

You're Hired! Mortality Salience Increases Americans' Support for Donald Trump

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Support for presidential candidate Donald Trump increased in the aftermath of the 2015 terrorist attacks in Paris, France, and San Bernardino, California, similar to Americans' greater enthusiasm for President George W. Bush after the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on the Pentagon and World Trade Center. According to terror management theory (Greenberg, Pyszczynski, & Solomon; Solomon, Greenberg, & Pyszczynski), people are prone to embrace charismatic politicians in times of historical upheaval to mitigate existential terror. Consistent with this view, previous research has demonstrated that reminders of death (relative to an aversive control condition) increased support for a charismatic leader in a hypothetical gubernatorial election, and support for President Bush and his policies in Iraq prior to the 2004 presidential election. The present Study 1 hypothesized and found that a death reminder increased support for Donald Trump. Study 2 found that while Hillary Clinton was viewed more favorably than Donald Trump in an aversive control condition, Mr. Trump was viewed more favorably in response to a death reminder while impressions of Mrs. Clinton were unaffected. Study 3 demonstrated that asking people to think about immigrants moving into their neighborhood increased the accessibility of implicit death thoughts. These findings suggest that electoral outcomes and public policy can be affected when existential concerns are aroused.

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It is [fear] that makes people so willing to follow brash, strong-looking demagogues with tight jaws and loud voices: those who focus their measured words and their sharpened eyes in the intensity of hate, and so seem most capable of cleansing the world of the vague, the weak, the uncertain, the evil. Ah, to give oneself over to their direction – what calm, what relief.

(Becker, 1971, p. 161)

The 2016 presidential election has been one of the most spirited affairs in the history of American politics, due in large measure to Donald Trump securing the Republican Party nomination and ultimately winning the election. To his detractors, Mr. Trump is a vulgar, sadistic, vindictive, ego-maniacal, racist, misogynistic, xenophobic candidate who makes no pretense of coherence, consistency, or veracity—and is thereby unfit for public office (Barry, 2017; Duncan, 2017; Fuchs, 2017; Martinez, 2017; Procknow, 2017). To his supporters however, Mr. Trump is a savvy, deal-making, bold, and heroic change agent who is unrestrained by political correctness and un-beholden to special interests. They are enthralled by Mr. Trump’s vow to “Make America Great Again” by revitalizing the economy, deport millions of immigrants, build an impregnable wall to secure the southern border, establish a travel ban on several Muslim majority countries, and “bomb the shit out of ‘em [ISIS]” (Barry, 2017; Chacón, 2017; Engel, 2015; Fuchs, 2017; Martin, 2017).

There has been a proliferation of cogent economic, sociological, and psychological accounts of Mr. Trump’s political ascent; in our estimation, however, such explanations are incomplete without considering the role of unconscious death anxiety on human behavior in general and in forging a bond between charismatic leaders and their followers in particular. Here we present an existential psychodynamic account of the allure of Donald Trump based on terror management theory, and provide empirical evidence that support for charismatic leaders, including Mr. Trump, is driven (at least in part) by death anxiety.

Terror Management Theory

Terror management theory (TMT; Greenberg, Pyszczynski, & Solomon, Rosenblatt, Vedeer, Kirkland & Lyon, 1990; Solomon, Greenberg, & Pyszczynski, 1991) is based primarily on cultural anthropologist Ernest Becker’s (1971, 1973, 1975) efforts to construct a comprehensive account of the motivational underpinnings of human behavior. Terror management theory posits that while human beings share with all other forms of life a basic biological predisposition toward self-preservation in the service of survival and reproduction, they are unique in their sophisticated cognitive capacity for abstract symbolic thinking and self-reflection, which gives rise to the recognition that one’s death is inevitable and can occur at any time for reasons that cannot be anticipated or controlled. This explicit awareness of death creates the potential for debilitating existential terror,

which is managed by a dual-component anxiety buffer consisting of a cultural worldview and self-esteem. Cultural worldviews are shared, humanly constructed beliefs about reality that convey a sense that the world is meaningful, stable, and orderly—and offer the prospect of attaining either literal immortality (e.g., by the promise of an afterlife afforded by most religions) or symbolic immortality (e.g., by having children, amassing a great fortune, writing a great book, making an important scientific discovery) by meeting the cultural standards of value. Self-esteem is the belief that one is a valuable participant in this meaningful universe and thereby qualified for the various forms of death transcendence.

One line of empirical support for TMT is provided by research (reviewed in a meta-analysis by Burke, Martens, & Faucher, 2010) demonstrating that momentarily making death salient (*mortality salience*; MS) by asking people to think about themselves dying (or completing death anxiety scales, viewing graphic depictions of death, being interviewed in front of a funeral parlor, or subliminal exposure to the word “dead” or “death”) magnifies positive reactions to those who uphold cherished cultural values as well as negative reactions to those who oppose such values. For example, Greenberg et al. (1990) found that following MS (relative to an aversive control condition), Christian participants had more favorable reactions to fellow Christians and less favorable reactions to Jewish targets, and American participants had more favorable reactions to the author of an essay praising the United States and more negative reactions to the author of an essay critical of the United States.

