

## **Threat, Authoritarianism, and Selective Exposure to Information**

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*We examined the hypothesis that threat alters the cognitive strategies used by high authoritarians in seeking out new political information from the environment. In a laboratory experiment, threat was manipulated through a "mortality salience" manipulation used in research on terror management theory (Pyszczynski, Solomon, & Greenberg, 2003). Subjects (N = 92) were then invited to read one of three editorial articles on the topic of capital punishment. We found that in the absence of threat, both low and high authoritarians were responsive to salient norms of evenhandedness in information selection, preferring exposure to a two-sided article that presents the merits of both sides of an issue to an article that selectively touts the benefits of the pro or con side of the issue. However, in the presence of threat, high but not low authoritarians became significantly more interested in exposure to an article containing uniformly pro-attitudinal arguments, and significantly less interested in a balanced, two-sided article. Finally, a path analysis indicated that selective exposure to attitude-congruent information led to more internally consistent policy attitudes and inhibited attitude change. Discussion focuses on the role of threat in conditioning the cognitive and attitudinal effects of authoritarianism.*

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**KEY WORDS:** Threat, Authoritarianism, Interactionism, Motivated Reasoning, Attitude Change

Authoritarianism is among the most widely studied dispositional concepts in political psychology. Originally conceived to explicate the psychological roots of anti-Semitism, ethnocentrism, and fascism (Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswik,

Levinson, & Sanford, 1950; Fromm, 1941; Reich, 1946/1970), it has emerged in more contemporary research as a robust predictor of a variety of politically related phenomena, including party identification, policy attitudes, voting, prejudice and intolerance, the punishment of deviants and criminals, religiosity, and support for the Bill of Rights (e.g., Altemeyer, 1988, 1998; Duckitt, 1989, 2001; Feldman & Stenner, 1997; Peterson, Doty, & Winter, 1993; Whitley, 1999). However, despite a vast empirical literature and some consistent findings, authoritarianism remains controversial as a theoretical concept. In the last two decades, Adorno et al.'s (1950) psychoanalytic framework has been supplanted by perspectives emphasizing social learning theory (Altemeyer, 1981, 1988, 1996, 1998), group identification (Duckitt, 1989), and a preference for social conformity over individual autonomy (Duckitt, 2001; Feldman, 2003).<sup>1</sup>

Despite their theoretical heterogeneity, these newer conceptions all incorporate a common theme in which authoritarianism and other forms of political conservatism are adopted to satisfy antecedent psychological motives stemming from threat, fear, and uncertainty.<sup>2</sup> That is, authoritarianism is viewed in functionalist terms as an ideological response intended to reduce high levels of perceived threat and anxiety (see also Katz, 1960; Smith, Bruner, & White, 1956). For the earlier psychodynamic theorists, threat took the form of repression of fear and weakness of the ego (e.g., Adorno et al., 1950), the uncertainty, anomie, and lack of security created by modern capitalistic societies (Fromm, 1941), or the anxiety associated with the incomplete repression of unacceptable sexual impulses (Reich, 1946/1970). In Altemeyer's (1988) social learning framework, threat arises from a constricted range of social experiences combined with messages and reinforcements that emphasize the perils of nontraditional lifestyles and beliefs. In Duckitt's (1989) group identification perspective, threat takes the form of insecure social identity, which is hypothesized to increase one's desire for group cohesion, submission to in-group authority, and hostility toward out-groups. Finally, in Feldman's (2003) social conformity theory, threat is centered on the idea that too much individual autonomy—and ideological diversity in general—will result in social rebellion and instability of the status quo. Authoritarian attitudes are seen here as instrumental in preserving social order against an onslaught of unconventional ideas and values (see also Duckitt, 2001; Duckitt, Wagner, du Plessis, & Birum, 2002). What we wish to highlight here is the functional similarity of

<sup>1</sup> Most contemporary scholars now view authoritarianism as a set of "ideological beliefs" or "social attitudes of a broad nature" rather than as a basic dimension of personality (e.g., Altemeyer, 1988; Duckitt, 2001; Feldman & Stenner, 1997; Jost, Glaser, Kruglanski, & Sulloway, 2003; but see Oesterreich, this volume), an important distinction. While this continues to be an open question, the personality vs. attitudinal basis of authoritarianism is orthogonal to the analysis of its dynamics that we address in this article.

<sup>2</sup> In a cogent integration of the literature on the psychological foundations of ideology, Jost et al. (2003) have interpreted variants of political conservatism (e.g., authoritarianism, social dominance) as products of *motivated social cognition*, in which ideological beliefs are seen as grounded in epistemic and existential psychological needs.

these theories: in each case, the concept of “threat,” however conceived, provides the primary motivation for the internalization of society’s prescriptions (conventionalism), submission to perceived legitimate authority, and aggression against out-groups (see also Rokeach, 1960; Samelson, 1993; Stenner, 1996, Wilson, 1973).<sup>3</sup>

Although threat is routinely implicated as an instigator of authoritarianism, the empirical evidence to date is rather sparse. At the aggregate level, archival studies provide some supporting evidence that citizens exhibit heightened authoritarian attitudes and behavior (e.g., a concern for power, authoritarian aggression, submission, cynicism, superstition) during periods marked by social, economic, and political threat (e.g., high unemployment, high crime, civil disorder, war; Doty, Peterson, & Winter, 1991; McCann, 1997, 1999; Sales, 1972, 1973). For example, conversion rates from nonauthoritarian to authoritarian church denominations increase during high-threat periods (e.g., the Great Depression, the 1960s), and decrease during low-threat periods (Sales, 1972; McCann, 1999). Two individual-level experimental studies provide more direct support for the *causal* role of threat in the development of authoritarian attitudes. In the first, Sales and Friend (1973) induced subjects to believe that they had performed well or poorly on an anagram task purporting to measure “ability and intelligence.” Positive feedback was found to produce slightly lower F-scale scores, and negative feedback slightly higher scores, compared to a control condition. In a more recent study, Duckitt and Fisher (2003) presented subjects with written scenarios about the future in which society was depicted as either threatening (sustained economic decline and social disintegration), secure (sustained economic boom and social harmony), or unchanged from the present. They demonstrated not only that authoritarianism scores were higher following exposure to the threat condition than the secure or unchanged conditions, but that this experimental effect was mediated entirely by threat-based differences in subjects’ beliefs that the world is a dangerous and threatening place (see also Altemeyer, 1981).<sup>4</sup> Finally, in a naturalistic experiment using letters to the editor of major U.S. newspapers, Perrin (2004; this volume) found increases in both pro- and anti-authoritarian sentiment in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001.

In the present research, we offer an alternative account of the threat-authoritarianism relationship. Rather than pursuing the argument that threat directly increases authoritarianism, we examine the proposition that threat may also activate existing levels of authoritarianism and thereupon strengthen the influence of authoritarianism on other political judgments and preferences. Based on the

<sup>3</sup> Perceived threat is also a central component of Marcus and Sullivan’s work on intolerance (Marcus, Sullivan, Theiss-Morse, & Wood, 1995; Sullivan, Piereson, & Marcus, 1982). However, because this work is not directly relevant to the origins or dynamics of authoritarianism, it is not discussed here.

