.096*** (0.164)
Hispanic	-0.265 (0.184)	-0.265 (0.184)
Multiracial	-0.107 (0.466)	-0.106 (0.465)
Other Race/Ethnicity	-0.130 (0.224)	-0.130 (0.224)
EDUCATION		
H.S. Diploma	-0.160 (0.196)	-0.160 (0.196)
Some College or Assoc. Degree	0.036 (0.213)	0.036 (0.213)
Bachelor's Degree	-0.061 (0.231)	-0.062 (0.231)
Graduate Degree	-0.676** (0.248)	-0.676** (0.248)
INCOME (log of income)	0.090 (0.078)	0.091 (0.078)
REGION		
Northeast	-0.273 (0.178)	-0.273 (0.178)
West	0.015 (0.176)	0.015 (0.176)
South	0.089 (0.157)	0.089 (0.157)
TERROR THREAT		-0.009 (0.112)
Constant	1.937* (0.865)	1.939* (0.868)
<i>N</i>	1270	1270
Probability>F	0.000***	0.000***
R squared	0.049	0.048

* p<.05; **, p<.01; *** p<.001

Support for the 2008 Candidates

We next analyze the effects of the terror threat manipulation on support for the 2008 presidential candidates, the focus of our investigation. Figure 1 gives respondents' reported voting intentions in both the control and treatment conditions. There were no significant effects of condition on reported voting intentions. A lower percentage of respondents reported intending to vote for McCain in the terror threat condition (31%) than in the control condition (34%), however this drop in support was not statistically significant ($t = -1.14, p = .30$).

Figure 1: Support for 2008 Candidates by Condition



As in our above analysis of support for Bush, we next use multivariate analysis to control for various demographic variables that might interfere with detecting an effect of the treatment. We estimated multinomial logistic regression models of respondents' reported voting intentions, using the intention to vote for Barack Obama as a baseline. Though these models produced results for all other answer categories (other, undecided, not voting), for parsimony's sake we focus here on the results for intentions to vote for John McCain. Table 3, Model 1 reports relative odds ratios for control variables before a measure of the experimental manipulation is added to the model. Results show that African American and Hispanic respondents were less likely to support John McCain, relative to Barack Obama, as were those with graduate degrees. Men were more likely to support McCain than Obama.

Table 3: Odds Ratios, Calculated from Multinomial Logistic Regression, for Support for McCain with and without Manipulation of Exposure to Terror Threat Manipulation, with 'Obama' as Baseline Category.

Variable	Model 1 Control	Model 2 Terror Threat
MALE	1.49*	1.49*
AGE	1	1
RACE/ETHNICITY		
African American	0.01***	0.01***
Hispanic	0.17***	0.17***
Multiracial	0.38	0.39
Other Race/Ethnicity	0.66	0.65
EDUCATION		
H.S. Diploma	1.04	1.06
Some College or Assoc. Degree	0.95	0.96
B.A.	1.4	1.41
Graduate degree	0.41*	0.42
INCOME (log of income)	0.88	0.88
REGION		
Northeast	0.98	0.98
West	1.3	1.29
South	1.45	1.46
TERROR THREAT		
Constant	4.05	4.22
<i>N</i>	1280	1280
Log likelihood	-1711.7	-1706.34
Degrees of freedom	56	60
LR chi sq	199.95	213.66

* $p < .05$; **; $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

Model 2 introduces a measure of experimental condition. Inclusion of this variable slightly reduced the significance of the variable 'graduate degree' ($p = .053$). Respondents in the terror threat condition were less likely to support McCain relative to Obama, however this effect was not significant.