Convergent evidence for the existential function of cultural worldviews is provided by another line of inquiry demonstrating that the accessibility of implicit death thoughts (death thought accessibility; DTA) increases when cherished cultural beliefs are threatened. For example, Christian fundamentalists exposed to logical inconsistencies in the Bible (Friedman & Rholes, 2007) and Canadians exposed to criticism of their country (Schimel, Hayes, Williams, & Jahrig, 2007) used more death related words in a word stem completion task (e.g., C O F F _ _ = coffin rather than coffee; G R _ V E = grave rather than grove) than participants in control conditions (see Hayes, Schimel, Arndt, & Faucher, 2010 for a meta-analysis of DTA research). Heightened DTA in turn instigates the same defensive reactions typically engendered by an explicit mortality salience induction (Hayes et al., 2015; Pyszczynski, Greenberg, & Solomon, 1999).

Fatal Attraction in the Wake of 9/11

Weber (1925/1968) observed that in times of historical upheaval people are especially prone to embrace charismatic political leaders who often proclaim that they have been divinely ordained to rid the world of evil. Becker (1973) proposed that the psychological impetus for this phenomenon is to assuage the potentially paralyzing existential terror engendered by the uniquely human awareness of

death: i.e., people identify with leaders who provide the possibility of being a valued part of a righteous and powerful tribe or nation on the right side of a cosmic battle between “good” and “evil.”

In order to test this hypothesis, following an MS or aversive control induction, Cohen, Solomon, Maxfield, Pyszczynski, and Greenberg (2004) had participants read campaign statements purportedly written by three candidates in an upcoming gubernatorial election. The candidates varied in leadership style: charismatic (visionary: “You are not just an ordinary citizen, you are part of a special state and a special nation.”), task oriented (instrumentally effective: “I can accomplish all the goals that I set out to do. I am very careful in laying out a detailed blueprint of what needs to be done. I can accomplish all the goals that I set out to do. I am very careful in laying out a detailed blueprint of what needs to be done.”), and relationship oriented (emphasizing the cooperation of leaders and followers and mutual responsibility: “I encourage all citizens to take an active role in improving their state. I know that each individual can make a difference.”). Participants were then asked which candidate they would be inclined to vote for. In the control condition, only 4 of 95 participants voted for the charismatic candidate; however, following MS, there was almost an eightfold increase in votes (31) for the charismatic leader.

Prior to the 2004 presidential election, Landau et al. (2004) had participants rate their support for President George W. Bush (who in the aftermath of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on the Pentagon and the World Trade Center declared that he believed God had chosen him to lead a “crusade” to “rid the world of the evildoers” (Purdum, 2001, p. 2) and his policies in Iraq, after an MS or aversive control induction. Although the president and his policies in Iraq were not highly regarded in the control condition, there was a dramatic increase in support for Bush and the Iraq war following MS among liberal as well as conservative participants. In the next study, participants rated Democratic presidential candidate John Kerry more favorably than President Bush after a reminder of intense pain, but Bush was more favorably evaluated than Kerry after a reminder of death. These findings were then replicated and extended by Cohen, Ogilvie, Solomon, Greenberg, and Pyszczynski (2005) in a sample of registered voters in a study conducted 6 weeks before the election. Whereas control participants reported they would be voting for Senator Kerry by a 4:1 margin, President Bush was favored by a 2.5:1 margin after an MS induction.

Death: The Trump Card?

The 2016 U.S. presidential election campaign occurred at a historical moment that is, from Weber’s (1925/1968) perspective, ripe for the ascendance of a charismatic leader: economic uncertainty juxtaposed with environmental instability compounded by concerns about immigration magnified by ongoing

threats of terrorist attacks by Islamic extremists. And Donald Trump has many characteristics of a (secular) charismatic leader: a powerful (i.e., rich) and self-assured public figure pledging to “Make America Great Again” and to keep U.S. citizens safe by stemming the tide of illegal immigrants from Mexico by building a wall at the border to keep out their “criminals” and “rapists,” “calling for a total and complete shutdown of Muslims entering the United States,” and bombing “the shit out of ISIS” (Engel, 13 November 2015).

Given previous research demonstrating that intimations of mortality increased support for charismatic leaders in general, and for President George W. Bush in the 2004 election in the aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks in particular, Study 1 and Study 2 were conducted to determine if reminders of death would increase Americans’ support for Donald Trump. Study 1, conducted in autumn 2015 (before Mr. Trump was the Republican candidate for president), examined the effects of MS on Americans’ support for Donald Trump. Study 2, conducted in summer 2016, when Mr. Trump and Hillary Clinton were the Republican and Democratic candidates respectively, examined the effects of MS on Americans’ support for Donald Trump or Hillary Clinton. Study 3, conducted in autumn 2016, was based on previous research (described below) demonstrating that asking participants to think about a terrorist attack or a mosque being built in their neighborhood increased DTA; in the present study, we hypothesized that asking participants to think about immigrants moving into their neighborhood would increase DTA as much as a typical MS induction.