<sup>4</sup> There is also correlational evidence linking the two concepts. Both Altemeyer (1998) and Duckitt (2001) have reported substantial correlations between Altemeyer’s right-wing authoritarianism and belief in dangerous world scales.

trait-situational matching hypothesis and the temporary accessibility of cognitive and motivational constructs (DeBono, 1987; Eagly, 1981; Higgins & King, 1981; Lavine & Snyder, 1999; Snyder & Ickes, 1985), we develop a model in which the cognitive and attitudinal effects of authoritarianism are contingent on the presence of situational threat. In particular, we demonstrate that in the absence of threat, high and low authoritarians exhibit equivalent levels of open-mindedness in seeking new attitude-relevant information and incorporating discrepant information into existing policy attitudes. In contrast, when threat is present, we show that high (but not low) authoritarians become disproportionately concerned with the defense of their prior attitudes, leading to biases in information-seeking preferences, and to opinions that are structurally one-sided (i.e., low in ambivalence) and resistant to attitude change. In the next section, we present the conceptual underpinnings of our model and review evidence consistent with it. We then present the results of an experiment on selective exposure to support the key interactive (i.e., threat  $\times$  authoritarianism) tenet of the model.

### **The Activation Model of Threat and Authoritarianism**

In our view, political judgment and behavior often arise out of the joint (non-additive) influence of longstanding political predispositions and forces emanating from the immediate political environment (see Snyder & Ickes, 1985). The impact of predispositions should thus be situationally variable (e.g., Fazio, 1986; Mischel, 1968; Zaller, 1992). In particular, a specific predisposition should be a powerful judgmental yardstick when salient features of the situation *match* that predisposition's cognitive and motivational content. For example, situations highlighting threat should increase the accessibility and use of threat-related predispositions, such as authoritarianism, whereas situations that highlight social-justive concerns should activate predispositions related to impression management orientations (e.g., self-monitoring; Snyder, 1987). This kind of feature or "template" matching (see Bem & Funder, 1978; Funder, 1982) occurs when situational forces activate corresponding personality dispositions from memory, thus rendering them temporarily salient or "cognitively accessible." In turn, when the cognitive-motivational propensities associated with a particular personality style or sociopolitical belief are memorially active—when their contents are transferred from long-term memory and deposited into working memory—they should exert a disproportionate effect on political judgment and decision making (e.g., Higgins & King, 1981; Huckfeldt, Levine, Morgan, & Sprague, 1999; Iyengar & Kinder, 1986; Zaller & Feldman, 1992). In other words, precipitating situations make predispositions *relevant* and thereby strengthen the connections with their presumed affective, cognitive, and behavioral consequences. In the absence of trait-situational feature matching, predispositions should remain cognitively and motivationally dormant and therefore less likely to influence subsequent judgments and behaviors.

What does this interactionist model imply about the relationship between threat and authoritarianism? If, as recent evidence suggests, authoritarians are sensitive to and provoked by a variety of threats, the model implies that the presence of situational threat should selectively activate the cognitive and motivational propensities of highly authoritarian individuals. We should therefore expect that such individuals will be most likely to act in accordance with their authoritarianism—e.g., submissive to authority, aggressive toward out-groups, etc.—when they are suitably threatened. Recent experimental evidence suggests that authoritarians are both more sensitive to threat than are nonauthoritarians and more likely to rely on their authoritarian attitudes when confronted with threat. With regard to threat sensitivity, Lavine, Lodge, Polichak, and Taber (2002) found that individuals scoring high on Altemeyer's right-wing authoritarianism (RWA) scale responded more quickly to threatening words (e.g., "mugger," "cancer," "crime," "poison") but not nonthreatening words ("poetry," "potato," "canteen," "telescope") on an automatic word recognition (lexical decision) task than low RWA scorers. In a follow-up priming experiment, Lavine et al. (2002) found that high authoritarians responded more quickly than low authoritarians to target words that are semantically related to threatening connotations of a homograph (dual meaning) prime (e.g., the target word "weapons," when following the prime word "arms") but *not* to target words that are semantically related to nonthreatening connotations of the prime (e.g., the target word "legs" when following the prime word "arms").

Consistent with the finding that high authoritarians are especially sensitive to threat, recent studies have shown support for the activation hypothesis—that threat strongly accentuates the relationship between authoritarianism and other social and political preferences. For example, using National Election Studies data, Feldman and Stenner (1997) assessed voters' perceptions of different types of social threat. They found that relations between authoritarianism and a variety of political attitudes, including policy issues, attitudes toward in-groups and out-groups, stereotypes about minorities, and political values, were considerably stronger when perceived ideological threat (perceiving the self as ideologically distant from the two major parties and presidential candidates) was high than when ideological threat was low. In a further study, Feldman (2003) found that a preference for social conformity over individual autonomy was strongly related to both prejudice toward African Americans and intolerance toward a fictitious group espousing white supremacy, but only among subjects who perceived a high level of threat to social cohesion. Studies of economic threat reveal the same interactionist dynamic: Rickert (1998) found that compared to nonthreatened authoritarians or nonauthoritarian respondents, economically threatened authoritarians were six times as likely to favor restricting benefits to powerless groups and eight times as likely to support laws making abortion illegal. Finally, in an experimental study based on a wholly different type of threat, namely "mortality salience" (a manipulation of threat intended to remind subjects of the inevitability of death),

Greenberg et al. (1990) found that high but not low authoritarians rated a target person with dissimilar social attitudes more negatively when mortality salience was high than when mortality salience was low (for examples involving intergroup threat, see Downing & Monaco, 1986; Esses, Haddock, & Zanna, 1993).

### The Present Study

These studies provide compelling evidence that threat powerfully moderates the role of authoritarianism in guiding social and political preferences. In the absence of threat, authoritarian predispositions remain dormant and exhibit little relationship to other political attitudes and beliefs. In the presence of threat, however, authoritarian predispositions become activated and brought into working memory and become highly relevant political guides. This contingent effect is consistent with the notion that authoritarian responses represent instrumental efforts to reduce perceived threat and anxiety. Moreover, as the studies reviewed above suggest, authoritarian dispositions may be activated by a variety of threats, including those that are political, economic, intergroup, or intrapsychic (e.g., mortality threat) in nature. In the present research, we address an important gap in the literature on authoritarianism. Specifically, nearly all of the work to date on the activation model has examined attitudes and beliefs congruent with the ideological content of authoritarianism, such as prejudice and intolerance of minority groups, punitive policy attitudes, and reactions to attitudinally dissimilar individuals. In the present research, we examine whether threat causes changes in the cognitive strategies that high authoritarians use in seeking out new political information from the environment, and in the processes through which attitudes are cognitively defended.

To do this, we take up one of the oldest and most enduring aspects of attitude theory, the notion that all aspects of cognition—information selection, perception, judgment, memory—are biased by people's "priors," that is, by their attitudes, beliefs, values, motives, goals, and expectations (for reviews, see Eagly & Chaiken, 1993; Eagly, Chen, Kulesa, & Chaiken, 2001). While from a normative perspective, the collection, evaluation, and integration of new information should be kept independent of one's prior attitudes, it appears that individuals often behave otherwise. They selectively attend to information that upholds their attitudes and beliefs while ignoring or actively avoiding information that challenges their validity, they critically scrutinize and counterargue attitude-discrepant information while accepting congenial information at face value, and they selectively remember information that accords rather than conflicts with their prior opinions. In short, citizens are often biased or "partisan" in their information processing, motivated more by their desire to maintain prior beliefs than by their desire to make "accurate" or otherwise optimal decisions (Lodge & Taber, 2000). Theoretically, such selectivity or "motivated reasoning" effects occur as people attempt to reduce cognitive dissonance associated with the acceptance of incon-

gruent information (Festinger, 1957). Protective information processing strategies—either avoiding such information or counterarguing it—should thus serve to defend the validity of one's current opinions and thereby help to restore psychological equanimity.

