

Bridging Partisan Divisions over Anti-Terrorism Policies:

The Role of Threat Perceptions

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ABSTRACT

We examine how changes in perceptions of threat affect individuals' policy views, as well as the political implications of this relationship. We administered a survey experiment to a representative sample of the U.S. population in which we exogenously manipulated individuals' perceived likelihood of a future terrorist attack on American soil and assessed subsequent changes in support for terrorism-related public policies. We find that perceived threat substantially increases support for policies intended to reduce terrorism and that this effect is concentrated among Democrats who believe another terrorist attack is likely to occur. These results suggest that increased levels of threat following September 11th may have assisted the Bush Administration in building a bipartisan coalition for its anti-terrorism policies by attracting individuals whose predispositions may have otherwise precluded their support. More broadly, our findings demonstrate how political elites can leverage and manipulate threat to bridge partisan divisions.

The September 11th attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon profoundly influenced the United States' foreign and domestic policy agenda, igniting debate over how much Americans were willing to sacrifice in order to guard against the threat of terrorism. In the wake of the attacks, both Republicans and Democrats at the mass and elite levels supported several costly anti-terrorism policies. For instance, the Patriot Act sailed through Congress with bipartisan support on a 98 to 1 vote in the Senate and a 357 to 66 vote in the House. Similarly, the Authorization for Use of Military Force Against Terrorists passed 98 to 0 in the Senate and 420 to 1 in the House. Additionally, 86 percent of Americans favored increased technological surveillance in public locations and 83 percent supported taking military action against a country harboring terrorists.¹

Unsurprisingly, the events of September 11th also spawned a great deal of social scientific inquiry, including research about how individuals' perceptions of the chance of another terrorist attack, which we refer to as "terrorist threat," affect related political attitudes. Many of these studies were conducted in the weeks and months following the attacks, making them valuable analyses of how the public reacted in the immediate aftermath of September 11th, when the perceived threat of a future attack was relatively high. However, we know less about the way in which terrorist threat continues to affect public opinion as the salience of the attacks and perceived threat has abated.

Consider the pattern of public opinion presented in Figure 1. Immediately after September 11, 2001, nearly 90 percent of Americans believed that another terrorist attack was "likely."² Additionally, both Republicans and Democrats approved of President Bush's handling

¹ Harris Poll, Sept. 19-24, 2001. CBS News/*New York Times* Poll, Sept 20-23, 2001.

² All trends in Figure 1 are constructed from CBS News and CBS News/*New York Times* polls from 2001 to 2007. For the "Perceived Threat" trend, respondents were asked, "How likely do you think it is that there will be another terrorist attack in the United States within the next few months—very likely, somewhat likely, not very likely, not at

of terrorism, representing a bipartisan coalition that supported government policies following September 11th. Six-and-a-half years after the events of September 11th, though, the proportion of Americans believing that an attack is “likely” fell below 50 percent. Public opinion polls suggest that, concurrent with this decline in threat, the bipartisan coalition in support for President Bush’s terrorism policies dissolved. Figure 1 also plots approval of President Bush’s performance on the issue of terrorism. Support among Republicans remained mostly steady from 2001 to 2007, whereas support among Democrats declined along with threat perceptions. Bipartisan consensus on specific anti-terrorism policies also waned over time. For instance, in 2006, 83 percent of Republicans favored the Bush administration’s warrantless wiretapping program, whereas only 38 percent of Democrats favored the policy.³ These poll results suggest that declining threat perceptions may have contributed to the dissolution of the bipartisan coalition in support of the Bush administration’s anti-terrorism policies.

Of course, there are several alternative explanations for widening partisan polarization since September 11th that have nothing to do with terrorist threat perceptions. Most obviously, Democrats’ displeasure with the initiation and execution of the Iraq War may have contributed to increased partisan polarization, especially because the Bush Administration closely linked military actions in Iraq with the broader global war on terrorism (Gershkoff and Kushner 2005). Additionally, if people rationalize domain-specific approval based on a president’s overall job performance, then decreasing Democratic approval of Bush’s handling of terrorism may be a consequence of Bush’s overall deteriorating job approval, rather than a function of decreasing terrorist threat. Unfortunately, the data we present in Figure 1 and the cross-sectional research

all likely?” In Figure 1, we categorize “Very” and “Somewhat likely” responses as “Likely.” For the “Bush Approval” trends, respondents were asked, “Do you approve or disapprove of the way George W. Bush is handling the campaign against terrorism?”

³ Pew Research Center Poll, February 1-5, 2006.

designs of past terrorism studies do not allow us to adjudicate among these competing explanations for the decline in support for anti-terrorism policies.