Study 1

Method

Participants. One hundred and fifty-two students at the College of Staten Island were randomly assigned to a MS or pain salient control conditions in a study of the relationship between personality attributes and current social issues. Participant demographics ranged as follows: 79 women and 70 men (3 were dropped for missing data); ethnically 69 participants self-identified as White, 15 as African American, 35 as Latino, 12 as Asian American, 2 as West Indian, and 19 as other; religiously 87 participants self-identified as a Christian denomination, 10 as Buddhist, 6 as Jewish, 11 as Muslim, 36 as other (3 were dropped for missing data). Political orientation was rated on a scale from 1 to 9 with 1 being the most liberal, 9 being the most conservative and 5 as neither conservative nor liberal. Sixty-nine participants self-identified as neither conservative nor liberal (5), 28 participants rated themselves as liberal (between 1 and 4) and 48 participants rated themselves as conservative (between 6 and 9). Ninety-two participants were traditional college age students between the ages of 18 and 22, 23 participants were

between the ages of 23 and 29, 5 participants were over 30, and 32 participants did not specify.

Materials and procedure. After obtaining informed consent, each participant completed two filler questionnaires. MS participants were then asked: “Please briefly describe the emotions that the thought of your own death arouses in you” and “Jot down, as specifically as you can, what you think will happen to you as you physically die and once you are physically dead.” Control participants responded to parallel questions regarding experiences of pain. All participants then completed Watson and Clark’s PANAS-X (1992) to assess affective consequences of the MS induction, and read a short literary passage to serve as a delay and distraction because previous research (Greenberg, Pyszczynski, Solomon, Simon, & Breus 1994) has shown that MS effects emerge more clearly over time.¹

Participants then responded to four questions (identical to those employed to evaluate President Bush in Study 4 of Landau et al., 2004): How favorably do you view Donald Trump? To what extent do you admire Donald Trump? To what extent do you have confidence in Donald Trump as a leader? If you vote in the upcoming Presidential election, how likely is it you will vote for Donald Trump?—on nine point scales (1 = not at all; 5 = somewhat; 9 = very much). Participants then completed a demographic questionnaire and were debriefed.

Results

Support for Trump. Responses on the four questions were combined ($\alpha = .97$) to form a composite index indicative of support for Trump. A 2 (MS vs. control) \times 2 (gender) ANOVA yielded only the predicted main effect for MS, $F(1, 145) = 18.27, p < .001, \eta^2 = .12$. MS participants reported higher support for Trump ($M = 3.84, SE = .27$) than control participants ($M = 2.18, SE = .28$), 95% CI (.89, 2.43) (Figure 1).

Role of political orientation. The demographic questionnaire asked participants “How would you describe your political orientation?” on a nine-point scale (1 = very conservative; 5 = moderate; 9 = very liberal). A secondary regression

¹ More specifically, research has delineated distinct defensive processes activated by conscious and nonconscious but highly accessible death thoughts (Pyszczynski, Greenberg, & Solomon, 1999). *Proximal* defenses entail suppressing death-related thoughts or pushing the problem of death into the distant future by denying one’s vulnerability. They are (seemingly) rational, threat-focused, and activated when death thoughts are in current focal attention. *Distal* terror management defenses entail maintaining self-esteem and faith in one’s cultural worldview. They function to control the potential for anxiety engendered by the knowledge that death is inevitable. Such defenses are experiential, are not related to the problem of death in any semantic or logical way, and are increasingly activated as the accessibility of DTA increases, up to the point at which such thoughts enter consciousness and proximal defenses are initiated.

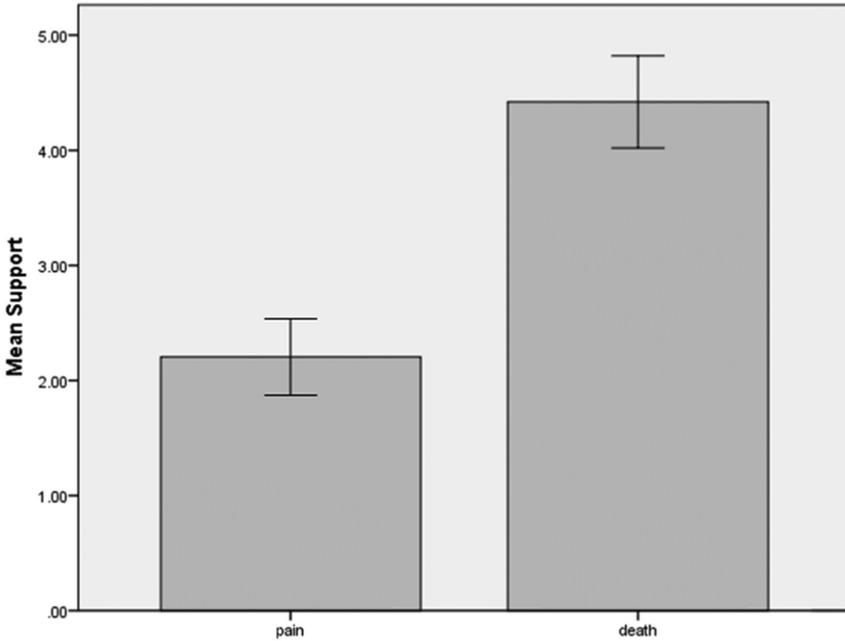


Fig. 1. Study 1: Mean support for Donald Trump by condition. Error bars represent ±1 SE.

