Compassionate Values and Presidential Politics: Mortality Salience, Compassionate Values, and Support for Barack Obama and John McCain in the 2008 Presidential Election

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In line with terror management theory, this research demonstrates that mortality salience motivated increased support for John McCain in the absence of reminders of compassionate values. However, polls had indicated that Barack Obama was generally perceived as the more compassionate of the two candidates. Thus, when compassionate values were made salient, death reminders motivated participants to uphold these values by significantly increasing their support for the more compassionate Barack Obama instead. The implications of these findings for terror management theory, the 2008 presidential election, and political endorsements are discussed.

> *America has never been united by blood or birth or soil. We are bound by ideals that move us beyond our backgrounds, lift us above our interests, and teach us what it means to be citizens. Every child must be taught these principles. Every citizen must uphold them... Today we affirm a new commitment to live out our nation's promise through civility, courage, compassion and character.*
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> — George W. Bush, First Inaugural Address, January 21, 2001

> *Compassion is the radicalism of our time.*
>
> — Dalai Lama

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November 4, 2008: In the Red Corner, John McCain promised aggressive, militaristic defense of the values represented by America and her people. In the Blue Corner, Barack Obama emphasized leading by example, treating people living both at home and abroad with the compassionate values that Americans might seek to uphold. And, as usual, a seemingly constant stream of domestic and international crises emerged as a common theme through the political zeitgeist of the 2008 presidential election. Especially when faced with threats to one's life and culture, people often rely on their political leaders to bolster their faith in their district, state, nation, or even their entire culture. Prior research on the 2004 U.S. presidential election, an era where the value of security was especially salient, showed that reminders of death increased support for the incumbent George W. Bush over rival John F. Kerry. Would such a pattern continue to hold 4 years later, prior to the 2008 presidential election? To address this question, the present study examined the effect of death awareness on support for candidates John McCain and Barack Obama. We also investigated the role that rendering salient a particular value—that of compassion—might play in how awareness of death affects the landscape of peoples' political preferences.

Terror Management Theory

Building on the work of Ernest Becker (e.g., 1973), terror management theory (TMT) posits that awareness of the inevitability of death gives rise to the potential for debilitating anxiety from which people must protect themselves. One important step in the psychological denial of death is placing faith in enduring cultural systems that extend beyond the self, that imbue the world with meaning, order, and standards through which humans can attain a sense of personal and collective value. Another crucial step is the accrual of self-esteem—the sense that one is a valuable contributor to a meaningful universe—attained by believing in and living up to the cultural standards of one's worldview. TMT thus posits that the awareness of death motivates investment in a cultural worldview that provides a meaningful conception of reality and a context through which to seek self-esteem, and has generated a considerable body of research in support of this analysis (see Greenberg, Solomon, & Arndt, 2008).

The Existential Vicissitudes of Political Leadership

A number of lines of this research have explored how political allegiances can serve the terror management function of helping people cope with the awareness of death. For instance, studies have documented the various ways people defend against threats to their political identities when reminded of death (mortality salience [MS]), typically by derogating and even aggressing against those with political values different from their own (Greenberg, Simon, Pyszczynski,

Solomon, & Chatel, 1992; McGregor et al., 1998). In recent years, this perspective has been extended to consider that political leaders may also carry unique anxiety-buffering qualities, capable of buttressing an individual's psychological insecurity. Fromm (1941) argued that the defensive need to envelop oneself inside a larger, longer lasting movement could be effectively served via allegiance to charismatic leaders who confer a sense of meaning, virtue, and permanence. Similarly, Becker (1962, 1973) contended that people tend to follow leaders who embody the greatest promise of cultural permanence.

Accordingly, Cohen, Solomon, Maxfield, Pyszczynski, and Greenberg (2004) reasoned that reminders of mortality might fuel support for charismatic leaders who emphasize the greatness of the group and aggrandize their constituent's self-worth as valued followers of a fundamentally "good" worldview that will rise to meet all challenges and ultimately prevail over the wicked. In support, Cohen et al. found that reminders of death boosted evaluations of, and votes for, a charismatic candidate, but not for a task-oriented or relationship-oriented candidate, in a hypothetical gubernatorial election.