Although attitude-based, information-processing biases may be rather robust phenomena, they do not occur ubiquitously (see Freedman & Sears, 1965). From a Lewinian perspective, their occurrence and magnitude should depend on aspects of the person and aspects of the situation (for a review of the conditional nature of post-decisional selectivity effects, see Frey, 1986). In this study, we test the proposition that departures from normative or "objective" information seeking strategies depend jointly on authoritarianism and threat. We expect that in the absence of threat, both low and high authoritarians should be responsive to salient norms of evenhandedness in information selection. In particular, when individuals are offered a choice of reading one of several different op-ed type articles on a specific political issue, they should be more likely (in the absence of threat) to choose a two-sided article that presents the merits of both sides of an issue than an article that selectively touts the benefits of only one side of the issue. However, in the presence of threat, the predispositions of high authoritarians should be activated, precipitating their desire to engage in instrumental responses to reduce anxiety. The most direct way of reducing anxiety in this context—or at least preventing the occurrence of increased anxiety—is to shore up the validity of one's opinions by choosing to read a uniformly pro-attitudinal message. Thus, we expect that in the presence of threat, high but not low authoritarians should depart from a preference for exposure to a balanced, two-sided discussion of an issue to a one-sided format that presents only arguments in favor of the respondent's preferred attitudinal position.

If the presence of threat selectively induces biased information seeking among high authoritarians, it should result in attitudes marked by higher levels of structural consistency and increased resistance to attitude change. That is, by choosing to read a "message" in which all of the arguments are attitudinally congenial, individuals are likely to acquire new attitude-consistent beliefs, increasing the extent to which opinions are one-sided and therefore less likely to change. In contrast, by choosing to read a message that presents strong arguments on behalf of *both* sides of a policy debate in a point-counterpoint fashion (or by choosing an attitudinally incongruent article), attitudes should become more ambivalent (as subjects come to endorse at least some of the counterattitudinal arguments), and more susceptible to change.

To examine these processes, we measured three potential consequences of biased information seeking. First, we assessed subjects' cognitive responses in reaction to the op-ed article that they chose to read. Cognitive responses refer to the thoughts (favorable, unfavorable, neutral, irrelevant) recipients have while processing a persuasive message. They are routinely assessed in social psychological studies of persuasion and are considered the primary mediator of attitude

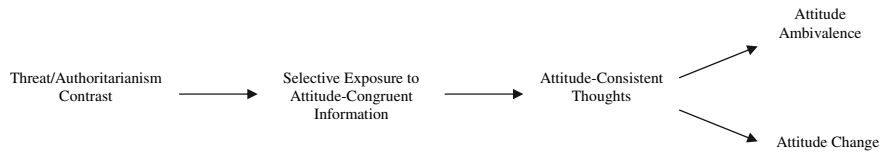
change in contexts in which message recipients are adequately able and motivated to attend to the central merits of an advocacy (see Cacioppo, Harkins, & Petty, 1981; Eagly & Chaiken, 1993; Mackie, 1987). If, when threatened, high (but not low) authoritarians choose to read a message that presents only congenial arguments (i.e., arguments consistent with the message recipient's own position), open-ended cognitive responses should reflect greater support for their initial policy position. This means that threatened authoritarians should express a greater number of thoughts in favor of their own position, and fewer thoughts in favor of the opposing policy position, than either nonauthoritarians or unthreatened authoritarians.

Second, to determine whether biased information exposure increases the internal consistency of subjects' policy opinions, we measured the structural property of attitude ambivalence. Ambivalence refers to the degree to which an individual endorses competing beliefs and feelings about an attitude object (Hochschild, 1981; Lavine & Steenbergen, in press; Zaller & Feldman, 1992). It has been shown in prior research to reduce the certainty and accessibility with which people express their attitudes (Huckfeldt & Sprague, 1998; Lavine, Borgida, & Sullivan, 2000), and to produce attitudes that are unstable over time and susceptible to persuasive influence (Alvarez & Brehm, 1995; Armitage & Conner, 2000; Bassili, 1996; Lavine, 2001; Zaller & Feldman, 1992). Finally, we examine whether subjects actually changed their policy opinions after exposure to the message of their choice. We expect that an exposure preference for uniformly pro-attitudinal message arguments should produce attitudes that are both internally consistent (i.e., unambivalent) and resistant to change compared to a preference for a balanced (two-sided) message or one containing uniformly counterattitudinal arguments.

In sum, we hypothesize that in the absence of threat, authoritarianism will exert little influence on respondents' information seeking preferences. All else equal, we suspect that both high and low authoritarians will be responsive to the norm of evenhandedness in the selection of new information and exhibit a market preference for a two-sided balanced message over a one-sided partisan message. However, in the presence of threat, we expect the information-seeking proclivities of high but not low authoritarians will diverge sharply from this normative preference. In particular, we test four specific hypotheses about the influence of threat among high authoritarians:

- (1) High authoritarians will be more likely to choose to read a message containing only attitude-congruent arguments when threat is high than when threat is low.
- (2) High authoritarians will express *greater* interest in a message containing only attitude-congruent arguments when threat is high than when threat is low.
- (3) High authoritarians will express *less* interest in a message containing balanced arguments when threat is high than when threat is low.





**Figure 1.** Path Model of the Causes and Consequences of Information Exposure Preference.

- (4) High authoritarians will express *less* interest in a message containing only attitude-incongruent arguments when threat is high than when threat is low.

We thus predict that high authoritarians, when threatened, will attempt to reduce anxiety by increasing their interest in attitudinally supportive arguments, and by exhibiting greater avoidance of both of the messages—balanced and incongruent—containing attitudinally challenging arguments. *However, we do not expect to observe any such changes in the information preferences of low authoritarians across levels of situationally induced threat.* Thus, we expect threat to exert a selective influence on the information exposure preferences of high authoritarians.<sup>5</sup> Finally, to examine the cognitive and attitudinal consequences of information exposure preferences (partisan vs. balanced), we estimate the parameters of the path model shown in Figure 1. In this model, open-ended attitude-consistent thoughts (cognitive responses) are hypothesized to be a direct positive function of whether or not the subject engaged in *selective exposure* (i.e., whether the subject chose and consequently read a message containing uniformly pro-attitudinal arguments). In turn, post-message attitude-consistent thoughts are hypothesized to produce more univalent (i.e., less ambivalent) policy attitudes, and to inhibit attitude change.