A Closer Look at Moderates

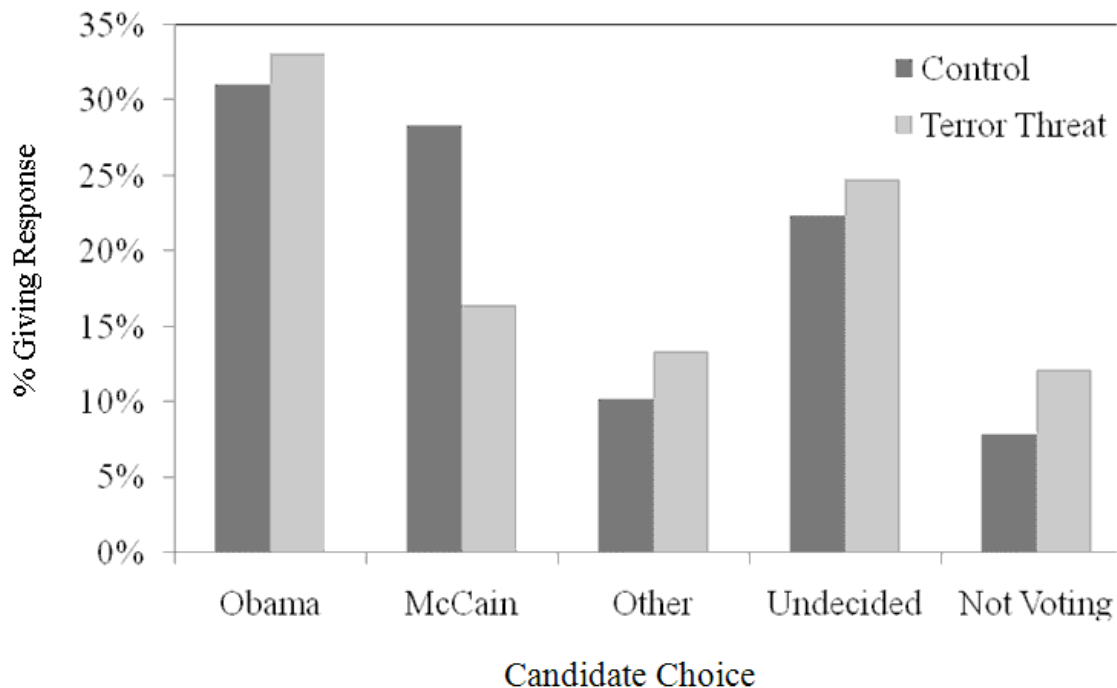
Further analyses revealed that, though there were no overall effects of the treatment on support for Obama or McCain, there were substantial effects among self-reported political moderates. This is perhaps unsurprising since self-reported moderates were far more likely to report being undecided (24%) than either liberals (12%; $t = 4.98$, $p < .01$) or conservatives (16%; $t = 3.19$, $p < .01$). It is likely that moderates' voting preferences are more easily affected by a stimulus, like a reminder of the threat of terrorism, since they are less committed to a certain candidate. Given

that our field experiment was conducted in late Spring of the most protracted presidential election in U.S. history, it is not surprising that self-reported liberals and conservatives' voting preferences were not easily influenced.

Moderates are a subgroup of significant interest for the 2008 election, as candidates are generally thought to focus on winning these critical "swing" votes after winning the nomination of their party. Further, moderates comprise the largest (40%) subsample of the dataset, larger than either self-reported liberals (24%) or conservatives (36%).

Figure 2 gives moderate respondents' voting intentions in the control and terror threat conditions. Here only reported intentions to vote for McCain are significantly affected by the treatment. Respondents randomly assigned to the terror threat condition indicated that they intended to vote for John McCain in the 2008 election at a significantly lower rate (17%) than did those assigned to the control condition (28%) ($t = -2.59, p < .05$).

Figure 2: Support for 2008 Candidates by Condition, among Moderates



To guard against the possibility that this effect was created by a failure of random assignment to create groups that differed only with respect to the treatment, we turn next to multivariate analyses. We estimated a multinomial logistic regression model of moderates' reported voting intentions, again using the intention to vote for Barack Obama as the baseline. We again only give results for intentions to vote for John McCain. Model 1 of Table 3 reports odds ratios for all control variables. As in the total sample, we find that African American, Hispanic, and multiracial respondents are less likely to support McCain than Obama, as were those whose education ended after some college or an Associates Degree. We also find a significant effect of age, with older respondents slightly less likely to support McCain. Compared to Midwesterners, our regional reference category, moderate respondents from the South and West are more likely to report intending to vote for McCain.

Table 4: Odds Ratios, Calculated from Multinomial Logistic Regression, for Support for McCain with and without Manipulation of Exposure to Terror Threat Manipulation, with ‘Obama’ as Baseline Category, among Self-reported Moderates.