Interestingly, during the lead-up to the 2004 presidential election, George W. Bush and John Kerry squared off amid a political environment saturated with the ballyhoo of war, terrorism, death, and destruction. Landau et al. (2004) thus hypothesized that Bush's patriotic rhetoric provided a sense of existential security at the time by confidently asserting that America and all her endeavors were morally righteous and destined for success, whereas Kerry was unable to instill this sense of American superiority. Across three studies, death reminders increased support for Bush; in a third study, Kerry was evaluated more favorably than Bush in a control condition; however, mortality reminders reversed this outcome (see also Cohen, Ogilvie, Solomon, Greenberg, & Pyszczynski, 2005).

It is important to note, however, that peoples' responses to existential threat are not limited to a conservative shift or an aggressive defense against change (cf, Anson, Pyszczynski, Solomon, & Greenberg, 2009; Greenberg & Jonas, 2003; Rutjens, van der Pligt, van Harreveld, 2009). For example, Weise et al. (2008, Study 1) blended TMT, attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969), and Lakoff's (2002) family model of political ideology to examine the effect of attachment security on 2004 presidential candidate preferences. Secure adult attachment was expected to be associated with progressive political ideology because it results from stable, warm, and caring interactions with parents, and engender values of empathy, trust, and compassion toward others. Low adult attachment security, however, was expected to be associated with conservative political ideology since it entails authoritarian interactions with parents and competitive attitudes toward others. Hypothesizing that such attachment styles serve an existential function of directing how people manage death-anxiety, Weise et al. found that when reminded of death, those low on attachment security increased support for the conservative Bush, whereas those

high on attachment security decreased support for Bush and increased support for the progressive Kerry.

Whereas Weise et al. (2008) reveal how differences in attachment security

Obama and John McCain during the 2008 presidential campaign, several key distinctions and issues emerged that provided clear juxtaposition of defense of the cultural mainstream against the pursuit of compassionate values.

The 2008 Presidential Campaigns: Superiority and Compassion

During the months prior to the election, in the wake of Russia's incursion into Georgian territory, McCain reiterated his past hard-line views concerning Russia. At several points along the campaign trail, he claimed he would be "very harsh," looking to remove Russia from the G-8 and rapidly incorporate former Soviet states into NATO in moves that were critiqued as reminiscent of former Cold War tactics that would politically and economically isolate the Russian government (Benjamin, 2008; "McCain: Russia deserves 'harsh treatment,'" 2006). McCain was also an ardent supporter of the war against Iraq, remaining a staunch advocate of its continued occupation throughout his campaign and publicly rebuking the war's critics (Gordon & Nagourney, 2007). Additionally, McCain routinely identified "evil" regimes and heads of state (e.g., Iranian President Ahmadinejad, Russian Prime Minister Putin, etc.) and publicly denounced the idea of negotiating or meeting with them to work out compromises. Thus, John McCain appeared to aggrandize the American way of life, emphasizing the importance of American lives over the lives of foreigners and advocating the military defense of Americans and their interests both at home and abroad. We therefore expected that mortality reminders would motivate people to increase support for John McCain, given his aggressive defense of the moral righteousness of the American way of life.

In contrast, when Russia invaded Georgia, Barack Obama stressed the need to cooperate with both nations to quickly stop the fighting and to extend humanitarian aid to the Georgian civilians ("Georgia crisis tests candidates," 2008). And from the beginning of his campaign, Obama had loudly touted a record of opposition to the Iraq war and occupation ("Obama seeks end to Iraq war," 2004). He offered a plan for reconciliation led by UN and regional diplomats and advanced a humanitarian initiative to provide services and safe-haven to the estimated 2 million displaced Iraqi refugees ("Where Obama stands: On Iraq," 2008). While repeatedly denouncing the prospect of war with Iran, he stressed the importance of condition-free diplomatic endeavors in maintaining peace. Further, Obama not only campaigned for nuclear nonproliferation, but for the active dismantling and elimination of nuclear weapons worldwide (Zeleny, 2007).