Our final consideration is *how* to manipulate the key construct of threat. Previous research suggests that authoritarian individuals are sensitized to a variety of threats, including those that are not overtly political in nature (e.g., Altemeyer, 1998; Duckitt, 2001; Esses et al., 1993; Greenberg et al., 1990; Jost, Glaser, Kruglanski, & Sulloway, 2003; Lavine et al., 2002; Sales & Friend, 1973; Wilson, 1973). As we reviewed above, work on the activation model suggests that the propensities of high authoritarians are triggered by threats to social order and cohesion, social identity, economic security, and mortality. On the basis of two recent activation experiments (Greenberg et al., 1990, Experiment 2; Lavine et al., 2002, Experiment 3), we chose to manipulate situational threat through a mortality salience procedure used in research on terror management theory (for a recent summary, see Pyszczynski, Greenberg, & Solomon, 1999; Pyszczynski,

<sup>5</sup> An equivalent way of stating our hypotheses would be to say that authoritarianism should predict subjects' information preferences when threat is high, but not when threat is low.

Solomon, & Greenberg, 2003). The theory holds that awareness of the inevitability of human mortality is highly anxiety provoking and that societies develop worldviews and cultural beliefs to combat mortality fear and to provide a sense of meaning in life. In previous research, heightened mortality salience has led to intensified support for one's cultural worldview, increased prejudice and intolerance toward individuals who express alternative social, cultural, and political beliefs, and increased attraction to those who hold similar worldviews. If, as the findings of Greenberg et al. (1990) and Lavine et al. (2002) suggest, high authoritarians are more sensitive to and provoked by such existential crises than low authoritarians, inducing mortality threat should activate the defensive propensities of authoritarians. In addition, as the general effect of mortality threat is to heighten social and attitudinal intolerance, it should provide a highly suitable device with which to activate the natural propensities of authoritarian individuals.

## Method

### *Overview of Experiment*

Subjects completed a questionnaire that solicited demographic information (e.g., age, gender, race), party identification and political ideology, attitudes toward several policy issues, including the target issue of capital punishment, and Altemeyer's (1996) Right-Wing Authoritarianism Scale. Then, half of our subjects were exposed to a threat induction intended to heighten mortality salience. Subjects then rated their interest in three "editorial" articles on the topic of capital punishment. The titles made clear that one of the articles contained arguments in favor of the policy, one contained arguments opposed to the policy, and one contained a mix of arguments on both sides of the issue. Subjects then chose to read one of the articles (a 300-word persuasive essay), after which they listed their thoughts and feelings about capital punishment. To assess message-induced attitude change, subjects' attitudes toward capital punishment were then reassessed. The threat induction, persuasive messages, and attitude measures are described in detail below.

### *Participants*

One hundred forty-five undergraduates ( $n = 72$  women;  $n = 73$  men) at the State University of New York at Stony Brook participated in the study for extra credit. An extreme thirds (tertile) split of scores on Altemeyer's (1996) Right-Wing Authoritarianism scale ( $\alpha = .89$ ) permitted a classification of these students as low ( $n = 42$ ) or high ( $n = 50$ ) in authoritarianism.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Subjects scoring in the middle third of the distribution were excluded from the analyses reported below. 49.3% of the students were white, 8.3% were Hispanic, 13.2% were African American, and 27.8% were Asian (1.4% did not respond to the race item).

*Threat Induction*

Half of our respondents were randomly assigned to the high-threat condition via a mortality salience induction in which subjects responded to the following two standard queries: "Please write down, as specifically as you can, what you think will happen to you as you physically die and once you are dead" and "Please briefly describe the emotions that the thought of your own death arouses in you" (see Pyszczynski et al., 1999; Pyszczynski et al., 2003). Seven lines were provided to answer these questions "as seriously and honestly as possible." The remaining subjects were assigned to a low-threat control condition and did not complete the mortality salience task.

*Dependent Variables*

*Attitudes toward capital punishment.* Both pre- and post-message attitudes toward capital punishment were assessed on a 10-point scale anchored by 1 = "Strongly Support the Death Penalty" and 10 = "Strongly Oppose the Death Penalty."

*Persuasive messages and information exposure preferences.* Subjects were informed that the experimenters were developing informational materials about capital punishment and that each subject would be asked to read and then react to one of three articles of their choosing. The article in favor of capital punishment was titled "America Needs Capital Punishment: Let's Not Get Rid of a Good Policy." The article opposed to capital punishment was titled "Capital Punishment is Bad for America: Let's Get Rid of It," and the two-sided or "balanced" article was titled "The Good and the Bad about Capital Punishment in America." Subjects were informed that the first article provided arguments in favor of capital punishment, that the second provided arguments against the policy, and that the third presented arguments on both sides of the issue in a point-counterpoint style. Respondents were asked to choose the article that they would most like to read and to rate their interest in reading each article on a 7-point scale where 1 = "definitely would not like to read" and 7 = "definitely would like to read."<sup>7</sup> Respondents were then provided with an approximately 300-word message containing either pro- or anti-capital punishment arguments, or a two-sided message, depending on which article the respondent chose to read. The pro-capital punishment message included the arguments that the policy was just ("an eye for an eye"), that studies had shown it to be an effective deterrent to violent crime, and that it saved taxpayer money. The anti-capital punishment message included the arguments that the policy was racially biased, that it unfairly punishes the poor, that it has led to the execution of innocent people, and that it is not an effective

<sup>7</sup> Measures of information interest and choice are standard indicators of exposure preference in the selective exposure literature in social psychology (e.g., for reviews, see Freedman & Sears, 1965; Frey, 1986).

deterrent to violent crime. Finally, the balanced message combined arguments from each of the two “pure” messages in a point-counterpoint fashion. Full transcripts of the messages are available from the authors on request.

*Cognitive responses.* Immediately following exposure to the message of their choice, subjects were asked to “write down all of your thoughts and feelings about capital punishment.” Each thought or feeling was coded by a judge (unaware of the subject’s RWA score or threat assignment) into one of four categories: supportive of capital punishment, opposed to capital punishment, neutral toward capital punishment, irrelevant to capital punishment. A second judge coded the cognitive responses of a randomly chosen 20% of the sample. Judges agreed on 83% of the coding categorizations. All disagreements were resolved by discussion. We computed a measure of *attitude-consistent thoughts* by taking the proportion of cognitive responses favorable to the subject’s own position on the issue and dividing by the total number of cognitive responses. For example, a subject who favored capital punishment in the pre-message attitude assessment and who listed three favorable thoughts toward the issue, one unfavorable thought, and two neutral thoughts would receive a score of .50. Attitude-consistent thought scores could thus range from 0 to 1.

*Attitude ambivalence.* Following procedures developed by Kaplan (1972) and Thompson, Zanna, and Griffin (1995), we assessed subjects’ ambivalence toward capital punishment by soliciting separately their positive and negative evaluations of the issue. For example, one pair of items read: “First, ignore for the moment any negative feelings you have about capital punishment, and consider only the positive ways that capital punishment makes you feel. Just considering your positive feelings toward the issue, would you say that you have ‘no positive feelings’ (=0), ‘slightly positive feelings’ (=1), ‘quite positive feelings’ (=2), or ‘extremely positive feelings’ (=3)?” Subjects were then asked to ignore any positive feelings they had about the issue and to consider only the negative ways that capital punishment makes them feel. Three such pairs of items were used, one focusing on the cognitive component of subjects’ attitudes (harmful/beneficial), one focusing on the affective component (positive/negative feelings), and one using generically evaluative labels (favor/oppose). After averaging subjects’ responses to the three positive and three negative items, we used Thompson et al.’s (1995) similarity-intensity formula to compute ambivalence, in which  $\text{ambivalence} = [(P + N)/2] - |P - N|$ , where P and N represent the intensity of positive and negative evaluation, respectively. Scores ranged from -1.5 (minimal ambivalence) to +3.0 (maximal ambivalence).