The public opinion patterns presented in Figure 1 create a puzzle: Do high perceptions of threat explain the bipartisan coalition that formed in support of anti-terrorism policies immediately after September 11th? Moreover, do decreasing threat perceptions in the years since the attacks explain the dismantling of that coalition? To address this puzzle we conducted an experimental study, administered to a representative sample of the U.S. population recruited via random digit dialing, in which we manipulated individuals' perceived likelihood of a future terrorist attack on American soil and assessed subsequent changes in support for public policies. We find that threat perceptions substantially affect support for policies intended to reduce terrorism. Surprisingly, Republicans, who generally perceive greater terrorist threat and are more supportive of anti-terrorism policies *a priori*, do not drive this relationship. Rather, the effects are concentrated within Democrats who perceive high levels of threat. Democrats, on average, may not be predisposed to support the policies of a Republican administration, either for ideological reasons or due to their reliance on party cues. Therefore, increased levels of threat following September 11th may have assisted the Bush Administration in building a coalition for its anti-terrorism policies by attracting individuals whose predispositions may have otherwise precluded their support. These findings suggest that political elites have incentives to manipulate threat perceptions in order to build support for their preferred policies.

The paper is organized as follows. In the first section, we discuss the existing literature on individuals' attitudes on terrorism and the influence of threat perceptions. We then present a theoretical basis to motivate our study and derive our main hypotheses of interest, drawing on literature from psychology and political science. We next describe the experimental design,

measures, and methods of analysis. Finally, we present our results and discuss their implications for the study of threat and attitude formation.

Previous Literature

Previous scholarship has identified a number of political, ideological, and demographic predispositions as important correlates of anti-terrorism attitudes, such as support for military interventionism and restrictions on civil liberties. For instance, Republican partisanship (Kam and Kinder 2007; Huddy et al. 2005), ethnocentrism or out-group prejudice (Kam and Kinder 2007), authoritarianism (Feldman and Stenner 1997; Hetherington and Weiler 2009; Huddy et al. 2005), and dogmatism (Davis and Silver 2004; Davis 2007) are related to increased support for various anti-terrorism measures. Other important determinants of terrorism-related preferences include demographic factors. Women are more likely than men to support increased spending for defense and homeland security, although they are less likely to support foreign military intervention (Kam and Kinder 2007). Other groups, including blacks (Davis and Silver 2004; Huddy et al. 2005; Kam and Kinder 2007), the young, and the better educated (Davis and Silver 2004, Huddy et al. 2005), favor protecting civil liberties and oppose military intervention. In this paper we explore another powerful determinant of terrorism-related preferences: perceived threat of a future terror attack. Unlike the longstanding predispositions and demographic characteristics described above, threat perceptions are likely influenced by the ever-changing information environment, which consists of elite rhetoric, real world events (e.g., September 11th and the July 2005 London bombings), and information released by the government (e.g., color-coded threat levels).

Political scientists have long recognized the political consequences of perceived threat. The rich literature on political tolerance has demonstrated that those who perceive a group to be threatening are more likely to be intolerant toward that group and support restrictions on their civil liberties (e.g. Stouffer 1955; Sullivan et al. 1982, Marcus et al. 1995). This relationship between threat and tolerance is robust, occurring in widely varying cross-national situations (see e.g., Gibson and Gouws (2003) for a discussion of tolerance in South Africa or Wang and Chang's (2006) study of tolerance in Taiwan). Increased threat can also affect how we perceive and judge our political leaders. Times of crisis, which are characterized by higher threat perceptions, can increase the level of charisma attributed to leaders (Merolla et al. 2007). Those who saw President Bush as more charismatic were less likely to blame him for mistakes made in Iraq. The presence of threat can also influence how individuals search for new information. In the absence of threat, individuals look for information in a non-partisan, balanced manner; however, high levels of threat lead individuals to seek out new information that is consistent with their prior attitudes (Lavine et al. 2005).

The construct of threat has given political scientists and psychologists significant leverage in explaining how citizens' beliefs and fears about terrorism affect related political attitudes.⁴ Consistent with the studies of political tolerance described above, recent research has found that perceived threat of terrorism increases support for anti-Arab policies, such as curtailing their civil liberties (Skitka et al. 2004; Davis and Silver 2004; Huddy et al. 2005). The effects of terrorist threat extend well beyond those established by the political tolerance literature. Threat perceptions are linked to greater support for domestic anti-terrorism policies. Those who think a future attack is likely are more supportive of greater border control spending

⁴ The prior literature draws an important distinction between sociotropic and personal threat (see Huddy et al. 2002; Davis and Silver 2004; Joslyn and Haider-Markel 2007; Davis 2007). Sociotropic threat is generally more consequential to preferences on terrorism-related policies.