Variable	Model 1 Control	Model 2 Terror Threat
MALE	0.96	0.97
AGE	0.98*	0.98*
RACE/ETHNICITY		
African American	0.00***	0.00***
Hispanic	0.09***	0.09***
Multiracial	0.00***	0.00***
Other Race/Ethnicity	0.25	0.25
EDUCATION		
H.S. Diploma	0.77	0.77
Some College or Assoc. Degree	0.24*	0.23*
B.A.	0.82	0.77
Graduate degree	0.48	0.54
INCOME (log of income)	1.07	1.07
REGION		
Northeast	1.71	1.87
West	3.55**	3.73**
South	2.59*	2.67*
TERROR THREAT		0.46*
Constant	1.39	1.76
<hr/>		
N	508	508
Log likelihood	-666.27	-658.44
Degrees of freedom	56	60
LR chi sqr	56931.81	58600.98

* p<.05; **, p<.01; *** p<.001

Model 2 introduces a measure of experimental condition. Inclusion of this variable does not affect results for control variables. However, the effect of exposure to the terror threat was large and statistically significant for moderates. Self-reported moderates who were randomly assigned to the terror threat condition were significantly less likely to report intending to vote for McCain than those assigned to the control condition. This decline in support was significant when compared with the same contrast for reported support for Obama. This replicates the drop in support for McCain among moderates exposed to the terror threat shown in Figure 2. [5]

DISCUSSION

We found that exposure to a media account of an imminent terror threat led to decreased support for McCain among political moderates, a substantial subset of the total sample with a high rate of undecided, likely voters. However, we did not find increased support for McCain's rival, Barack Obama. Support for McCain in the total sample also declined when respondents were exposed to the terror threat, though not significantly. No other effects for the 2008 candidates were statistically significant. However, this was not because the manipulation made no impact on respondents. On the contrary, those exposed to the threat reported greater concerns about "homeland security."

The finding that exposure to a terror threat decreased support for McCain among moderates may at first glance be surprising for several reasons. First, past research has generally shown that Bush's support is buttressed by terror concerns, and Bush and McCain share largely the same policies and approach to combating terrorism.[6] Most of the mechanisms for why Bush was likely helped by the terrorism issue would seem to lend themselves to McCain in the 2008 context since McCain advocates most of the same foreign policy positions as Bush. Additionally, McCain has made the "war on terror" central to his campaign for president, more than Barack Obama has.

However, this finding is perhaps less surprising on further review. The enormous decline in support for President Bush and the Iraq war over the last several years may also have involved a decline in support for the Bush administration's approach to the "war on terror." Thus, it may be that Americans' sentiments towards terrorism have changed considerably over the last few years. Further, this shift may have occurred largely without being noticed, given (1) the far greater media focus on attitudes towards the president and the Iraq war, and (2) the lower rate of high profile, anti-terrorism activities – such as use of the homeland security department's advisory system – in Bush's second term. Supportive of this change in sentiment, a recent poll shows Obama is perceived by Americans to be nearly as trusted to handle the "campaign against terrorism" as McCain, with the gap gradually decreasing across the Spring and Summer (Washington Post 2008).

We think that our findings are largely consistent with the claim that many Americans prefer a new approach to foreign policy and combating terrorism, and exposure to the threat of terrorism in our field experiment brought these considerations to the forefront of their thinking. These results are also strikingly similar to the public opinion impact of the 2004 Madrid bombing. In analyzing the decreased support for candidates from the incumbent, conservative party following the terrorist attack in Spain, Bali (2007) found evidence that it was driven by moderates and liberals whose concerns about the party's foreign policies (in particular, supporting the Iraq war) were made salient.

Based on these findings, we propose the following general model of the impact of external threats (or "rally events") on popular support for leaders or candidates: External threats will lead to greater support for incumbent leaders, or candidates strongly associated with standing leaders, provided that the leader's related foreign policy positions are popular or at least viewed neutrally; but external threats will lead to decreased support if their related foreign policy positions are unpopular. This model arises from tendencies for (1) group members to support their group more

when it is threatened, (2) these pro-group attitudes to extend to leaders who are viewed as symbols of the group, but also for (3) terror threats to prime and emphasize leaders' or candidates' related foreign policies, and (4) lead to less support if those policies are unpopular.