Such differences during their campaigns suggest that Obama would be seen as the more compassionate candidate. Of course, an individual's perception of compassion can be quite elastic. Rather than attending to the differences noted above, one could focus on McCain's care for his ailing mother and his fellow veterans, or his compassion toward unborn babies and victims of crime, or on the increased attention to special-needs children that came with his selection of Sarah Palin as his

vice presidential running-mate. This elasticity notwithstanding, a CNN/Opinion Research Corporation poll conducted just before the current study reported that 55% of registered voters felt that Obama was more compassionate than McCain, with only 35% saying McCain was more compassionate than Obama (Steinhauser, 2008). Thus, although some viewed McCain as compassionate, this number was far surpassed by those who considered Obama to be the more compassionate candidate. Drawing on previous research showing that MS motivates people to uphold salient social norms and cultural values of egalitarianism, empathy, and tolerance, we expect that MS will motivate people to uphold the value of compassion when it is made salient. Given that polls reported Obama was popularly perceived as a steward of the cultural value of compassion, we expected MS to motivate increased support for Obama when compassionate values were also made salient.

Method

Participants

Ninety-one undergraduate students from introductory psychology classes (27 male) at a large mid western university, with a mean age of 18.34 ($SD =$ .72), participated for partial course credit. Seventy-six self-reported as Caucasian, 10 African American, 4 Asian, and 1 Hispanic.

Procedure

Participants were recruited via an online study sign-up system in groups of six, and upon arrival at the laboratory, were escorted to individual cubicles. The experimenter delivered a brief cover story explaining that the study was a joint effort by the psychology and political science departments to determine how personality traits influence attitudes toward various social issues. After providing informed consent, participants completed a packet of questionnaires. Upon completion, each participant was probed for suspicion, fully debriefed, and thanked.

Materials

Participants began with a series of filler questionnaires, then following previous research (Greenberg et al., 1992), were randomly assigned to complete one of two versions of a "projective life attitudes assessment." In the MS condition, participants responded to the prompts, "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 happens to you as you physically die and once you are physically dead." In the control condition, we used the same personal uncertainty manipulation developed by Van Den Bos (2001), "Please briefly describe

the emotions that the thought of your being uncertain arouses in you," and "Jot down, as specifically as you can, what you think physically will happen to you as you feel uncertain." Participants then completed a 20-item version of the Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS; Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988), which measures both self-reported positive ($\alpha = .88$) and negative ($\alpha = .76$) affect, and a word search puzzle to create a sufficient distraction to allow distal defense terror management processes to emerge (Pyszczynski, Greenberg, & Solomon, 1999).

Subsequently, participants were randomly assigned to complete one of two conditions of a Values manipulation. In each condition, participants were asked to rate their agreement with each of a set of four quotations on a 10-point scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 10 = *strongly agree*). One condition used quotes designed to increase the salience of the cultural value of compassion:

1. "When it comes to our enemies, we should try to understand them."—Matthew
2. "If we pass judgment on others, we should not be surprised when others pass judgment on us."—Joe
3. "We should not treat anyone any differently than we would want to be treated ourselves."—Frank
4. "Our #1 responsibility is to love others."—Jonathan

A second group of quotes did not refer to the value of compassion:

1. "If a man begins with certainties, he shall end in doubts; but if he will be content to begin with doubts, he shall end in certainties."—Matthew
2. "A single conversation across the table with a wise man is worth a month's study of books."—Joe
3. "Never regret yesterday. Life is in you today, and you make your tomorrow." —Frank
4. "The man who believes he can do something is probably right, and so is the man who believes he can't."—Jonathan

Following these experimental manipulations, participants completed a 6-item measure of candidate support designed to assess which of the two major presidential candidates they preferred ($\alpha = .90$). First, a single sentence stem was presented, "Which Presidential candidate do you think would do each of the following . . . ," followed by five evaluation items, (1) "Antagonize unfriendly nations," (2) "Be a competent President," (3) "Use government to contribute to society," (4) "Keep America safe," and (5) "Improve America's status around the world." A sixth item read, (6) "I will probably vote for. . ." Each item was scored on a 10-point scale (1 = *John McCain,* 10 = *Barack Obama*). The first item (1) was reverse scored so that all items reflect a positive evaluation of the candidate.