(Kam and Kinder 2007) and curtailing civil liberties of the general public through such policies as a national identification card program and the monitoring of communications (Huddy et al. 2005; Davis and Silver 2004). Experimental results from Germany suggest that increased threat can lead individuals to favor harsher penalties for criminals (Fisher et al. 2007). Greater perceived threat is also consequential for foreign policy preferences, such as heightened support for military action in Afghanistan, taking an active role in world affairs (Huddy et al. 2005), greater defense spending, and greater support for taking military action in Iraq (Kam and Kinder 2007).

This paper makes three main contributions to the extant literature. First, it is important to note that nearly all of the existing literature consists of studies administered in the weeks and months following the September 11th attacks, when both the event and the policy discussions surrounding it were salient in individuals' minds. By studying attitudes six-and-a-half years after the events, we can explore whether the threat of terrorism still has a powerful impact after the immediacy of the attacks has receded from individuals' thoughts and the national policy agenda. We can also explore whether the effects of threat vary by party identification and prior threat perceptions. More specifically, we can assess whether variations in perceived threat explain the high levels of partisan polarization on terrorism-related issues that we observed at the beginning of this paper. Understanding these relationships between perceived threat and policy preferences shed light on the bipartisan coalition that was formed in support of anti-terrorism policies September 11th, and more generally how political elites can strategically leverage and manipulate threat perceptions to build coalitions in support of their preferred policies. Finally, to our knowledge, this is the first study to examine the effect of threat on terrorism attitudes using a

randomized experiment of the general U.S. population.⁵ Nearly all previous studies of threat and terrorism-related attitudes are based on observational studies of single cross-sections, which cannot address *changes* in threat perceptions or their consequences. Further, threat perceptions are highly correlated with both observed and unobserved variables, making establishing causality difficult due to the threat of omitted variables bias. Moreover, individuals may alter their threat assessments in such a way as to bring them in line with their prior policy attitudes, therefore rationalizing those attitudes (Festinger 1957; Rahn et al. 1994).

Theoretical Overview: Explaining Support for Terrorism-Related Policy

Psychological research offers three mechanisms that guide us in explaining how and why threat perceptions influence political attitudes: emotional response, group attachment, and activation of authoritarianism.⁶ Several studies have shown that increased threat is associated with greater levels of fear and anxiety. Individuals attempt to resolve these emotions by turning to sources of security (Lerner et al. 2003; Fischhoff et al. 2005; Skitka et al. 2004). Additionally, fear and anxiety can increase interest in, attention to, and even learning about politics, as people search for information to resolve emotional unease and discomfort (Valentino et al. 2008; Marcus and MacKuen 1993; Marcus et al. 2000; Brader 2005).⁷

⁵ Merolla et al. (2007) manipulated threat in an experimental study of undergraduates, although they focus on the effect of crisis on perceptions of political leaders, not terrorist threat itself. Similarly, numerous psychological studies have attempted to trigger emotional reactions related to the threat of terrorism, but they do not explicitly provide information about the likelihood of future attacks (e.g. Skitka et al. 2004). Moreover, these studies often employ unrepresentative convenience samples or undergraduate research participants.

⁶ Our research design cannot distinguish which of these mechanisms mediates the relationship between threat and policy preferences. We suspect, however, that these mechanisms are not mutually exclusive in the case of terrorist threat.

⁷ See Huddy et al. (2005) for a treatment of the differing underpinnings and consequences of anxiety and perceived threat.

Others argue that threat induces group conflict and association with one's group (e.g. Kam and Kinder 2007; Sherif and Sherif 1953). Once people feel comfort and security in their in-group, they may seek to use the apparatus of the state to restrict competitive or threatening out-groups. This may explain individuals' willingness to support public policies that impose higher costs on certain minority groups, particularly those of Arab descent (e.g., Davis and Silver 2004). Similarly, recent work by Philip Tetlock and colleagues (e.g Goldberg et al. 1999; Tetlock 2002) argues that when people feel that the social order is threatened (by rising crime rates, for example), they will respond by supporting extremely harsh and punitive penalties for specific transgressions, hoping that it may deter future transgressions and protect the social order. Fischer et al. (2007) extended this theory to the context of the post-September 11th world, arguing that terrorist attacks make people feel that the social order is unbalanced and needs to be corrected.