This model is consistent with the buttressing effects of the salience of external threats on Bush's popularity in his first term, when his foreign policies were quite popular (Willer 2004, Landau et al. 2004; Eichenberger et al 2006), but also the diminishment and even reversal of that effect over time as his policies have lost support (Davis and Silver 2004; Eichenberger et al 2006). For example, in the early stages of the Iraq war military casualties were positively associated with Bush's approval ratings; in later stages of the war, however, as the popularity of the war declined, the relationship between Iraq war casualties and Bush's approval became negative. This model also captures the negative effects of the Madrid bombing on support for the incumbent, standing party in Spain in 2004, whose approach to fighting terrorism and support for the Iraq war had grown unpopular. And, finally, it also accounts for the present research wherein terror threats had a negative effect on support for John McCain, a candidate who supports the Iraq war and the same approaches to terrorism as Bush, policies that may have lost favor with many or even most Americans.

It would be tempting to conclude that these results support Cohen et al.'s claim that terror threats increase support for charismatic leaders (2004), with Obama perhaps being perceived as the more charismatic leader. However, this reasoning would primarily predict greater support for Obama, while our main effect was decreased support for McCain. The findings are far more inconsistent with the other theoretical predictions, namely that the threat of terrorism would lead to greater support for the candidate perceived as tougher on defense or for a candidate associated with aggressive, retaliatory foreign policies.

We also found that exposure to the terror threat did not affect support for President Bush, neither in the whole sample nor among moderates. The non-effect on support for Bush is inconsistent with most prior research on the subject from Bush's first term (e.g., Willer 2004; Landau et al. 2004), and is seemingly inconsistent with our interpretation that making salient the threat of terrorism made respondents' concerns about Bush's foreign policies and approach to combating terrorism more central to their thinking. However it could be that, 7 years into the Bush presidency, it is very difficult for any stimulus to substantially change Americans' views of Bush. Additionally, given how low his approval ratings were during the period the survey was fielded, it is likely that support for Bush had reached a floor below which it could not be significantly lowered.

One limitation of the current research could be that the effect of the treatment was found only among moderates. While a significant effect of the treatment for the whole sample would be more impressive, it makes sense that moderates would be most reactive to it. At the relatively late stage of the campaign that the field experiment was conducted, the majority of Americans had already formulated their presidential preference. Not surprisingly, those identifying as moderates were more likely to be undecided than liberals or conservatives in our sample. It is precisely these likely "swing voters" that presidential campaigns typically target in the late stages of elections. Thus, moderates are a subset of Americans of unique interest for research on support for the 2008 presidential candidates.

It should be emphasized that we found a significant effect of exposure to a terror threat on support for McCain, but not Obama. The decrease in support for McCain in the terror threat condition relative to the control condition was matched by non-significant increases in respondents reporting all other answer categories. Nonetheless, elections in the U.S.'s predominantly two-party system are essentially zero-sum, where what is bad for one candidate necessarily helps his or her opponent. So it may be that decreased support for McCain is tantamount to an increased likelihood of Obama winning the election.

It is possible that some sort of confound with our manipulation drove the effects we observed. For example, it might have been the case that our manipulation produced the results it did, not by priming concerns about terrorism, but by priming thoughts related to "*The New York Times*." It is possible that cognitive associations some respondents might have had between *The New York Times* and liberalism were activated, leading to a decrease in support for McCain. We think this alternative explanation is possible but not plausible. First, there was far more information in the key passage about terrorism than about *The New York Times*, and this is a far more emotionally charged stimulus, shown in the past to readily produce effects when primed (Landau et al. 2004). In addition, the manipulation check shows that the priming manipulation led to greater concerns related to "homeland security."

One other confound with the experimental manipulation that could possibly be responsible for our effects is that the respondents in the terror threat condition read an additional article than those in the control condition. It is possible that fatigue or boredom from this was somehow responsible for our effects rather than the impact of making the threat of terrorism salient to respondents. We think that this alternative explanation is also unlikely. The result of our manipulation check are consistent with our interpretation that the observed effects were a result of making the threat of terrorism salient to respondents, and inconsistent with an alternative explanation based on boredom or fatigue.