*Attitude change.* A binary (change/no change) attitude change score was constructed by determining whether subjects’ attitudes toward capital punishment crossed the midpoint of the 10-point scale (i.e., points 5 and 6) between the pre- and post-message attitude assessments. Of the 92 low and high RWA subjects included in the analyses, seven (or 7.6%) changed their opinions from oppose to favor. The average change for these seven subjects on the 10-point scale was 3.57

**Table 1.** Frequency of Message Choice as a Function of Threat and Authoritarianism

	Threat		No Threat	
	Low RWA	High RWA	Low RWA	High RWA
<i>Message Type</i>				
Balanced	14	15	22	18
Attitude-Congruent	2	11	1	3
Attitude-Incongruent	0	1	1	1
<i>% Selective Exposure</i>	12.50	40.74	4.17	13.64

*Note.*  $N = 89$  (cell  $n$ s ranged from 16 in the high threat/low RWA condition to 27 in the high threat/high RWA condition). Cell entries for the first three rows are frequencies with which subjects chose each of the three types of messages. Cell entries for the last row indicate the percentage of subjects in each column that chose the attitude-congruent message.

scale points. Another 10 subjects (or 10.9%) changed their attitudes from favor to oppose. The average change for these subjects on the 10-point scale was 4.70 scale points. Thus, in total, 18.5% of the subjects changed their opinions toward capital punishment after exposure to the message of their choice.

## Results

It is of little theoretical concern whether subjects preferred the message arguing in favor of or against capital punishment. Instead, we are interested in whether threat and authoritarianism influenced subjects' interest in exposure to arguments that were *congruent* or *incongruent* with their pre-message policy attitudes. Therefore, in the analyses below, we refer to the three persuasive messages as "attitude-congruent," "attitude-incongruent," and "balanced."<sup>8</sup> We analyze the results in three sections. First, we examine which article or message subjects chose to read. We then examine subjects' ratings of interest in each of the three articles. Finally, we estimate the parameters of an observed variable path model in which subjects' cognitive responses to a message of their own choosing—congruent, balanced, or incongruent—mediate the influence of threat and authoritarianism on attitude structure (ambivalence) and attitude change.

### *Information Exposure Preferences*

*Message choice.* The frequencies with which subjects chose each type of persuasive message are shown in Table 1. As can be seen in the table, only 17 of

<sup>8</sup> Fifty-seven (60%) subjects favored capital punishment on the pre-message attitude assessment (40% opposed the policy). For subjects who favored capital punishment in the pre-message assessment, the pro-capital punishment article is attitude-congruent, and the anti-capital punishment article is attitude-incongruent. For subjects who opposed capital punishment, the anti-capital punishment article is attitude-congruent and the pro-capital punishment article is attitude-incongruent.

89 subjects (19.10%) chose to read the attitude-congruent message.<sup>9</sup> All but three of the remaining subjects—69 of 89 (77.53%)—chose to read the balanced message. The question we wish to address here is whether the subjects choosing the attitude-congruent message came disproportionately from the high-threat/high authoritarianism cell. As the frequency entries in Table 1 plainly show, the answer is yes: 11 of the 17 subjects who engaged in selective exposure, an outright majority (64.71%), were threatened authoritarians. As the bottom row of Table 1 indicates, only in the high-threat/high-authoritarianism cell did subjects show a substantial preference for the attitude-congruent message. In this cell, 40.74% of subjects chose to expose themselves to uniformly pro-attitudinal arguments. Selective exposure rates did not reach 15% among low authoritarians (threatened or not) or among high authoritarians in the absence of threat. Moreover,  $\chi^2$  tests of association revealed that authoritarianism was significantly associated with a preference for congruent (vs. balanced) information when threat was high,  $\chi^2(1) = 4.12, p < .05$ , but not when threat was low,  $\chi^2(1) = 1.31, p > .20$ .

*Interest ratings.* To examine further whether threat moderated the effect of authoritarianism on information exposure preferences, we performed a 2 (Threat: high- vs. low-mortality salience)  $\times$  2 (Authoritarianism: high- vs. low-RWA)  $\times$  3 (Message Type: attitude-congruent, attitude-incongruent, balanced) mixed effects ANOVA, with repeated measures on last factor. Subjects' interest ratings for the three articles served as the dependent variable.<sup>10</sup> Our three-fold prediction is that high authoritarians will express greater interest in the attitude-congruent message when threat is high than when threat is low (i.e., the mortality salience condition vs. the control condition), and that high authoritarians will express less interest in both of the messages containing incongruent arguments (i.e., the attitude-incongruent and balanced messages) when threat is high than when threat is low. Thus, threat should increase high authoritarians' motivation to expose themselves to supportive information and reduce their motivation to expose themselves to threatening information. However, according to the activation thesis, threat should not alter the information preferences of *low* authoritarians. Instead, across threat conditions, we expect that low authoritarians will be responsive to the norm of evenhandedness in information selection and thus to express a uniform (i.e., cross-message) preference for the balanced message over either of the partisan messages. Taken together, our hypotheses translate into a three-way interaction between authoritarianism, threat, and message type.<sup>11</sup>

The means of this 2  $\times$  2  $\times$  3 analysis of variance are presented in Table 2. In addition to a significant main effect for message type ( $F[2, 174] = 27.14, p < .001$ )

<sup>9</sup> Three subjects did not complete the message choice question.

<sup>10</sup> Rather than analyzing separately subjects' interest in each of the three articles, we include "Message Type" as a repeated factor in the experimental design.

<sup>11</sup> That is, the simple two-way interaction between threat and authoritarianism should vary across the three message types (attitude-congruent, attitude-incongruent, balanced), indicating a three-way interaction.

**Table 2.** Effects of Threat, Authoritarianism, and Message Type on Ratings of Interest in Reading Attitude-Relevant Messages

	Threat		No Threat	
	Low RWA	High RWA	Low RWA	High RWA
<i>Message Type</i>				
Balanced	6.0	5.4	6.1	6.1
Attitude-Congruent	4.8	5.7	5.1	4.9
Attitude-Incongruent	4.8	3.3	4.9	4.4

*Note.* Cell entries are mean ratings of interest of each of the three messages, where 1 = “definitely would not like to read” and 7 = “definitely would like to read.”

and a significant (but theoretically uninteresting) two-way interaction between threat and message type ( $F[2, 174] = 5.50, p < .01$ ), this analysis produced only the expected three-way interaction,  $F(2, 174) = 2.90, p = .05$ . Moreover, as can be seen in Table 2, the condition means reproduced all three aspects of our hypothesis. We explicate this interaction by conducting orthogonal contrasts for the  $2 \times 2$  (threat  $\times$  authoritarianism) cell means separately for each of the three messages.<sup>12</sup> First, as predicted, high authoritarians expressed significantly greater interest in the *attitude-congruent message* when threat was high ( $M = 5.7$ ) than when threat was low ( $M = 4.9$ ),  $t(48) = 2.05, p < .05$ . However, this experimental effect of threat did not emerge for low authoritarians (high-threat  $M = 4.8$ ; low-threat  $M = 5.1$ ),  $t(39) < |1|, ns$ . This indicates that high but not low authoritarians became significantly more attracted to supportive (attitude-congruent) information as threat increased. In addition, a significant effect of authoritarianism emerged only when threat was high. Specifically, high authoritarians exhibited a stronger preference than did low authoritarians for the attitude-congruent article when threat was high (high RWA  $M = 5.7$ ; low RWA  $M = 4.8$ ;  $t(42) = 2.20, p < .05$ ), but not when threat was low (high RWA  $M = 4.9$ ; low RWA  $M = 5.1$ ;  $t[45] < |1|, ns$ ).

