



## Running for your life, in context: Are rightists always less likely to consider fleeing their country when fearing future events?



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### HIGHLIGHTS

- We examine how context and ideology moderate fear's effect on flight intentions.
- Context, ideology and fear interactively affect willingness to consider flight.
- When ideology is irrelevant, fear increases only rightists' flight intentions.
- In ideologically-relevant contexts, fear increases only leftists' flight intentions.

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### ABSTRACT

Fear is a powerful motivator for the classic fight or flight response. Under extreme social and political circumstances, fear may lead people to emigrate from their land to protect themselves and their families. While ideology is related to differences in behavioral fear reactivity, little is known about how it moderates the effect of fear on flight intentions. In a large experimental study ( $N = 243$ ), we examined our hypothesis that this moderating effect is context-dependent, such that the context's relation to the ideology determines its influence. In ideologically-irrelevant contexts, because rightists (versus leftists) are assumed to be more behaviorally reactive to fear, their willingness to consider flight should be more affected. In ideologically-relevant intergroup contexts, however, rightist ideology provides clear reaction guidelines ruling out flight, and therefore fear should have a weaker effect on rightists' (versus leftists') flight tendencies. Our findings supported these predictions, and their significance is discussed.

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Fear, a discrete aversive emotion, arises when an individual perceives a threat or danger towards himself or herself or his or her ingroup (Gray, 1987; Öhman, 1993; Rachman, 1978). This emotion has long been recognized for its importance in political and other social contexts. Classically, fear has been conceptualized as motivating “fight or flight” (see Cannon, 1932), meaning the tendency to either confront the fear-eliciting agent or escape from it. Of these two routes, fear very often leads individuals to the latter, motivating highly avoidant behavior (Frijda, Kuipers, & ter Schure, 1989), an extreme form of which may be physical migration to another country. Nonetheless, in many contexts, such as intergroup conflicts, leaving a country may stand at odds with one's ingroup attachment and ideological convictions. In this paper, we are interested in examining when fear of an impending threat to society may lead people to consider fleeing. We argue that the effect of fear on flight intentions is ideology- and

context-dependent, such that political stance may have a different impact on the outcomes of fear in ideologically-irrelevant versus ideologically-relevant contexts. We elaborate on this proposed difference below.

### Fear, collective fear, and flight reactions

Associated with appraisals of high perceived threat coupled with low strength and control over the situation (Roseman, 1984), fear comprises physiological and psychological reactions aimed at increasing survival capabilities in dangerous situations. Behaviorally, it may lead to different, even contradictory, action tendencies—often termed “fight or flight.” This means that while fear may motivate confrontation with fear-inducing stimuli, it is frequently associated with avoidant action tendencies (see Frijda et al., 1989). In fact, when individuals have little ability to alter the fear-eliciting situation through a “fight” reaction, “flight” may become the dominant behavior.

One context in which individuals may not be able to deal with fear-eliciting events by individually confronting them is the collective

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context, in which events are often beyond the personal control of individuals. Studies show that in such contexts, experiences of threat and fear lead to increased support for risk-averse and defensive political policies (e.g., Halperin, 2011; Lerner, Gonzalez, Small, & Fischhoff, 2003), decreased support for confrontational policies (e.g., Huddy, Feldman, Taber, & Lahav, 2005; Skitka, Bauman, Aramovich, & Morgan, 2006), and increased motivation to avoid a threatening outgroup (e.g., Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006; Skitka et al., 2006). Furthermore, studies have shown that threats to the group lead to greater personal avoidance tendencies, with people reporting cancelling travel plans and avoiding mass transportation in light of fear (e.g., Huddy, Feldman, Capelos, & Provost, 2002).

As stated above, because of limited individual influence over many collectively-relevant threats, one readily available option for personal action in such situations may be fleeing the area in which the threat is present. In collective contexts in which threats are continuously or repeatedly present, flight may involve drastic measures and great costs—because to avoid the threatening context altogether the individual would have to physically leave the area inhabited by the group, which is often a region of political significance such as a state. In certain contexts, such as in the midst of intergroup conflicts, physical flight may be viewed as socially illegitimate, exposing the individual to social criticism for not facing the threat together with fellow group members. Indeed, individuals fleeing their countries in the wake of political conflict are often regarded as traitors, or given derogatory descriptions such as the one coined by former Israeli prime minister Yitzhak Rabin to describe Jews moving away from Israel during the turbulent 1970s: “fall-outs of weaklings” (Israeli Broadcasting Authority, 1976).

### Ideology and conflict-related ideology in collective contexts

Because of the benefits and costs associated with fleeing, individuals may differ in their willingness to consider this option. Differences in flight intentions may stem from factors such as trait anxiety, personal connections abroad, socio-economic status, and more. In socio-political contexts, one such differentiating factor is political ideology: a stable “interrelated set of attitudes, values, and beliefs with cognitive, affective, and motivational properties” (Jost, Federico, & Napier, 2009, p. 315). According to recent research, ideologies relate to both the contents of beliefs and the needs underlying them, with people tending to adopt ideologies that fulfill their own dominant needs (Jost et al., 2009).