Despite possible alternative explanations, and the fact that decline in support for McCain was observed only among moderates, we still think these results are significant. This effect is large, statistically significant, robust to alternate model specifications, and found among perhaps the most critical voting group in the 2008 elections. Further, the effects echo the electoral impact of the Madrid bombing of 2004. These findings help underscore the drastic change in attitudes that has occurred among Americans since 2001. In late 2001 almost all Americans supported President Bush. In 2003 most Americans supported the Iraq war, a war then closely tied with terrorism. A variety of studies conducted during Bush's first term showed that terror concerns led to greater support for his presidency. However, now growing evidence suggests that many, possibly even most, Americans may prefer a new approach to combating terrorism.

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ENDNOTES

1. For more sampling details, see <http://www.knowledgenetworks.com/ganp/index.html>
2. We follow Knowledge Networks' classifications of U.S. states as Northeast (ME, NH, VT, MA, RI, CT, NY, NJ, PA), Midwest (OH, IN, IL, MI, WI, MN, IA, MO), South (DE, MD, DC, VA, WV, NC, SC, GA, FL, KY, TN, AL, MS, AR, LA, OK, TX) or West (MT, ID, WY, CO, NM, AZ, UT, NV, WA, OR, CA, AK, HI).
3. Gallup and Rasmussen polling showed a statistical dead heat between candidates McCain and Obama during the period our field experiment was conducted. The results of these polling firms, however, do not show such high results for "Another candidate," "Undecided," or "Not Voting" because their question wording and response options compel their respondents to choose one of the top two candidates. Also, they exclude nonvoters from their surveys.
4. These and all other multivariate models presented in text were conducted with the above-detailed weighting. All results reported here are substantively the same when run without weighting.
5. We also analyzed the effect of the terror threat manipulation on support for Bush among moderates in a model with full controls. Though we found the terror threat manipulation led to decreased support for Bush, this effect was not significant ($p > .25$).
6. Consistent with this, overall a strong correlation exists between support for Bush and reported intention to vote for McCain ($r = .57$). This correlation persists in regression models with full controls and among moderates as well as the full sample.

APPENDIX CORRELATION MATRIX FOR KEY VARIABLES

	Bush Support	McCain Support	Obama Support	Undecided	Not Voting	Homeland Sec.	Male
Bush Support	1.00						
McCain Support	0.57	1.00					
Obama Support	-0.42	-0.47	1.00				
Undecided	-0.03	-0.32	-0.31	1.00			
Not Voting	-0.04	-0.19	-0.19	-0.13	1.00		
Homeland Sec.	0.26	0.18	-0.14	-0.01	0.00	1.00	
Male	-0.03	0.04	0.01	-0.05	-0.01	0.02	1.00
Age	-0.02	0.05	-0.02	0.03	-0.08	0.09	-0.01
White	0.12	0.22	-0.20	-0.05	-0.01	0.03	0.02
Af-Am	-0.17	-0.19	0.30	-0.01	-0.07	-0.03	0.03
Hispanic	-0.04	-0.12	0.07	0.04	0.05	-0.05	-0.04
No HS Diploma	-0.02	-0.05	-0.03	0.03	0.13	0.05	0.02
HS Diploma	0.00	-0.03	-0.07	0.02	0.08	-0.02	0.01
B.A. or Higher	-0.04	0.06	0.08	-0.04	-0.10	0.01	-0.02
log of Income	0.04	0.10	0.04	-0.04	-0.12	0.01	0.03
Political Ideology	0.50	0.46	-0.39	0.00	0.01	0.13	0.04

	Age	White	Af-Am	Hispanic	No HS Diploma	HS Diploma	B.A. or Higher	log of Income
Age	1.00							
White	0.16	1.00						
Af-Am	-0.02	-0.52	1.00					
Hispanic	-0.14	-0.57	-0.09	1.00				
No HS Diploma	0.15	-0.06	0.01	0.10	1.00			
HS Diploma	0.10	0.03	0.00	-0.01	-0.24	1.00		
B.A. or Higher	-0.06	0.07	-0.07	-0.08	-0.21	-0.43	1.00	
log of Income	-0.13	0.13	-0.13	-0.09	-0.25	-0.23	0.34	1.00
Political Ideology	0.12	0.08	-0.08	-0.07	0.01	-0.01	-0.06	0.03

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