Second, as the Table 2 means show, high authoritarians expressed significantly *less* interest in the *attitude-incongruent message* when threat was high ( $M = 3.3$ ) than when threat was low ( $M = 4.4$ ),  $t(48) = 2.82, p < .01$ . In contrast, the effect of threat did not emerge among low authoritarians (high-threat  $M = 4.8$ ; low-threat  $M = 4.9$ ),  $t(39) < 1, ns$ . This conditional effect suggests that threat led

<sup>12</sup> These simple (threat  $\times$  authoritarianism) interaction effects can be interpreted from two perspectives. In one, the effects of authoritarianism can be analyzed within each level of threat; in the other, the effects of threat can be analyzed within each level of authoritarianism. These two analytic strategies, while not statistically independent of one another (they rely on the same degrees of freedom for testing nonadditive mean differences), do provide somewhat different substantive information. We therefore present the results both ways in the text.

high but not low authoritarians to become more avoidant of information that challenged the validity of their policy opinions. Moreover, an effect of authoritarianism occurred only when threat was high. Specifically, high authoritarians exhibited significantly less desire than low authoritarians to read the incongruent message when threat was high (high RWA  $M = 3.3$ ; low RWA  $M = 4.8$ ;  $t(42) = 3.66$ ,  $p < .001$ ), but not when threat was low (high RWA  $M = 4.4$ ; low RWA  $M = 4.9$ ;  $t[45] = 1.23$ ,  $p > .10$ ).

Finally, the effects for the balanced message strongly resembled those for the incongruent message. Specifically, high authoritarians expressed significantly *less* interest in the *balanced message* when threat was high ( $M = 5.4$ ) than when threat was low ( $M = 6.1$ ),  $t(48) = 1.80$ ,  $p < .05$  (one-tailed). However, as with the partisan messages, the effect of threat did not emerge among low authoritarians (high-threat  $M = 6.0$ ; low-threat  $M = 6.1$ ),  $t(39) < 1$ , *ns*. Furthermore, as with the partisan messages, high authoritarians exhibited (marginally, in this case) less desire than low authoritarians to read a message containing a mix of supportive and challenging arguments when threat was high (high RWA  $M = 5.4$ ; low RWA  $M = 6.0$ ;  $t(42) = 1.46$ ,  $p < .08$ , one-tailed). In contrast, no effect of authoritarianism obtained when threat was low (high-RWA  $M = 6.1$ ; low-RWA  $M = 6.1$ ;  $t[45] = 0$ , *ns*).<sup>13</sup>

In sum, the interactive effect of threat and authoritarianism on subjects' desire to expose themselves to new political information was quite pronounced for each of the three message types. Perhaps most important, *the effect of authoritarianism was completely contingent on threat*. In no case did low and high authoritarians differ significantly in their exposure preferences to supportive or challenging

<sup>13</sup> An alternative explanation of our results is that threat increased high authoritarians' interest in the *pro*-capital punishment message (regardless of their prior attitude toward the issue), rather than increasing their interest in the *congruent* capital punishment message. Although authoritarianism and capital punishment attitudes are correlated ( $r = .23$ ), there are an adequate number of high authoritarians in our sample who *oppose* capital punishment to empirically distinguish between these two possibilities. If the congruence explanation is correct, high authoritarians who oppose capital punishment—when threatened—should become more interested in the one-sided *anti*-capital punishment essay (which is *attitude-congruent*), and less interested in the one-sided *pro*-capital punishment essay (which is *attitude-incongruent*). If the alternative explanation is correct, threatened authoritarians should increasingly prefer the *pro*-capital punishment arguments, even if they oppose capital punishment. The data strongly support the congruency explanation: among high authoritarians who *oppose* capital punishment, the mean interest for the (congruent) *anti*-capital punishment article is 5.33 in the high-threat condition, and 4.77 in the low-threat condition. Moreover, for these same subjects, the mean interest rating for the (incongruent) *pro*-capital punishment article is 3.66 in the high-threat condition, and 4.44 in the low-threat condition. Thus, threatened authoritarians who oppose capital punishment become more interested in the congruent *anti*-capital punishment message, not the *pro*-capital punishment message. In contrast, among high authoritarians who *support* capital punishment, the mean interest rating for the (incongruent) *anti*-capital punishment article is 3.25 in the threat condition, and 4.40 in the low-threat condition. Moreover, for these same subjects, the mean interest rating for the (congruent) *pro*-capital punishment article is 5.80 in the high-threat condition, and 5.15 in the low-threat condition. These differences, based on highly reduced sample sizes, are not statistically significant among high authoritarians who oppose capital punishment; however, the effects we report in the text are not statistically qualified by whether the respondent supported or opposed capital punishment (i.e., the congruence effect holds equally across both attitudinal groups).



(or mixed) message arguments in the absence of mortality salience. As we expected, in the absence of threat, both low and high authoritarians were obedient to the norm of evenhandedness in acquiring new political information, expressing a pronounced preference for the balanced message over either of the partisan messages.<sup>14</sup> In sharp contrast, when threat was introduced, the information exposure preferences of high authoritarians changed markedly, such that supportive information became more desirable, and challenging information (even when it was embedded in a mix of supporting arguments) became less desirable.<sup>15</sup>

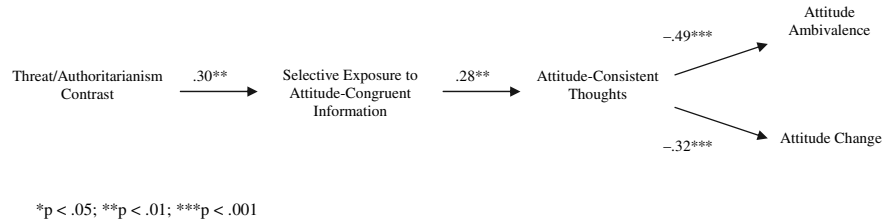
### *Path Analysis*

We now turn to an analysis of the attitudinal consequences of selective exposure to policy information stemming from the joint effect of threat and authoritarianism. We hypothesize that the immediate consequence of choosing to read a persuasive message containing uniformly pro-attitudinal arguments is the cognitive bolstering of one's initial policy position. Specifically, those who read the attitude-congruent article should list a greater proportion of attitude-consistent thoughts than those who read the balanced (or attitude-incongruent) message. For example, a subject who favors capital punishment and who chooses to expose herself to a persuasive message containing uniformly pro-capital punishment arguments is highly likely to report positive thoughts and unlikely to report negative thoughts about the policy. In contrast, a subject who favors capital punishment but who chooses to read a two-sided message is more likely to report a mix of both positive and negative thoughts about the policy. Thus, selective (vs. balanced) exposure to a persuasive message should lead to more one-sided issue-relevant cognitive responses. In turn, when post-message thoughts are highly consistent with the subject's initial (pre-message) position on the issue, subsequent (post-message) attitudes should become more internally consistent (i.e., lower in ambivalence) and less likely to exhibit change across the pre- and post-message assessment.