Finally, Feldman and Stenner (1997) argue that threat activates authoritarian predispositions, leading some individuals to display attitudes consistent with authoritarianism, such as greater intolerance of minority groups and greater support for the use of force, both domestic (support for death penalty) and abroad (support for the 1992 Gulf War). Research also suggests that the activation of authoritarianism should have consequences for how individuals search for information. When faced with a threat, those with high levels of authoritarianism prefer news articles containing arguments consistent with their prior opinions rather than balanced articles containing pro- and counter-attitudinal information (Lavine et al. 2005). Based upon this literature, we expect that the activation of authoritarian predispositions is a potential mechanism for the relationship between higher levels of perceived terrorist threat and greater support for anti-terrorism policies. Indeed, research shows that the September 11th attacks did

activate authoritarianism, evidenced by a greater number of “letters to the editor” expressing authoritarian sentiment (Perrin 2005).

To better understand how the terrorist threat information may impact political attitudes, we draw upon prospect theory and the concept of *loss aversion* (Tversky and Kahneman 1981). When people make choices under uncertainty, they tend to be risk averse with respect to gains but risk loving with respect to losses. An implication of this pattern is that prospective losses guide decision making more than prospective gains of the same size (Jerit 2009; Druckman and McDermott 2008; Cobb and Kuklinski 1997). Although the bulk of psychological research has demonstrated this empirical regularity by presenting subjects with highly stylized lotteries, Jerit (2009) showed that prospect theory also explains support for risky policies such as Social Security privatization (see also Quattrone and Tversky 1988). People are much more sensitive to negative information about losing money in private accounts than to positive information about prospective monetary gains.

In the experimental design described below, respondents weigh two different costs: the costs of the policies against the potential costs of an attack. When the perceived threat of an attack is low, people are likely to be operating in the domain of gains, meaning that the policies should, on average, garner less support.⁸ Treatment information showing an attack to be likely should shift people into the domain of losses, meaning they should be more willing to support risky policies that entail some cost.

Hypothesis 1: Information indicating a higher perceived threat from a terrorist attack will make individuals more supportive of public policies designed to combat terrorism.

However, we do not expect the treatment effect of the threat information to be the same

⁸ In prospect theory, an individual’s reference point defines whether he or she is operating in the domain of gains or losses. In this case, we have no information or measure of reference points; however, the distribution of reference points should be equivalent across experimental conditions due to randomization.

for all individuals. Rather, both partisanship and prior threat perceptions may moderate the impact of the treatment.

Partisanship. Republicans may be more supportive of anti-terrorism policies simply based on ideology. Many of these policies stress a strong military presence or a commitment to law and order, consistent with traditional values of political conservatism (Pratto et al. 1994). Therefore, Republicans' support for anti-terrorism policies may be unaffected by higher threat information (i.e., information conveying a greater likelihood of an attack) because the policies are consistent with their ideological predispositions. In other words, many Republicans will support these policies even in the absence of greater threat perceptions. Conversely, Democrats may be committed to more liberal principles, such as concern for civil liberties, pacifism, and diplomacy over military intervention. It is possible, though, for higher threat information to override Democrats' ideological predispositions thereby having a more substantial impact on their policy attitudes. Rudolph and Popp (in press) presented a similar logic in explaining attitudes on Social Security privatization. Because conservatives support the policy on ideological grounds, the effect of trust in government on support for privatization only exists among liberals.

Prior Threat Perceptions. Individuals approach new threat information with different *prior* perceptions of the likelihood of a terrorist attack. For instance, if an individual believes that the percentage chance of an attack is X and she learns later that it is actually z units above (below) X , then she should adjust her expectations upwards (downwards) if she is a Bayesian learner (Gerber and Green 1998). Hence, current judgments about the likelihood of a terrorist attack may be a weighted average of prior and new information. If people are Bayesian learners, then the influence of threat perceptions on policy choice should depend on these prior

expectations. If new information shows the world to be more (less) threatening *than expected*, individuals should be more (less) supportive of counterterrorism policies.

However, individuals may not approach new information in such a rational manner. Indeed, many studies in psychology and behavioral economics have highlighted people's inability to update accurately and perfectly (e.g., Tversky and Kahneman 1973; Slovic et al. 1977; Slovic et al. 2004). Similarly, political scientists have long argued that individuals engage in "motivated reasoning," rejecting information that is inconsistent with their partisan and ideological predispositions (e.g., Taber and Lodge 2006). Therefore, we posit that people will update when the information is directionally consistent with their priors, and will fail to update when it is directionally inconsistent. Consider two types of individuals: (1) those who think that a terrorist attack is likely; and (2) those who believe that an attack is unlikely. The first group may be highly attentive to threat information because they view the world as a threatening place. Conversely, the second group may not attend to information about threat because terrorism is not a concern.

Thus, we predict that the individuals most likely to be influenced by the treatment information are Democrats who perceive the threat of terrorism to be high. This subgroup has two key characteristics that make them highly sensitive to information about heightened terrorist threat: (1) they are not predisposed to support anti-terrorism measures; and (2) they are attentive to threat-related information.