In violent intergroup contexts, ideological belief systems relating to the conflict receive widespread support (Bar-Tal, 2000, 2013; Cohrs, 2012), as rightist ideology is generally associated with greater intergroup bias (Altemeyer, 1996). Rightist, conflict-supporting ideology in these contexts takes on specific contents, leading to greater adherence to certain societal beliefs, including beliefs regarding patriotism, security, and unity. Specifically, societal beliefs about patriotism focus on loyalty and sacrifice for the collective; beliefs about security emphasize the importance of personal and national survival and modes of achieving it; and beliefs about unity emphasize the importance of facing the opponent as a cohesive unit (Bar-Tal, 2013). These beliefs may limit individual willingness to consider flight, and may also shape responses to the experience of fear described above.

Extensive research has indicated that these context-specific ideological beliefs influence not only the attitudes (Bar-Tal, Sharvit, Halperin, & Zafran, 2012), but also the behaviors (e.g., information seeking, see Porat, Halperin, & Bar-Tal, 2013) of individuals in societies involved in intractable conflicts. Although research has not directly examined the ideology–flight relationship (but see recent work on migration to ideologically-similar communities, Motyl, Iyer, Oishi, Trawalter, & Nosek, 2014), there are indications in the literature that the beliefs of individuals are a key motivation behind the decision not to leave one's home in perilous times (e.g., Gidron, Peleg, Jaffe, & Shenhar, 2010).

### The interactive effect of fear and ideology on willingness to consider flight

While it is clear that fear and ideology play important roles in collective contexts, little is known about their interactive influence. Could rightists and leftists be differentially motivated by fear? Could their willingness to consider fleeing be more or less influenced by their heightened experience of fear? Our goal in the present research was to examine these as-of-yet unexamined questions. Nonetheless, the literature contains several clues that lead to seemingly conflicting predictions, especially when examining fear in intergroup contexts.

On one hand, recent accounts of ideology indicate that rightists and leftists differ from one another in fear reactivity, such that rightists have an over-activated fear response (e.g., Block & Block, 2006; Jost, Glaser, Kruglanski, & Sulloway, 2003a,b; Kanai, Feilden, Firth, & Rees, 2011; Oxley et al., 2008), and that these differences explain many right–left motivational differences (see Jost & Amodio, 2012; Jost et al., 2009). Importantly, brain research has also demonstrated right–left differences specifically relevant to avoidance tendencies, with the processing of “conservative” statements associated with greater activity in brain regions associated with withdrawal motivations (Zamboni, Gozzi, Krueger, Duhamel, Sirigu, & Grafman, 2009). A review of the empirical literature has recently suggested that rightists have greater negativity bias in general, and their greater attention to negative occurrences leads them to take more steps to avoid such occurrences (Hibbing, Smith, & Alford, 2014). These findings indicate that rightists may be more behaviorally reactive to fear-inducing stimuli in several ways, and such greater reactivity may lead to the prediction that fear would have a greater impact on rightists' (compared to leftists') willingness to consider flight.

On the other hand, the specific contents of rightist ideology in certain contexts may lead to a competing prediction, that fearful rightists would be less motivated than fearful leftists to consider flight. As stated earlier, rightist ideology is associated with patriotism (Bar-Tal, 2013), and specifically blind patriotism (Schatz, Staub, & Lavine, 1999), and such patriotism promotes self-sacrifice, the opposite of physical flight from danger, especially in intergroup conflict situations. These beliefs should be most powerful with regard to patriotism-relevant units—namely, one's land and nation—and leaving these may be particularly at odds with patriotic beliefs. Right-wing beliefs in conflict situations are also associated with beliefs regarding security—and the modes of achieving it through confrontation—and unity—and its importance in facing the threatening outgroup (Bar-Tal, 2013). These firm beliefs should limit rightists' willingness to consider fleeing, even when experiencing fear. Additionally, the literature suggests that rightist ideology is associated with over-active fear responses and needs for certainty and security precisely because it functions to reduce fear and answer these needs (Jost et al., 2009). It follows that rightist ideology, in answering these needs, regulates the effects of fear by providing clear guidelines on how to react to ideologically-relevant threats—a notion supported by findings on ideological differences in the impact of emotions on policy support (Pliskin, Bar-Tal, Sheppes, & Halperin, 2014). These factors support a prediction that rightists' (compared to leftists') willingness to consider flight would be less affected by fear, at least in ideologically relevant intergroup contexts.

### The present research

The relevant literatures therefore lead to two seemingly contradictory predictions. Nonetheless, we argue that the contradiction can be settled by acknowledging the moderating role context plays in the relationship among ideology, fear and the willingness to consider flight. In other words, along the lines of research demonstrating that right–left differences in threat sensitivity, risk-aversion, and negativity bias are domain specific (Choma, Hanoach, Hodson, & Gummerum, 2014; Federico, Johnston, & Lavine, 2014), we believe that both predictions

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