



## Report

## The effects of mortality salience on political preferences: The roles of charisma and political orientation

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## ABSTRACT

Research has shown that mortality salience (MS) heightens liking for certain political candidates. Yet the particular qualities that make candidates more appealing after MS has been subject to debate. This study tested three possibilities: MS increases liking for charismatic candidates independent of participants' or candidates' political orientation; MS increases liking for conservative candidates independent of participants' or candidates' political orientation; and MS increases liking only for charismatic candidates who support the individual's pre-existing political orientation, whether liberal or conservative. Following a MS manipulation, liberal and conservative participants evaluated two hypothetical gubernatorial candidates who differed both in their political orientation and level of charisma. MS heightened liking of charismatic candidates who shared the perceiver's political orientation, whether liberal or conservative. In contrast, MS reduced liking for uncharismatic and opposing-orientation candidates. Results thus indicated that MS heightens regard for same-political orientation charismatic candidates, rather than just any charismatic candidate or conservative candidates. Implications for the influence of death-related concerns on political preference are briefly discussed.

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## Introduction

Psychologists have long explored motivational and affective factors that contribute to political preferences (Converse, 1964; Rokach, 1960; Tomkins, 1963; Westen, 2007). A number of theorists propose that one such factor is the psychological security people acquire through reverence of cultural leaders (Becker, 1973; Bord, 1975; Ehrhart & Klein, 2001; Freud, 1921/1965; Fromm, 1941; Redl, 1942). Consistent with this view, research based on terror management theory (TMT; Greenberg, Pyszczynski, & Solomon, 1986) has demonstrated that reminders of death (mortality salience; MS) increase support for certain political candidates.

Evidence remains equivocal, however, regarding the particular qualities that render some candidates more appealing than others in response to mortality salience. One perspective, derived from TMT, suggests that what matters most is a candidate's charismatic qualities—the confidence and optimism he/she displays in promoting the greatness of an individual's worldview (Becker, 1973; Ehrhart & Klein, 2001; Fromm, 1941; Feldmann, 2004). Another perspective, however, suggests that political candidates provide security from death by advocating conservative ideologies (Jost,

Glasser, Kruglanski, & Sulloway, 2003; Jost et al., 2007). The present experiment was conducted to clarify the roles of charisma and political orientation in the effect of MS on evaluations of political candidates.

## Terror management theory

Based on the work of Ernest Becker (1973), TMT (Greenberg et al., 1986) states that all forms of life share biological systems geared toward continued survival, yet humans possess unique cognitive abilities which produce the realization that death is perpetually imminent and ultimately inevitable. To mitigate the anxiety that such awareness could evoke, humans develop and subscribe to *cultural worldviews*—shared symbolic conceptions of reality that imbue life with meaning, order and permanence, and prescribe standards of value that enculturated individuals may live up to in order to acquire *self-esteem*. Confident faith in a cultural worldview and self-esteem allows humans to perceive themselves as enduring beings who transcend death either literally or symbolically, rather than as finite animals.

TMT further proposes that, although worldviews are derived from beliefs and values espoused by the culture at large, individuals internalize a personalized version of the broader worldview based on their unique temperament and socialization experiences. Accordingly, research has shown that MS motivates individuals to

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sustain cultural beliefs and values with which they personally identify. For instance, MS motivates people to bolster positive views of their nationalistic identity (Greenberg, Pyszczynski, Solomon, Simon, & Breus, 1994), religion (Greenberg et al., 1990), political orientation (Greenberg, Simon, Pyszczynski, Solomon, & Chatel, 1992; McGregor et al., 1998), and various other bases of meaning and value important to the individual (for a review, see e.g., Greenberg, Solomon, & Arndt, 2007). For instance, Rosenblatt, Greenberg, Solomon, Pyszczynski, and Lyon (1989) demonstrated that, following MS, participants with negative attitudes toward prostitution recommended harsher bonds for a prostitute, whereas people with a more positive attitude did not. Similarly, Simon, Harmon-Jones, Greenberg, Solomon, and Pyszczynski (1996) found that MS led individuals to prefer others with similar attitudes toward the legalization of flag burning, whether those attitudes were positive or negative.

#### *What qualities make political candidates more attractive after MS?*

Various thinkers have proposed that people derive support for their cultural worldview by revering charismatic leaders (e.g., Becker, 1973; Freud, 1921/1965; Redl, 1942; Weber, 1925/1968). At times of cultural upheaval or personal insecurity, charismatic figures who confidently pronounce the righteousness of important ideals, from Adolph Hitler to Barack Obama, have provided comfort and inspiration to millions. According to TMT, candidates who voice unwavering support for a person's worldview bolster beliefs that buffer death-related concerns. This suggests that MS should enhance affection for political candidates who exhibit a charismatic leadership style.