Hypothesis 2: The effect of threat information on support for public policies designed to combat terrorism will be stronger among Democrats who believe an attack is likely.

Experimental Design

To test these hypotheses, we designed and conducted a survey experiment administered by Knowledge Networks (KN) over the Internet between March 21 and March 31, 2008 using a nationally representative sample of 677 American adults. KN recruits panel members over the telephone via random digit dialing (RDD) and provides them with WebTV equipment in exchange for their participation in weekly surveys, which they complete online.⁹ The AAPOR RR3 completion rate was 62.8 percent.

The experimental manipulation was designed to increase threat perceptions, operationalized as the perceived likelihood of a future terrorist attack. An individual's perception of terrorist threat is malleable, as demonstrated by previous studies that manipulate threat perceptions with treatments similar to ours. In a 2004 experiment designed to explore the effects of crisis on the perceived charisma of leaders, Merolla et al. (2007) presented undergraduate subjects with a CIA warning that al Qaeda will soon mount a large-scale terror attack. Subjects in this condition were more worried about terrorist attacks than those who received no information about the likelihood of a future attack. In another study, researchers found that perceptions of terrorist threat were higher among German undergraduate subjects who were told that German intelligence thought there was a high risk of a terror attack versus those told intelligence saw no risk of an attack (Fischer et al. 2007). Changes in threat information also have led to changes in political attitudes outside of the laboratory. The Department of Homeland Security has raised and lowered the Homeland Security Advisory System threat level several times, an action that is reported heavily in the press. Willer (2004) showed that these threat level

⁹ Prior to conducting the main studies, we ran a similar study on 270 undergraduate students at [AUTHOR INSTITUTION] who received extra credit in their political science courses in exchange for their participation. As described below, the pilot study allowed us to refine several aspects of our experimental design.

changes have produced corresponding changes in presidential approval, suggesting that the public utilizes available threat information when forming related political judgments.

As the main treatment, we presented respondents with a brief statement about findings from an actual survey of arms control experts conducted by the Senate Foreign Relations Committee.¹⁰ Respondents were asked to read the following passage, in which we manipulated the information respondents received about the percentage chance (X) of a terrorist attack:

Assisting the government in preparing for a potential terrorist attack, the Senate Foreign Relations Committee surveyed a group of arms control experts about the likelihood of a terrorist attack on American soil. Based on an analysis of the responses, the experts concluded that there is a [X] % chance that there will be a damaging terrorist attack in the United States in the next five years.

X was randomly drawn from multiples of five between 5 and 95, inclusive. We excluded 0 and 100, because we thought such absolute statements of certainty would be implausible.¹¹

Moreover, we did not randomly draw all integers because people can more easily digest round numbers (Kruel 1982; Schindler and Kirby 1997). To disguise the purpose of the information presented to respondents, we asked respondents how the government should publicize threat information. Respondents were asked: “How should the United States government inform the American public about the current level of terrorist threat?,” and could select a number of options including televisions announcements, unsolicited e-mails, and the like. This also encouraged respondents to read through the treatment information, instead of perfunctorily skipping through it.

¹⁰ To ensure that any estimated treatment effects were a function of the manipulated value of X and not simply the presentation of a report on terrorism *per se*, we also included a control condition ($n = 227$) in which no threat-related information was presented. Estimating treatment effects in comparison to this baseline yields statistically and substantively similar results to those presented below. Hence, we are confident that we are isolating the effects of varying levels of threat information.

¹¹ The Senate Foreign Relations committee did commission a study of arms control experts; however, we manipulated the results of that study to conform to our experimental design. We were able to construct every X value based on some subset of responses in the Committee report. Therefore, we were not explicitly deceptive, but still explained our procedures to respondents during debriefing.

Measures

Dependent Variable. The main dependent variable is an index of attitudes towards anti-terrorism policies. We considered four policies that have been proposed to combat terrorism: (1) “Do you support or oppose the U.S. government using wiretaps to listen in on citizens’ phone conversations in terrorism investigations?”; (2) “Do you support or oppose a law requiring libraries to turn over to terrorism investigators records of what books people have checked out?”; (3) “Do you support or oppose limits on airline passengers carrying liquids or gels (e.g., beverages, toothpaste, shampoo) onto airplanes?”; and (4) “Do you support or oppose the United States launching a military attack against Iran, which American government officials have accused of supporting terrorist organizations such as al Qaeda?”¹² All of these policies impose some sort of costs on the public. To reduce measurement error, we averaged these four items together to construct an index (Cronbach’s α of .76). The scale was coded to lie between 0 (lowest level of support) and 1 (highest level of support). We also estimated results for each individual item (see Appendix A).¹³

Independent Variable. The main independent variable, or treatment, is information about the percentage chance of a damaging terrorist attack in the United States in the next five years, which we refer to as “X.” As mentioned above, respondents were randomly assigned to receive different levels of X ranging from 5 to 95 percent. We coded X to lie between 0 and 1.