analysis revealed that although political orientation was negatively correlated with support for Trump ($b = -.37, SE = .10, t = -3.65, p < .001, 95\% CI [-.57, -.17]$), there was no interaction between MS and political orientation ($b = -.21, SE = .21, t = -1.00, p = .32, 95\% CI [-.61, .20]$), suggesting that MS increased support for Trump across the political spectrum in this sample. This is consistent with Landau et al.' (2004) finding that MS increased support for President George W. Bush regardless of the political affiliation of the participants.

Role of affect. To assess whether the MS induction affected mood, we performed ANOVAs on the subscales of the PANAS-X, including Positive Affect and Negative Affect. Consistent with most previous TMT research, there were no significant differences found for any of these analyses. Then to ensure that the evaluation of Donald Trump reported here were not mediated by affect, we conducted a 2 (MS vs. control) × 2 (gender) analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) with PANAS-X subscale scores (including Positive Affect and Negative Affect scores) as covariates; the critical main effect remained significant $F(1, 113) = 15.49, p < .001, \eta^2 = .12$. Additionally, in light of recent work by Lambert et al. (2014) suggesting that MS may increase fear, we conducted ANOVAs on the fear

items of the PANAS-X (i.e., afraid, frightened, scared, and fearful). There were no significant differences found for any of these analyses, and a 2 (MS vs. control) \times 2 (gender) analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) with the fear items as covariates revealed that the critical main effect remained significant $F(1, 137) = 17.26$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .11$). Thus, we are confident that the present findings are not the result of affective differences between the MS and pain salient conditions.

Discussion

Among a sample of U.S. college students, support for presidential candidate Donald Trump increased in response to reminders of death, consistent with previous research (Cohen et al., 2005; Landau et al., 2004) showing that MS increased support for President Bush by participants across the political spectrum.

Overall, participants in the study did not have particularly favorable impressions of Mr. Trump, with mean support for him below the mid-point (5 = “somewhat” supportive) of the scale in both the control and MS conditions. However, this makes the fact that support for Mr. Trump increased in response to the MS induction particularly interesting in that existing attitudes are typically polarized following death reminders; for example, Jong, Halberstadt, and Bluemke (2012) found that following an MS induction, participants who believed in God became more confident of God’s existence whereas atheists became more confident that God does not exist.

Similarly, Kosloff, Greenberg, Weise, and Solomon (2010) investigated the effects of death reminders on American liberals’ and conservatives’ evaluations of two hypothetical charismatic gubernatorial candidates, and found that MS heightened liking of charismatic candidates who shared the perceiver’s political orientation, whether liberal or conservative. Although this finding is superficially at odds with studies showing that MS increased support for President Bush (and for Donald Trump) by participants across the political spectrum, historical circumstances may be the critical factor for understanding this apparent discrepancy. As Kosloff et al. (2010) proposed, in 2004 President Bush “staunchly advocated strong anti-terrorism policies at a point in American history when such concerns were prominent among both liberal and conservative Americans . . . Americans may therefore have gravitated toward Bush after mortality salience because they perceived him as a fervent, unapologetic patriot, and leader of citizens across the political spectrum who shared concerns with terrorist threats to their physical well-being and American identity (p. 144).”

Study 2

The results of Study 1 replicate Landau et al.’ (2004, Study 1) finding that support for a charismatic leader (President Bush in Landau et al.; Mr. Trump in the

present Study 1) is bolstered by a subtle reminder of death. The design of Study 1 did not however, include a comparison condition to determine the effect of a mortality salience induction on Hillary Clinton, comparable to Study 4 of Landau et al., which found that while participants had more favorable reactions to Senator Kerry in an aversive control condition, that President Bush was more highly regarded in response to MS. Study 2 was therefore undertaken as a conceptual replication of Landau et al. (2004, Study 4); specifically, after a reminder of death or an aversive control topic, participants evaluated either Donald Trump or Hillary Clinton.

Method

Participants. One hundred and sixty-nine students at the College of Staten were randomly assigned to conditions in a 2 (mortality salient vs. intense pain salient control) \times 2 (evaluate Donald Trump vs. evaluate Hillary Clinton) design. Participants completed the experimental materials during the 2016 summer semester. Participant demographics ranged as follows: 100 women and 68 men (3 were dropped for missing data); ethnically 70 participants self-identified as White, 10 as African American, 35 as Latino, 30 as Asian American, 3 as West Indian, and 19 as other (3 were dropped for missing data); religiously 104 participants self-identified as a Christian denomination, 8 as Buddhist, 7 as Jewish, 19 as Muslim, 23 as other (10 were dropped for missing data). Political orientation was rated on a scale from 1 to 9 with 1 being the most liberal, 9 being the most conservative and 5 as neither conservative nor liberal. Seventy participants self-identified as neither conservative nor liberal (5), 38 participants rated themselves as liberal (between 1 and 4) and 57 participants rated themselves as conservative (between 6 and 9). One hundred and thirty-six participants were traditional college age students between the ages of 18 and 22, 30 participants were between the ages of 23 and 29, 5 participants were over 11, and 4 participants did not specify.