Participants concluded the packet by completing a demographic questionnaire asking about age, sex, ethnicity, and education level.

Results

Preliminary Analyses

A 2 (male vs. female) × 2 (MS vs. Uncertainty) × 2 (values: compassionate vs. noncompassionate) analysis of variance (ANOVA) on candidate support revealed no main or interactive effects involving the sex variable, F's < .86, p's > .36, η^2's < .03. Therefore this variable was dropped from the primary analyses. As in previous TMT research, a 2 (MS vs. Uncertainty) × 2 (values: Neutral vs. compassionate) ANOVA revealed no main effects or two-way interactions on positive or negative affect, F's < 1.18, p's > .28, η^2's < .01.[1]

Candidate Support

A 2 (MS) × 2 (Values) ANOVA revealed no main effect of MS ($F < 1$), but did yield a main effect of values condition ($F[1, 87] = 5.55$, $p = .02$, $\eta^2 = .06$) such that those in the compassionate values condition were more supportive of Obama than those in the noncompassion condition. Notably, as predicted, this effect was qualified by a MS × Values interaction, $F(1, 87) = 8.99$, $p = .004$, $\eta^2 = .09$ (see Figure 1). Specifically, in the absence of compassionate values being primed, reminders of mortality ($M = 5.47$, $SD = .45$) led to greater support for McCain relative to those reminded of uncertainty ($M = 6.72$, $SD = .40$), $t(43) = 2.13$, $p = .04$, $d = .65$. As the theoretical midpoint of the candidate support scale was 5.5, a mean of 5.47 crossed the midpoint onto the McCain side of the scale, a significant increase in support compared to the uncertainty condition. Yet, as predicted, when primed with compassionate values, participants who thought about mortality ($M = 7.76$, $SD = .45$) increased their support of Obama relative to those who thought about uncertainty ($M = 6.45$, $SD = .40$), $t(44) = 2.12$, $p = .04$, $d = .64$. Looked at differently, when confronted with personal uncertainty, participants did not differ in their candidate support as a function of the Values manipulation, $t < 1$. However, when reminded of mortality,

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[1] A 2 × 2 ANOVA examining the impact of mortality and compassion reminders on the four Values Endorsement items revealed a main effect for the MS manipulation, such that MS ($M = 8.09$, $SD = .19$) produced greater endorsement than uncertainty ($M = 7.59$, $SD = .17$), $F(1, 87) = 3.96$, $p = .05$, $\eta^2 = .04$, and a main effect for the compassion manipulation, such that compassionate value reminders ($M = 8.44$, $SD = .18$) produced greater endorsement than neutral reminders ($M = 7.23$, $SD = .18$), $F(1, 87) = 22.89$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .21$; however, no interaction effect was found, $F(1, 87) = 1.81$, $p > .18$, $\eta^2 = .02$.
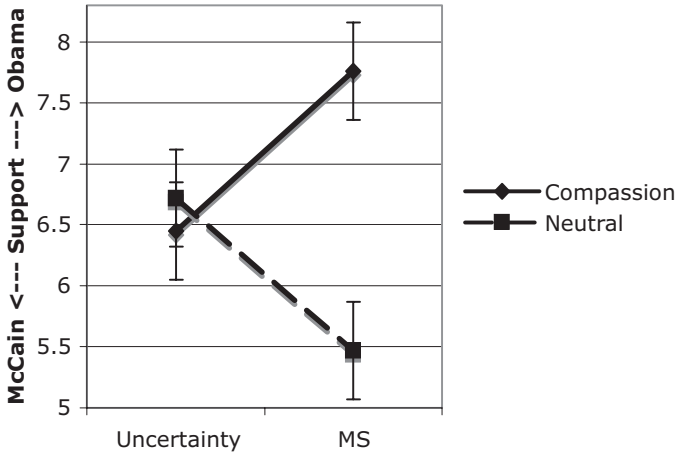
Fig. 1. Support for Barack Obama and John McCain as a function of mortality and compassion primes.