Moderators. Before the administration of the treatment, respondents answered several items measuring potential moderating variables. To measure partisanship, respondents were

¹² Subjects chose among the following response options: “Strongly oppose,” “Somewhat oppose,” “Neither support nor oppose,” “Somewhat support,” and “Strongly support.”

¹³ Non-response was not an issue in this dataset. 98.5 percent of respondents completed all of the questions necessary for the analyses.

asked: “Generally speaking, do you consider yourself a Republican, a Democrat, an independent, or something else?”¹⁴ To assess prior levels of threat, respondents were asked: “What would you estimate to be the percentage chance¹⁵ that the United States will suffer a damaging terrorist attack in the next five years? Please only type in whole numbers between 0 and 100.”¹⁶ We coded “high prior threat” individuals as those who believed that the percentage chance of an attack in the near future was 75 or above.¹⁷ In order to ensure that statement of one’s prior did not prime respondents or make them resistant to treatment information, we asked a series of four unrelated, open-ended questions about leisure activities that were designed to distract respondents from the main topic of the study.¹⁸ The average completion time of these four items was nearly three minutes. Thus, they functioned effectively as a distracter task by increasing the length of time between respondents’ reporting of their prior level of threat and when they received the treatment.

KN keeps demographic information on file about panelists, including age, education, race, and gender. We coded age to lie between 0 (youngest respondent) and 1 (oldest). Education

¹⁴ KN keeps data on respondent partisanship as part of their demographic profile. For the purposes of analysis, we constructed an indicator variable for whether the respondent was a Democrat, placing Republicans in the omitted category and excluding pure Independents (3.7 percent of sample). The results are statistically and substantively similar if Independents are included in the omitted category, or separated out into their own category.

¹⁵ Some previous studies have asked respondent to report in percentage terms the perceived threat of a terrorist attack (Lerner et al. 2003, Goodwin et al 2005, Fischhoff et al. 2005). These authors have shown that such items are valid and function well.

¹⁶ In the pilot study, we asked an identical question following the presentation of the treatment information in order to gauge the level of Bayesian updating. The pilot revealed that responses are “sticky.” More than half (55 percent) of subjects in the pilot study reported identical threat perceptions prior to and following the threat treatment; however, only 10 percent of subjects received treatments that were identical to their priors. Based upon this pretest, we determined that using identical measures of perceived threat before and after the experimental stimulus would not be feasible. For this reason, we only asked about threat perceptions before the administration of the treatment information. Additionally, these results demonstrated the value of administering a distraction task after the statement of the prior to mitigate potential priming.

¹⁷ Although this coding is somewhat arbitrary, we do not have strong theoretical reasons to presume that a certain cutoff was most valid. Hence, we selected a cut point that best discriminated respondents. 23 percent of respondents were coded as having “high prior threat.” Of these, 48.7 percent identified as Democrats.

¹⁸ The four items were: (1) “What was the name of the last restaurant you went out to eat at?”; (2) “What was the name of the last movie you saw in the theater?”; (3) “Think back to the last time you filled up your car with gas. How much did the gas cost per gallon?”; (4) “Where would you like to take your next vacation?”

was coded linearly to lie between 0 (less than a high school education) to 1 (college graduate). Race and gender were coded as indicator variables with non-whites and females as the reference categories.

Randomization Check

Randomization across values of X was successful. We estimated an OLS regression predicting X with the near-full set of profile variables provided by KN: household Internet access, party identification, age, education, race, gender, response option order, household size, household income, marital status, urbanicity, home ownership, employment status, whether the respondent was the head of the household, children in household, and region (see Appendix B). We fail to reject an F -test testing the null hypothesis that the coefficients are jointly equal to zero ($F_{25, 651} = .51; p = .98$), indicating that X does not systematically vary with any observable characteristic of the respondent. Moreover, none of the individual coefficients is statistically significant at the $p < .10$ level.