To examine this ordering of processes, we used LISREL 8 (Joreskog & Sorbom, 1993) to estimate the parameters of the observed variable path model shown in Figure 2. Based on the chi-square and ANOVA results that both low authoritarians (whether threatened or not) and unthreatened high authoritarians

<sup>14</sup> Contrasts revealed that in the absence of threat, both low and high authoritarians preferred the balanced message to its closest competitor (the congruent message),  $t(45) = 2.47$ ,  $p < .05$  for low authoritarians, and  $t(42) = 2.93$ ,  $p < .01$  for high authoritarians.

<sup>15</sup> A second alternative explanation of our results is that high authoritarians attach greater *personal importance* to their capital punishment attitudes than do low authoritarians. Although this may be the case, it is unlikely to account for our effects. Perhaps most relevant here is that previous research has shown that the selective effect of threat on the attitudes of high authoritarians (e.g., Feldman & Stenner, 1997; Rickert, 1998) occurs on a wide range of issues (i.e., some of which may be more important to low authoritarians), making this importance-based alternative less plausible.



**Figure 2.** Path Model of the Causes and Consequences of Information Exposure Preference.

are highly (and approximately equally) likely to choose the balanced article, the fully exogenous threat-authoritarianism variable in the path model is a contrast coded factor in which  $-1$  is given to all low authoritarians, as well as to high authoritarians in the low-threat condition, and  $+3$  is given to high authoritarians in the threat condition.<sup>16</sup> The information exposure preference variable is a dichotomously coded score in which 0 is given to subjects who chose (and then actually read) the balanced or attitude-incongruent article, and 1 is given to subjects who chose and then read the attitude-congruent article. The other variables are coded as described in the Method section.

The path model shown in Figure 2 is based on a standardized solution using maximum-likelihood estimation. As the figure indicates, all of the paths in the model are significant ( $ts > 2.65$ ,  $ps < .05$ ); moreover, the model provides a very good fit to the data:  $\chi^2(6) = 8.60$ ,  $p = .20$ ,  $\chi^2/df = 1.43$  (ratios less than 2 are considered a good fit, see Carmines & McIver, 1981). We also examined three other fit indices that have been shown to be less dependent on sample size: the goodness-of-fit index (GFI) (Joreskog & Sorbom, 1993), the root mean square residual (RMSR) (Steiger, 1990), and the comparative-fit index (Bentler, 1985). Values of the GFI and CFI range from 0 to 1, with values exceeding .90 generally accepted as indicating superior fit, whereas smaller values of the RMSR represent better fit, with values of less than .05 suggesting a very good fit to the data. Inspection of all of these indices confirmed the fit of the model, GFI = .96, CFI = .94, and RMSR = .02.

As can be seen in Figure 2, threatened authoritarians were more likely than either low authoritarians (threatened or not) or nonthreatened authoritarians to choose the attitude-congruent message ( $R^2 = .09$ ). In turn, a preference for the attitude-congruent message led to a greater proportion of attitude-consistent cognitive responses toward the issue ( $R^2 = .08$ ), which in turn produced more

<sup>16</sup> This contrast coding does not capture the statistical interaction of threat and authoritarianism. Rather, it captures the pattern of mean differences on both the message choice and message interest dependent variables, in which threatened authoritarians responded differently from those in the other three groups.

univalent attitudes ( $R^2 = .24$ ) that were less likely to change across the pre- and post-message attitude assessment ( $R^2 = .10$ ). Moreover, the indirect paths from the exogenous threat/authoritarianism contrast code to attitude-consistent thoughts through exposure preference ( $\beta = .084, p = .05$ ), and from exposure preference to both ambivalence and attitude change through attitude-consistent thoughts ( $\beta$ s =  $-.137$  and  $-.089, ps < .05$ ) are significant. These indirect effects indicate that subjects' information exposure preferences mediated the joint impact of threat and authoritarianism on attitude-consistent thoughts, and that attitude-consistent thoughts mediated the impact of information exposure preferences on attitude structure and attitude change.<sup>17</sup> In sum, the path model suggests that highly authoritarian individuals, when threatened, attempt to reduce anxiety by selectively exposing themselves to attitude-validating information, which leads to "stronger" opinions that are more resistant to attitude change.<sup>18</sup>

### Discussion

After languishing for decades in the file drawer of scientifically suspicious constructs, the study of authoritarianism is now on sturdy ground. During the last 20 years, political psychologists have offered several theoretical alternatives to the original psychoanalytic framework, as well as more valid instruments to measure it (Altemeyer, 1981, 1988, 1996, 1998; Duckitt, 1989, 2001; Duckitt et al., 2002; Feldman, 2003; Feldman & Stenner, 1997). Moreover, empirical work has strongly linked authoritarianism with attitudes toward a range of distinctly *political* objects, including political parties, issues, and candidates, as well as politically salient social groups. It would appear that authoritarianism is a core political predisposition, on par with party identification and political ideology as a lens through which the political world is perceived and evaluated. However, despite the manifest resurgence of interest in the topic, comparatively little work has explicitly aimed to study the *dynamics* of authoritarianism; that is, the way authoritarianism interacts with exigencies in the social and political environment. What little "dynamic" work does exist, moreover, focuses on outcome phenomena that have strong ideological linkages to the content of authoritarian attitudes and beliefs, such as prejudice and intolerance of minority groups, punitive policy attitudes, and reactions to attitudinally dissimilar individuals (Esses et al., 1993;

<sup>17</sup> The direct paths from the exogenous threat-authoritarianism contrast code to both attitude-consistent thoughts and attitude ambivalence are significant (or marginally so for thoughts) when the indirect paths are not in the model ( $\beta$ s =  $.093$  and  $-.31$  for thoughts and ambivalence,  $ps = .11$  and  $<.05$ , respectively). However, when the paths from the exogenous variable to thoughts and from thoughts to ambivalence are added to the model (i.e., when the indirect paths are included), these direct effects are no longer significant ( $.03$  and  $-.20$  for thoughts and ambivalence,  $ps > .20$  and  $>.10$ , respectively). This pattern of effects bolsters our argument about mediation. Moreover, ambivalence was not significantly related to attitude change ( $\beta = .03, ns$ ).

<sup>18</sup> A continuous measure of attitude change in the direction of the message produced a nearly identical effect to our "crossing the midpoint" operationalization of change.

Feldman & Stenner, 1997; Greenberg et al., 1990; Rickert, 1998). What we know from this work is that authoritarian individuals are more likely to express authoritarian-like attitudes and beliefs when they encounter threat in their social environment.

In the present research, we sought to take the dynamic study of authoritarianism in a new direction, focusing not on the hypothesis that threat alters *what* authoritarians think, but on *how* they think. In particular, we focused on two contrasting cognitive strategies by which people seek new information about their policy attitudes: a *partisan* strategy, in which individuals choose to expose themselves to policy information that uniformly upholds the validity of their own opinions, and a two-sided or *balanced* strategy, in which individuals choose to expose themselves to a mix of information, some of which upholds, and some of which challenges, the validity of their opinions.<sup>19</sup> Moreover, we attempted to model how information selection strategies alter attitude structure and the likelihood of attitude change (i.e., ambivalence and persuasion). By focusing on the strategies by which individuals acquire new policy-relevant information, we hope to provide insight into how threat and authoritarianism jointly influence the manner in which people maintain and defend their opinions from counterattitudinal arguments. In a more specific vein, our results suggest one cognitive mechanism by which authoritarian rigidity occurs, namely through strategic exposure to information that wholly supports one's existing attitudes and beliefs.