priming participants with compassionate values led to greater support of Obama than those not primed with such values, $t(38) = 4.52$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.47$.

Discussion

The present study supports previous findings that MS motivates people to bolster faith in political leaders who proclaim the purity of one's culture and aggressively defend its crowned existence. In contemporary American politics, this position tends to be associated with conservative or Republican candidates. Just as studies of the 2004 presidential election found that MS increased support for George W. Bush, the current study demonstrates that death reminders shifted support across the theoretical midpoint, in favor of John McCain. But more importantly, the present study extends these findings by demonstrating that this is *not* an inevitable response to existential threat. Considering that polls indicated Obama was popularly perceived as an exemplar of the cultural value of compassion, MS motivated increased support of the Democratic candidate when compassionate values were primed.

The present findings extend those of Rothschild et al. (2009). Rothschild et al. showed that priming religious fundamentalists with compassionate values that were clearly tied to their religious foundations in either Christianity or Islam led to lower level of support for the use of violence against Iran among Americans and to less hostile attitudes toward the United States (including less support of martyrdom attacks) among Iranians; in the absence of priming these compassionate

values, death reminders led to increased support for violence among both groups. The present study goes beyond a religious context to show that in the absence of being faced with compassionate values, death reminders increased support for John McCain; but when oriented toward compassionate values, MS increased support for Barack Obama.

This study also provides convergent support for a growing number of findings that existential threat is capable of motivating defense of progressive, prosocial values like tolerance, egalitarianism, and empathy (Gailliot et al., 2008; Greenberg et al., 1992; Rothschild et al., 2009; Schimel et al., 2006). Because people possess a variety of resources for buffering existential fear, terror management trajectories can be quite malleable. Thus, increasing the salience of a particular aspect of one's cultural worldview, such as the prosocial value of compassion, can motivate increased adherence to this value after reminders of death. As such, examining the effects of MS in light of individual differences in progressive value orientation might be a useful direction for the future research on the psychology of politics and/or intergroup relations. For example, emerging research suggests that compassion might be found in the perception of interdependence among diverse groups of people, helping to reduce or eliminate reactionary, hostile forms of worldview defense. Motyl et al. (2009) report that priming a perception of a common humanity attenuated an increase in anti-Arab prejudice and hostile immigration policy among Americans reminded of death. This compassionate perception of a common humanity can also be observed, rather ominously, in universal dangers (i.e., global warming) that *threaten* humanity as a whole. In research conducted with both Americans and Palestinians living in Israel, Pyszczynski et al. (2009) demonstrated that the perception of such global threat bolsters support for peaceful coexistence in the face of increased death awareness. Future research on these values and concerns might provide useful directions for those seeking peace and political harmony among groups embroiled in long-standing conflicts.

The present analysis of compassion also offers potential insights into understanding reactions to other political figures. Weise et al. (2008) found that MS motivated securely attached adults to support John Kerry instead of Bush. Given that secure attachment is linked to compassion and empathy (e.g., Mikulincer et al., 2005), the existentially motivated activation of secure adult attachment systems may have increased support for Kerry to the extent that he was perceived as the more compassionate candidate. However, comparing the current study with Weise et al. suggests a crucial distinction between the ability of Obama and Kerry to capitalize on the MS-induced need to achieve psychological equanimity by rigorously defending culturally cherished values. Whereas both men might very well have been harbingers of compassion, for Kerry, this may have been obscured by his relatively dry speaking style and meeker presence; Obama, on the other hand, wore compassion on his sleeve (Steinhauser, 2008). Thus, it may have been that Obama's frequent, eloquent outbursts of compassion boosted his support by priming the