Materials and procedure. The experimenter approached individuals in the college cafeteria and asked them to participate in a short study of personality attributes and social judgments. After giving verbal consent, each participant was given a questionnaire packet and asked to complete each question in the booklet in the order in which it appeared. The packet began with two filler questionnaires to sustain the cover story and obscure the true purpose of the study, followed by the manipulation of MS. In the MS condition, participants responded to the two open-ended questions used in Study 1; control participants responded to parallel questions about being in intense pain. All participants then completed a self-report mood scale (PANAS-X; Watson & Clark, 1991) to assess possible affective consequences of the MS induction and read a short literary passage to serve as a delay.

The next page of the questionnaire booklet was titled "Opinion Survey." In the evaluate Donald Trump condition, participants were instructed to "Think for a moment about presidential candidate Donald Trump and then answer the following questions by circling the number that best approximates your feelings." Four questions followed: "How favorably do you view Donald Trump?" "To what extent do you admire Donald Trump?" "To what extent do you have confidence in Donald Trump as a leader?" and "If you vote in the upcoming presidential election, how likely is it you will vote for Donald Trump?" In the evaluate Hillary Clinton condition, participants read identical instructions and responded to identical questions about presidential candidate Hillary Clinton. The questions were followed by 9-point scales with end points marked *not at all favorably* and *extremely favorably* for the first question and *not at all* and *very much* for the remaining three questions. Finally, after completing a demographic questionnaire, including an assessment of their political orientation on a scale from 1 (*very conservative*) to 9 (*very liberal*), the experiment was concluded and participants were debriefed.

Results

Opinion survey. The four questions on the opinion survey demonstrated good internal reliability ($\alpha = .95$), so we formed a composite index indicative of support for either Trump or Clinton. We then subjected the composite index scores to a 2 (MS vs. intense pain) \times 2 (evaluate Trump vs. evaluate Clinton) \times 2 (gender) ANOVA, which revealed a main effect for mortality salience, $F(1, 159) = 5.32$, $p = .02$, $\eta^2 = .054$, qualified by an interaction between MS and evaluating Trump versus Clinton, $F(1, 165) = 7.70$, $p = .006$, $\eta^2 = .10$; see relevant means in Figure 2). The main effect was due to participants in the MS condition giving higher ratings ($M = 3.26$) to either candidate than those in the intense pain control condition ($M = 2.42$).

More importantly, however, an examination of the interaction revealed that although Hilary Clinton ($M = 3.26$, $SE = .31$) was significantly more highly regarded than Donald Trump ($M = 1.84$, $SE = .30$) in the intense pain control condition, $t(86) = 3.39$, $p = .001$, 95% CI (.59, 2.25), Donald Trump's evaluations ($M = 3.50$, $SE = .41$) increased in response to MS (across the midline of the scale), whereas Hilary Clinton's evaluations ($M = 3.30$, $SE = .37$) remained unchanged, $t(79) = .34$, *ns*, 95% CI (-1.31, .92) such that Trump was evaluated in the same manner as Clinton when mortality was salient.

Role of political orientation. The demographic questionnaire asked participants "How would you describe your political orientation?" on a nine-point scale (1 = very conservative; 5 = moderate; 9 = very liberal). A secondary regression analysis revealed no significant correlation between political orientation and support for Trump ($b = .02$, $SE = .09$, $t = .24$, $p = .81$, 95% CI [-.155,

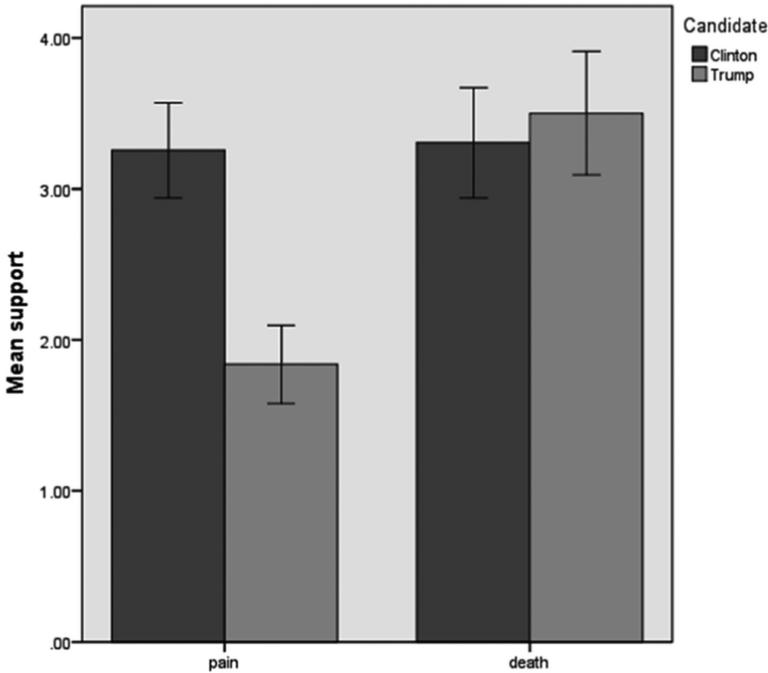


Fig. 2. Study 2: Mean support for candidate by condition. Error bars represent ± 1 SE.