In accord with this analysis, Cohen, Solomon, Maxfield, Pyszczynski, and Greenberg (2004) found that MS boosted support for a hypothetical gubernatorial candidate who exuded self-confidence, had high expectations and optimism about his constituents' potential, advocated risks in opposition to the status quo, and articulated a value-based vision and collective identity (characteristics identified as typical of charismatic leaders; Ehrhart & Klein, 2001), whereas MS diminished support for a relationship-oriented candidate lacking such qualities. In that study, the candidates did not express any attitudes that would clearly indicate the candidate's political orientation. Landau et al. (2004) then examined whether similar effects would occur in the context of an actual election featuring charismatic and uncharismatic political figures. Prior to the 2004 Presidential election, Landau et al. (2004) tested whether MS would heighten Americans' support for incumbent President George W. Bush. The researchers reasoned that, since the September 11th terrorist attacks, Bush established a charismatic persona through assertive appeals to patriotism and American supremacy in the war on terror. By contrast, Senator John Kerry, Bush's opponent, was perceived as an uncharismatic "flip-flopper" (Harris, 2004) with low expectations (e.g., Kerry's assertion that terrorism could never be entirely eliminated; Bai, 2004).

Consistent with this view, Landau et al. (2004) found that individuals reminded of their mortality evaluated Bush and his anti-terrorism policies more favorably and evaluated Kerry less favorably. Interestingly, these effects were found among both politically liberal and politically conservative participants. These findings are most consistent with a "simple charisma" hypothesis regarding the influence of MS on political candidate evaluations: that MS will heighten liking for charismatic political candidates and dampen liking for uncharismatic candidates, regardless of the candidates' and perceiver's political orientation.

However, Landau et al. (2004) acknowledged that their findings may have resulted from various factors other than Bush's charisma. Specifically, in addition to being charismatic, Bush was also the sitting American President, a conservative, and a staunch advocate of strong security and aggressive military measures at a particular

moment in American history when most liberal and conservative leaders alike had supported the invasion of Iraq and professed pronounced concerns about the prospect of additional acts of terrorism. The MS-induced increase of both liberals' and conservatives' regard for Bush may thus reflect the influence of any one or a combination of these factors. Specifically, the threat of terrorism and the war in Iraq combined with MS may have heightened the appeal of the current leader of the country, a charismatic candidate, and a conservative leader who advocated strong security and military responses to the threat of terrorism. A goal of the present research was therefore to isolate the roles of charisma and political orientation in MS effects by experimentally manipulating the charisma and political ideology of hypothetical candidates.

In this context, we tested three plausible competing hypotheses. The first, supported most clearly by Cohen et al. (2004), is that MS simply increases the appeal of a charismatic candidate independent of the candidate's political orientation (the simple charisma hypothesis). The second hypothesis follows from a recent line of research suggesting that existential concerns motivate investment in conservatism. This idea is supported by research showing that conservative ideologies afford an unambiguous, stable conception of the world, and are advocated more by people with existential concerns (Jost et al., 2003, 2007; Jost, Fitzsimons, & Kay, 2004; Paulhus & Trapnell, 1997; however, see Greenberg & Jonas, 2003 for evidence that the same is true of leftwing ideologies in communist countries). Accordingly, proponents of this view interpret Landau et al.'s (2004) findings as the result of both liberal and conservative participants gravitating toward conservatism after MS, and thus affirming Bush, the politically conservative candidate (the conservative shift hypothesis; Jost et al., 2007).

However, Landau et al. (2004) included a measure of political orientation following participants' judgments of the political candidates, and MS did not lead participants to report a more conservative political orientation – there seemed to be no conservative shift. Yet because this assessment consisted of only one item, it may have been insensitive to MS-induced shifts toward conservatism. Furthermore, although Cohen et al.'s (2004) findings supported the simple charisma hypothesis, the political orientation of their hypothetical candidates was unspecified, leaving open that possibility that inferences regarding political orientation of the hypothetical candidates played some role. It thus remains possible that, regardless of how charismatic candidates are, both liberal and conservative participants will respond to MS with enhanced support for conservatives and decreased support for liberals.

Our third hypothesis is the one that we believe most clearly follows from TMT and TMT research. In terms of the theory, MS should bolster an individual's liking for a candidate who confidently promotes the greatness of the worldview that individual advocates. This suggests that MS will enhance liking for charismatic leaders, but only if the candidate's charismatic rhetoric bolsters the participant's pre-existing values – whether those values are liberal or conservative. This position rests on the assumption that both liberalism and conservatism constitute cultural worldviews that individuals seek to bolster and defend following MS, an idea supported by previous research. For instance, McGregor et al. (1998) found that following MS, liberals were more aggressive toward an overtly anti-liberal person (but not an anti-conservative), and conservatives were more aggressive toward an anti-conservative person (but not an anti-liberal). Greenberg et al. (1992) demonstrated that while conservatives responded to MS with less acceptance of a benign but dissimilar other, liberals, whose worldview emphasizes tolerance (Stone, 1980), responded to MS with a trend toward greater acceptance of a dissimilar other. Similarly, Pyszczynski et al. (2006) found that MS led conservative, but not liberal, Americans to advocate extreme military measures against potential threats from other groups.

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