cultural defense of this value amid frequent discussion of issues involving re-
minders of mortality (e.g., healthcare, Iraqi occupation, Russian invasion of Geor-
gia, etc.). It is important to note, however, that the present analysis does not imply
that compassionate associations are limited only to Democratic candidates. Indeed,
as the quote which opens this paper illustrates, then-President George W. Bush
co-opted the term "compassionate conservative" during his second campaign, a
move that may have helped garner support, assuming both that he was perceived
as the more compassionate candidate and that such values were made salient.

The present research also contributes to understanding the nature and speci-
ficity of responses to thoughts of death (cf, Pyszczynski, Greenberg, Solomon,
& Maxfield, 2006). Like a number of other studies, here we tested the impact
of MS against that of personal uncertainty. Proponents of the uncertainty man-
agement model claim that MS effects are actually a result of increased personal
uncertainty, which motivates efforts to regain a sense of certainty by defending
the validity of one's cultural worldview and confidently adhering to its norms
and values (e.g., Van Den Bos, Poortvliet, Marjolein, Miedema, & Van den Ham,
2005). The present study demonstrates that uncertainty concerns did not impact
political preferences, or produce reactions to cultural values (e.g., compassion)
similar to those triggered by MS.

The recently proposed uncertainty-threat model (e.g., Jost, Glaser,
Kruglanski, & Sulloway, 2003) claims that uncertainty and mortality threat both
produce a shift toward political conservatism. Critics of this model (e.g., Anson
et al., in press; Greenberg & Jonas, 2003), on the other hand, have argued that the
motivated social-cognitive foundations (i.e., dogmatism; intolerance of ambiguity;
personal need for closure, structure, or order; etc.) of political ideology are not lim-
ited to a conservative shift, but can readily trigger support for progressive change.
The present study provides clear and direct evidence for the latter contention:
MS-induced threat is indeed capable of motivating support for *either* conserva-
tive or progressive politicians, depending on the values that are salient at the
time.

This idea, however, does raise an interesting possibility with regard to inter-
preting the present effects. The compassionate value statements were designed for
this study to directly emphasize the value of compassion. While the comparison
statements were designed to lack such references, it is possible that these state-
ments might have been construed as priming wisdom. Previous research (e.g.,
Landau et al., 2004; Cohen et al., 2004, 2005) demonstrated that MS motivated
increased support for authoritarian candidates, and for Bush specifically, without
moderating factors such as a wisdom induction. This is consistent with the notion
that Republican candidates tend to enjoy increased support from those reminded
of mortality because these candidates tend to emphasize American superiority.
However, McCain was considerably older than Obama and held his Senate seat
for much longer; thus, he may have been seen as "wise" relative to Obama's

"naïveté." If this were the case, and if the neutral value condition's statements did prime wisdom, this may have motivated increased support for McCain after death reminders.

While the participants in this study were by no means representative of the diverse American electorate, they provided crucial insight into the psychological impact of each candidate's campaign and even of the candidates themselves. Embedded within a social climate boiling over with death reminders (e.g., war, terrorism, fear-mongering rhetoric, etc.), people may latch onto certain political leaders in an effort to affirm their faith in the permanence and validity of their particular culture. However, it would seem that the individual can achieve this leader-based worldview defense in several different ways. Depending on the salience of particular cultural values, a person might be motivated to follow a conservative leader who rigorously asserts the fundamental superiority of one's culture and aggressively "defends" it from the clutches of evil, or they might be motivated to support progressive prototypes of their more compassionate social values. As Ernest Becker (1973, p. 139) concluded, "[The human] is a trembling animal who pulls the world down around his shoulders as he clutches for protection and support and tries to affirm in a cowardly way his feeble powers. The qualities of the leader, then, and the problems of people fit together in a natural symbiosis."

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