.198]); additionally, there was no interaction between MS and political orientation ($b = -.06, SE = .18, t = -.33, p = .75, 95\% CI [-.41, .30]$), suggesting that, as in Study 1, MS increased support for Trump across the political spectrum. This is again consistent with Landau et al.' (2004) finding that MS increased support for President George W. Bush regardless of the political affiliation of the participants.

Role of affect. To assess whether the MS induction affected mood, we performed ANOVAs on the subscales of the PANAS-X, including Positive Affect and Negative Affect. Consistent with most previous TMT research, there were no significant differences found for any of these analyses. Then to ensure that the evaluation of the candidates reported here were not mediated by affect, we conducted a 2 (MS vs. intense pain) \times 2 (evaluate Trump vs. evaluate Clinton) \times 2 (gender) analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) with PANAS-X subscale scores (including Positive Affect and Negative Affect scores) as covariates; the critical MS \times evaluation of the candidate interaction remained significant $F(1, 127) = 9.62, p = .002, \eta^2 = .07^2$. Thus, we are confident that the present

² As with Study 1, we conducted ANOVAs on the fear items of the PANAS-X. There were no significant differences found for any of these analyses, and a 2 (MS vs. control) \times 2 (Trump vs.

findings are not the result of affective differences between the MS and pain salient conditions.

Discussion

The results of Study 2 replicate the MS-induced support for Mr. Trump obtained in Study 1. Additionally (and consistent with Study 4 of Landau et al. 2004), participants in the present study in the aversive control condition rated Hillary Clinton significantly more favorably than Donald Trump. However, following an MS induction, support for Mr. Trump increased significantly (regardless of participants' political orientation) to the point where he was rated slightly more (albeit nonsignificantly) favorably than Mrs. Clinton; support for Mrs. Clinton was unaffected by the MS induction. Although, the latter finding is at odds with Study 4 of Landau et al. (2004), where both MS increased support for President Bush and decreased support for Senator Kerry, such that Bush was rated significantly higher than Kerry in response to MS, the overall pattern of results is similar in both studies (and also consistent with Cohen et al., 2004) in that participants were not particularly supportive of charismatic candidates unless existential anxieties were aroused.

Study 3

The results of Study 1 and Study 2 suggest that support for Donald Trump is amplified by subtle reminders of death. Mr. Trump does not, however, ask his supporters to briefly consider their own mortality at the beginning of his rallies, stage television interviews in front of funeral parlors, or (at least to our knowledge) subliminally present the word "death" on his website. How, then, do subconscious fears of death arise that in turn increase support for Mr. Trump?

Recall that research has shown that threatening cherished cultural worldviews increases DTA, and that heightened DTA instigates the same defensive reactions that are provoked by a typical (i.e., explicit) mortality salience induction. In the run-up to the 2004 presidential election, Americans had pervasive concerns about terrorism in the aftermath of the September 11, 2001 attack on the Pentagon and the World Trade Center. Pyszczynski, Solomon, and Greenberg (2003) characterized 9/11 as a "real-life" mortality salience induction, conjuring up intimations of death, both literally (the thousands of people who perished on 9/11) and symbolically (via the threat to the American way of life posed by the destruction of the iconic symbols of U.S. military and economic power); and, Landau et al. (2004, Study 2)

Clinton) \times 2 (gender) analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) with the fear items as covariates revealed that the critical condition X candidate interaction effect remained significant $F(1, 144) = 10.03$, $p = .002$, $\eta^2 = .07$.

corroborated this notion empirically by demonstrating that subliminal exposure to the numbers “911” or the letters “WTC” increased American participants’ DTA. In a subsequent study (Landau et al., 2004, Study 3), participants were instructed to think about death (MS), the events of 9/11 (terrorism prime), or an aversive control topic before rating President Bush and his policies in Iraq; both mortality and 9/11 salience produced substantial increases in support for President Bush and his policies in Iraq.

The events of September 11, 2001 also precipitated persistent anti-Muslim sentiment in the United States. Evidence that hostility to Islam is (at least in part) a reflection of terror management processes is provided by more recent studies showing that MS reduced support for building the Cordoba House community center in Manhattan (the “Ground Zero Mosque”); and, that when participants thought about a mosque being built in their neighborhood, accessibility of implicit death thoughts increased (Cohen, Soenke, Solomon, & Greenberg, 2013).