Model Specification

To test Hypothesis 1, we estimated the following OLS¹⁹ regression:

$$P_i = \beta_0 + \beta_1(X_i) + \gamma \mathbf{x}_i + \varepsilon_i \quad (1)$$

where i indexes respondents, P_i represents support for anti-terrorism policies, X_i is the randomly-assigned level of terrorist threat (X) presented in the treatment, \mathbf{x}_i is a vector of political and

¹⁹ Of course, the effect of X on policy attitude may be non-linear. To test this, we also estimated a set of generalized additive models (GAM), semiparametric regression models that retain the assumption of additivity from OLS but relax linearity (Hastie and Tibishirani 1990; Keele 2008). The results were extremely similar in statistical and substantive terms. More importantly, likelihood ratio tests reveal that the GAMs do not produce a statistically significant improvement over models simply including a linear term for X . Hence, we only report and consider OLS estimates.

demographic control variables, and ε_i is random error. β_1 represents the treatment effect on P_i of increasing X from 5 to 95 percent. We include \mathbf{x}_i in the regression specification for two reasons. First, it increases the efficiency of the treatment effect estimates. Second, it provides us with substantively interesting quantities with which to compare the treatment effects. For instance, how does the effect of threat perceptions compare to the effect of partisanship in predicting policy attitudes?

To evaluate Hypothesis 2, we estimated the following OLS regression model:

$$P_i = \beta_0 + \beta_1(X_i) + \beta_2(TD_i) + \beta_3(X_i \times TD_i) + \gamma\mathbf{x}_i + \varepsilon_i \quad (2)$$

where TD_i is a dummy variable indicating “threatened Democrats,” or Democratic respondents who perceive the threat of a terrorist attack to be greater than or equal to 75 percent. We expect β_3 to be positive and significant, meaning that the treatment effect of X_i on P_i is stronger among threatened Democrats than among all other respondents. To assess the robustness of our findings, we estimate several variants of equation (2) using different operationalizations of the omitted category associated with TD_i .

Results

Consistent with Hypothesis 1, the threat of terrorism significantly boosts support for anti-terrorism policies. In the first column of Table 1, we present model estimates from equation (1).²⁰ The coefficient associated with “Threat Treatment (X)” ($\beta_1 = .08$, $p = .04$, two-tailed) is positive and statistically significant, meaning that increasing the threat level from 5 to 95 percent results in an eight percentage point increase in the range of the dependent variable. This estimated effect of threat is large in substantive terms. One useful comparison is with party

²⁰ For convenience, we have shaded the key coefficients of interest in gray.

identification, which many scholars have argued is an important determinant of individuals' policy attitudes (Rahn 1993; Cohen 2003; Davis and Silver 2004). The coefficient estimate on "Democrat" of $-.17$ indicates that Democrats as a group are $.17$ units lower on the policy scale than Republicans, *ceteris paribus*. In determining policy attitudes, the perceived threat of terrorism is over two-fifths the size of party identification, often considered to be the strongest predictor in studies of political behavior. The other control variables demonstrate other substantively interesting findings. Consistent with prior research, low-education and female respondents were more likely to support anti-terrorism policies. The treatment effect is larger than the effect of gender and over two-fifths as large as the effect of education, two important demographic predictors of anti-terrorism policy attitudes.

As predicted by Hypothesis 2, the treatment effects were concentrated among threatened Democrats. The second column of Table 1 presents coefficient estimates from equation (2). Per theoretical expectations, the coefficient associated with the "Threat Treatment (X) \times Threatened Democrats" interaction is positive and statistically significant ($\beta_3 = .23, p=.02$), meaning that the impact of X_i on policy attitudes was stronger among threatened Democrats as compared to the members of the omitted category, which is comprised of Republicans and unthreatened Democrats.²¹ Decomposing this coefficient estimate into its constituent elements, we find that among threatened Democrats, increasing X from 5 to 95 percent boosted policy support by $.27$ units, or over one-quarter of the range of the dependent variable ($\beta_1 + \beta_3 = .27, p=.002$). Among this subgroup, the effect of threat perceptions is stronger than any of the demographic predictors, including education. Conversely, among the omitted subgroup, X does not significantly affect

²¹ As shown in Appendix A, when predicting each of the four issues individually, we obtain positive estimates of β_3 in all four cases, consistent with Hypothesis 2. However, the items on library records and a preemptive military strike on Iran most greatly contribute to the effect.

anti-terrorism policy attitudes ($\beta_1 = .04, p=.40$).

To assess the robustness of this result, we explore different operationalizations of the omitted category associated with TD_i . In specification (3) in Table 1, we include an additional dummy (and associated interaction term) to equation (2) for unthreatened Democrats (i.e. Democrats whose prior threat assessment was less than 75 percent), making the excluded category all Republicans. The coefficient estimate associated with “Threat Treatment (X) \times Threatened Democrats” is similar in size and significance to the one presented in specification (2). In specification (4), we included one more dummy for threatened Republicans, making the omitted category unthreatened Republicans. Again, we find that the “Threat Treatment (X) \times Threatened Democrats” interaction term is positive and statistically significant.