We predicted that in the absence of situational threat, authoritarianism would fail to stratify respondents' preferences for partisan vs. balanced policy-relevant information. For both groups of subjects, we suspected that the norm of evenhandedness—and the motivation to hold accurate opinions that square with *all* of the relevant facts—would lead to a preference for a balanced message over a one-sided partisan message. However, in the presence of situational threat, we expected that high but not low authoritarians would become increasingly motivated by the desire to defend the validity of their policy opinions and would thus shift their preferences toward a persuasive message containing uniformly proattitudinal arguments. This is what we found. Both the message choice and message interest analyses (see Tables 1 and 2) strongly confirmed that threat—in the form of mortality salience—caused a substantial shift in the information exposure preferences of high but not low authoritarians *toward* attitude-congruent information, and *away from* attitude-incongruent information. Threatened authoritarians were nearly three times more likely to choose a partisan message than either unthreatened authoritarians, or nonauthoritarians, whether exposed to threat or not. Finally, our path analysis provided empirical traction on the consequences of authoritarianism-based effects on information exposure preferences. Specifically, by reinforcing rather than challenging initial opinions, the policy attitudes

<sup>19</sup> In theory, we examined a second one-sided strategy in which people selectively expose themselves to uniformly counterattitudinal information. In practice, this strategy was rarely used (see Table 1).

of subjects choosing the attitude-congruent message became more internally consistent and less likely to change.

One of the interesting puzzles in contemporary research concerns the types of threat that are capable of triggering authoritarian propensities. The extant evidence indicates that a wide variety of threats, from those that are political (Feldman, 2003; Lavine et al., 1999) or economic (Rickert, 1998) in nature, to those that are intergroup (Duckitt, 1989; Esses et al., 1993) or intrapsychic (Greenberg et al., 1990; Lavine et al., 2002; Sales & Friend, 1973) in nature are functionally similar in this regard. In each case, "threat" increases the effect of authoritarianism on the expression of other political attitudes and beliefs, and in the present study, on information processing strategies and resistance to attitude change. Moreover, Lavine et al. (2002) have shown that authoritarians are even more sensitive than nonauthoritarians to threatening words on an automatic cognitive processing task (lexical decision) that bypasses "controlled" or intentional cognitive processing. That authoritarians are sensitive to and provoked by a range of threatening events suggests that theories that privilege one specific type of threat may be overlooking a larger psychological picture. Indeed, conceptualizations in which authoritarianism is hypothesized to be a response to *generalized* anxiety would seem to comport better with the available evidence (Rokeach, 1960; Wilson, 1973).

One such theory of authoritarianism is offered by Oesterreich (this volume). He locates the developmental origins of authoritarianism in the interaction of high levels of situational stress and a lack of coping ability on the part of the individual. In particular, when situational threats exceed the child's coping capabilities, a "flight into security" occurs, such that anxiety is reduced by seeking shelter and security in authority. If the individual fails to overcome this authoritarian reaction to stress, the adult personality learns to negotiate threat by seeking security in authority and by rejecting new or unfamiliar ideas (e.g., counterattitudinal information). Thus, in Oesterreich's theory, authoritarianism is not a psychological response to any *particular* type of threat, whether political, economic, or otherwise; rather, it is a generalized response to a broad range of situations that exceed the individual's coping abilities. This would explain the authoritarian's sensitivity to a diverse range of environmental threats. From the standpoint of Oesterreich's theory, our findings represent an attempt on the part of threat-sensitive individuals to ward off anxiety, and indeed to reduce it, by choosing to expose themselves to attitudinally congenial information.

Interestingly, our results are strongly at odds with the recent work of Marcus, Neuman, and MacKuen (2000) on affective intelligence and political judgment. Arguing that anxiety disrupts individuals' reliance on well-learned political habits and predispositions, Marcus et al. find that anxious voters rely less on party identification and more on contemporary information about issues and candidates in forming evaluations of presidential candidates. Thus, within the affective intelligence framework, anxiety is the main instigator of deliberate and

systematic political judgment, as depicted in theories of public choice (e.g., Downs, 1957). Perhaps most strikingly at odds with our findings is that anxiety heightens voters' open-mindedness. In our study, by contrast, threat increases—not decreases—the extent to which authoritarians act in line with their predispositions; moreover, among high authoritarians, threat leads to biased rather than open-minded information processing. Why the difference across these two programs of research? First, in our study, the consequences of threat and anxiety are limited to high authoritarians, who, as previous research suggests, are dynamically different (from the typical person) in how they perceive and respond to threatening events. Second, anxiety reduction is likely to take different routes, depending on the structure of the decision facing the individual. In the Marcus et al. (2000) work (see also Marcus & MacKuen, 1993), anxiety about the in-party candidate renders party cues less useful, prompting individuals to reduce anxiety by attending to more diagnostic information. In our study, the most efficient anxiety-reducing response is to simply seek out information that does not challenge the validity of one's prior attitudes.<sup>20</sup>

Finally, our results provide a glimpse into the psychological motivations that might attract individuals to the now ubiquitous format of one-sided (generally right-wing) talk radio (e.g., Rush Limbaugh, Sean Hannity, Michael Savage, Bill O'Reilly, Bob Grant, Mark Levin, etc). The standard psychological profile of the typical listener of this political format has been characterized as chronically resentful and angry. Our research suggests that viewers' preferences for one-sided vs. "fair and balanced" formats are at least partly a function of perceived environmental threat. According to our research, one-sided political formats should appeal disproportionately to individuals who are highly authoritarian and who at the same time feel highly threatened. This suggests that the underlying motivational appeal of such formats is not that they tap into a reservoir of political resentment and disaffection, but rather that they serve the psychological needs of fearful and submissive individuals. This leads to the prediction that the popularity of this political media format should rise and fall with changing levels of environmental threat (e.g., terrorism).

The study of authoritarianism is entering a third generation, in which empirical studies are more firmly grounded in psychological theory than has often been the case in the past. This is, of course, a positive development. However, we believe more attention should be paid to the *dynamics* of authoritarianism, in which its manifold manifestations are understood as interactions between dispositional motivational needs and cognitive styles on one hand, and exigencies of the social and political environment on the other. It is only when political psychologists map out these complex linkages that the study of authoritarianism will

<sup>20</sup> It is also possible that differences between mortality salience and anxiety about the in-party presidential candidate are responsible for the divergent findings on information processing.

rise above the realm of empirical prediction and enter into the realm of scientific explanation.

### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We acknowledge the assistance of Inna Burdein, Vlad Frants, and Daniel Frischberg in the collection and coding of the data. We would also like to thank George Marcus and three anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments. Correspondence may be addressed to Howard Lavine (Department of Political Science, State University of New York at Stony Brook, Stony Brook, NY 11794-4392). E-mail: Howard.Lavine@stonybrook.edu

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