Support for Donald Trump in the 2016 presidential election was based substantially on his pledge to keep Americans safe by “bombing the shit out of ISIS” and prohibiting Muslims and immigrants from entering the United States. Previous studies (cited above) show that making terrorism or Islam salient increases DTA (that in turn, at least for terrorism, increases support for a charismatic leader). Study 3 was designed to determine if U.S. college students perceive new immigrants as an existential threat by investigating whether thinking about immigrants moving into one’s neighborhood would increase the accessibility of death-related thought. We had participants think about new immigrants moving into their own neighborhood, their own death, or a control topic, followed by a delay task and a word completion task that measured participants’ DTA. We predicted that participants who read about immigration would show an increase in DTA comparable to that of a MS induction; and that both of these groups would show significantly higher DTA than participants in the control condition.

Method

Participants. Sixty-eight students at the College of Staten Island were randomly assigned to think about their own death, immigrants moving into their neighborhood, or experiencing intense pain, in a study purported to be about the relationship between personality attributes and current social issues. Participant demographics ranged as follows: 41 women and 27 men (1 was dropped for missing data); ethnically 33 participants self-identified as White, 10 as African American, 11 as Latino, 10 as Asian American, 1 as West Indian, and 4 as other; religiously 51 participants self-identified as a Christian denomination, 2 as Buddhist, 1 as Jewish, 4 as Muslim, 9 as other (2 were dropped for missing data). Sixty-two participants were traditional college age students between the ages of 18 and 22, and 7 participants were between the ages of 23 and 29.

Materials and procedure. Participants were approached by researchers in the student center and after providing verbal consent each participant completed two filler questionnaires. Mortality salient participants then completed the same MS induction as in Study 1. Immigration salient participants responded to parallel prompts regarding new immigrants moving into their neighborhood (specifically, “Please describe the emotions that the thought of immigrants moving into your neighborhood arouses in you.” and “Write down as specifically as you can, what you think will happen to you when the immigrants arrive.”), and control participants responded to parallel questions regarding being in intense pain. All participants then completed Watson and Clark’s PANAS-X (1991) to assess affective consequences of the MS induction, and read a short literary passage to serve as a delay and distraction.

Participants then completed a set of 20 word fragments by filling in two missing letters, which served as a measure of DTA (Greenberg et al., 1994). Six of the 20 words could be completed as either neutral or death-related words. For example, subjects saw the letters C O F F _ _ and could complete the word with the neutral term *coffee* or with the death-related term *coffin*. The possible death-related terms were *coffin*, *grave*, *dead*, *skull*, *corpse*, and *stiff*.

Participants then completed a demographic questionnaire and were debriefed.³

Results

Death thought accessibility. A 3 (Immigration vs. MS vs. control) \times 2 (gender) ANOVA yielded only the predicted main effect for condition on levels of DTA, $F(2, 62) = 5.42, p = .007, \eta^2 = .15$ (Figure 3). In accord with predictions, a one degree of freedom a priori contrast (Rosnow & Rosenthal, 1991) in which immigration and death were each coded as -1 and pain was coded as 2 was significant $t(66) = 3.35, p = .001$ revealed that participants in both the immigration condition ($M = .92, SE = .23$), and the death condition ($M = .96, SE = .17$), had significantly higher levels of DTA than participants in the pain condition ($M = .19, SE = .18$). Moreover, pairwise comparisons revealed there was no significant difference between levels of DTA for participants in the death and immigration conditions, $t(46) = 0.78, p = .72, 95\% CI (-.46, .65)$ indicating that for Americans, thinking about immigrants moving into their neighborhood activated implicit death-related thought as much as thinking about their own death did.

³ Unfortunately, due to a clerical error, the demographic questionnaire did not include an assessment of participants’ political orientation.

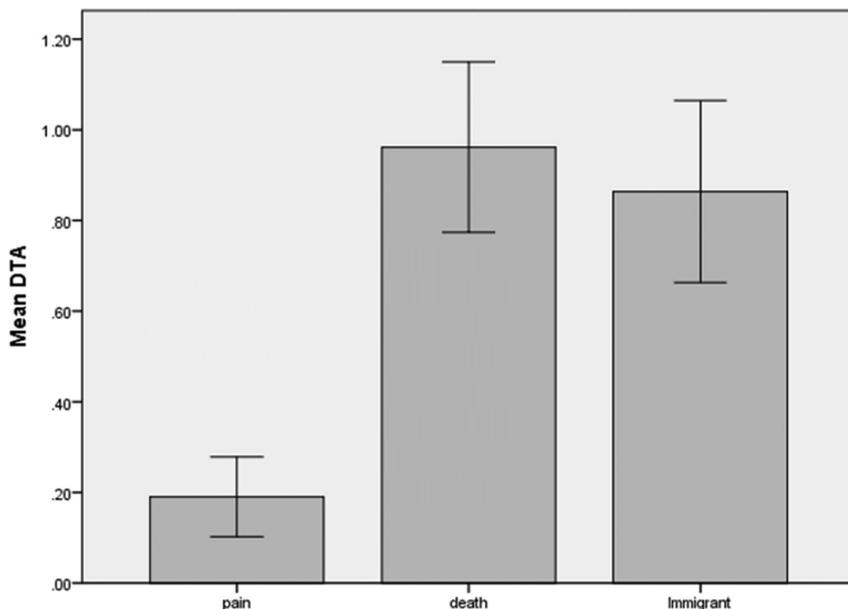


Fig. 3. Study 3: Mean death thought accessibility by condition. Error bars represent ± 1 SE.

Role of affect. To assess whether the Immigration or MS induction influenced mood, we performed ANOVAs on the subscales of the PANAS-X, including Positive Affect and Negative Affect. Consistent with most previous TMT research, there were no significant differences found for any of these analyses. Then to ensure that the levels of DTA reported here were not mediated by affect, we conducted a 3 (Immigration vs. MS vs. control) \times 2 (gender) analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) with PANAS-X subscale scores (including Positive Affect and Negative Affect scores) as covariates; the critical main effect remained significant $F(2, 48 = 5.16, p = .009, \eta^2 = .18^4$. We are thus confident that the present findings are not the result of affect.

Discussion

Previous research has demonstrated that challenging central tenets of cherished belief systems, such as confronting Christians with logical inconsistencies

⁴ As with Studies 1 and 2, we conducted ANOVAs on the fear items of the PANAS-X. There were no significant differences found for any of these analyses, and a 2 (MS vs. control) \times 2 (gender) analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) with the fear items as covariates revealed that the critical main effect remained significant $F(2, 56 = 4.57, p = .01, \eta^2 = .14)$.

in the Bible or exposing Canadians to criticisms of their country, increased DTA. And subsequent research has shown that thinking about a mosque, a fundamental symbol of Islam, increased DTA. In the present study, thinking about immigrants moving into one's neighborhood, also increased DTA. The fact that thinking about a mosque being built in one's neighborhood or immigrants moving into one's neighborhood produced a comparable increase in DTA to thinking about one's own mortality may help to explain the vehement hostility towards Muslims and immigrants that is typical of Mr. Trump's most ardent supporters, given that increased DTA produces the same effects as a typical MS induction, and MS has been shown to increase denigration of out-groups.

General Discussion

The results of the present studies are consistent with Weber's claim that people are prone to embrace charismatic political leaders in times of historical upheaval, and with Becker's proposition that this helps people to manage potentially paralyzing terror by identifying with leaders who foster a sense of being a valued part of a righteous and powerful tribe or nation. Donald Trump promised to "Make America Great Again" by keeping Muslims and immigrants at bay, and Study 1 confirmed that his support is undergirded by existential concerns in that Americans reminded of their mortality had more favorable attitudes about Mr. Trump and reported being more willing to vote for him. Study 2 found that while participants favored Hillary Clinton over Donald Trump in an aversive control condition, support for Mr. Trump increased in response to a mortality salience induction (replicating the finding of Study 1) to the point where he was viewed slightly (albeit nonsignificantly) more favorably than Mrs. Clinton (her evaluations were unaffected by the MS induction). Study 3 showed that pondering the prospect of immigrants moving into one's neighborhood, similar to the prospect of a mosque being built in one's neighborhood (Cohen et al., 2013), increased DTA to the same level engendered by a typical MS induction.

These findings are consistent with previous research demonstrating that MS increased support for charismatic leaders in general, and for President George W. Bush in the 2004 U.S. presidential election. The findings also add to a substantial body of empirical research showing that political preferences can be substantially altered when existential concerns are aroused (for reviews of this literature see Burke, Kosloff, & Landau, 2013; Cohen & Solomon, 2011), and that a host of non-rational factors likely contributed to Mr. Trump's victory in the 2016 presidential election (see Fitzduff, 2017 for a review of this literature).

These findings should also, however, be interpreted with some degree of caution. Although the mortality salience-induced boost to Mr. (and now President) Trump's popularity was obtained in two studies, the participants are hardly representative of the American electorate. Ideally, these studies should be replicated

with larger and more heterogeneous (and thus more representative) samples in order to bolster confidence in the generalizability of these findings. Moreover, we do not mean to imply that all support for Mr. Trump is necessarily a defensive reaction to concerns about death. And although it is a matter of public record that Trump's election campaign has been carefully crafted to emphasize the war on terrorism by (in part) demonizing Muslims and immigrants, the strategic use of fear to advance political agendas has a long history in American politics (all politics for that matter) and is by no means confined to the Republican Party (Cohen & Solomon, 2011). As Hermann Goering (a leading member of the Hitler's Nazi Party) put it: "it is the leaders of the country who determine the policy and it is always a simple matter to drag the people along, whether it is a democracy or a fascist dictatorship or a parliament or a communist dictatorship . . . Voice or no voice, the people can always be brought to the bidding of the leaders. That is easy. All you have to do is tell them they are being attacked and denounce the pacifists for lack of patriotism and exposing the country to danger. It works the same way in any country."

The fact that thinking about terrorism, Muslims, and immigrants increases DTA; and, that DTA is in turn associated with terror management defenses suggests a not-so-virtuous circle where repeated reference to terrorism, Islam, and immigration could reinforce and amplify affection for charismatic leaders like President Trump pledging to keep us safe by ridding the world of evil. Regardless of one's political preferences, this psychological state of affairs has ominous implications for democracy, where public policy and electoral outcomes should ideally result from rational deliberations rather than unreflective defensive reactions to mortal terror.

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