Finally, we examine the moderating effect of partisanship and prior threat perceptions independently to assess whether one of the two is driving our main result for threatened Democrats. As shown in specifications (5) and (6) of Table 1, both partisanship and prior threat contribute to the effect, but neither is overpowering. The “Threat Treatment (X) \times High Prior Treat” interaction in specification (5) and the “Threat Treatment (X) \times Democrats” interaction in specification (6) are both positive and approach statistical significance, but are only about half the size of the coefficients on “Threat Treatment (X) \times Threatened Democrats” presented in specifications (2) to (4). Hence, both Democratic partisanship *and* heightened perceptions of terrorist threat jointly result in sensitivity to threat information.

Presenting these results visually underscores the heterogeneity in the treatment effect, as well as how threat can bridge partisan divisions. In Figure 2, using estimates obtained from specification (3) in Table 1, we plot the marginal effect of X (with the associated 95% confidence interval) against the *difference* in policy support between threatened Democrats and all

Republicans. When threat is low, the partisan divide on anti-terrorism policy preferences is large, exceeding .25 units; however, as X approaches 95 percent, the gap between threatened Democrats and all Republicans diminishes. We see the same pattern when examining policy support among all Republicans, threatened Democrats and unthreatened Democrats, separately. As shown in Figure 3, at low levels of the threat treatment, partisan polarization is high—both threatened and unthreatened Democrats exhibit low support of anti-terrorism measures whereas Republican support is high.²² The only subgroup that is sensitive to the threat treatment is threatened Democrats. As we move X from 5 to 95 percent, the gap in policy support between Republicans and threatened Democrats disappears whereas the gap between Republicans and unthreatened Democrats remains constant. This demonstrates that both partisanship and prior threat perceptions jointly operate. Republicans are unaffected by the treatment because they are already predisposed to support the anti-terrorism policies. Unthreatened Democrats do not think another attack is likely and therefore may not be as attentive to the new information. It is only among threatened Democrats that new information about the threat of another attack leads to heightened support for anti-terrorism policies. These findings present a potential explanation for why there was such broad support for domestic and foreign policies to combat terrorism, such as the Patriot Act and the Iraq War, following September 11th. Additionally, they explain the dismantling of this bipartisan coalition as threat perceptions decreased over time.

Discussion

Via a survey experiment, we found that exogenously-manipulated threat information affects support for costly policies such as preemptive war and restrictions on civil liberties. This study provides the first experimental evidence of this effect among the general U.S. population.

²² In calculating predicted values, we hold all control variables at their medians.

Surprisingly, these effects exist six-and-a-half years after September 11, 2001, reinforcing the fact that although threat levels may wax and wane, the political effects of terrorist threat are not ephemeral. These findings suggest that terrorism-related attitudes, at least among some specific groups, are malleable and vulnerable to elite manipulation. Our experimental stimulus is relatively weak in comparison to threat-related information that individuals may encounter in the real world, so these results may understate the extent to which elites can influence public opinion on anti-terrorism measures.

More interestingly, we learn a great deal about which groups are affected by threat information. We found that the treatment effects were most concentrated among Democrats who had high levels of prior threat. Conversely, Republicans—both threatened and unthreatened—exhibited strong support for the policies *independent* of the level of threat, presumably because these policies comported with their longstanding ideological predispositions. Hence, in attempting to build policy support for ideologically conservative actions such as the Patriot Act and the Iraq War, political elites in the aftermath of September 11th may have been able to use the specter of threat to affect how Democrats evaluated anti-terrorism policies, consequently changing their policy attitudes. Further, this coalition may have fallen apart due to the subsiding threat of terrorism.

This study lays the groundwork for future research exploring the effect of threat and risk information on political attitudes. Of course, attitudes on terrorism can be explored in greater detail, and alternative conceptions and forms of the threat manipulation can be considered. However, a more interesting extension of our research would be to explore whether these effects are confined to terrorism (or other similar domains where physical safety is at stake), or whether they operate more broadly. For example, it would be fruitful to consider other forms of threat

such as economic collapse, which is particularly salient in the aftermath of the 2008 financial meltdown, or affronts to moral values, such as movements to legalize gay marriage. Finally, a closer examination of risk is warranted. Although risk tolerance is notoriously difficult to measure accurately (Brady and Ansolabehere 1989), future scholarship can explore the tradeoff between two types of risks: risk from terrorist attacks and uncertainty regarding whether policies will be successful.

In summary, we have shown that threat perceptions significantly influence terrorism-related opinions, particularly among individuals who are not ideologically predisposed to support these policies. Further, prior threat perceptions are important. Similar to how the extensive literature on motivated reasoning shows that people filter out substantive arguments inconsistent with their longstanding predispositions, threat information is consequential only among people who perceive the world as threatening to begin with. We also make a substantive contribution to understanding how such a broad, diverse coalition was formed across the partisan spectrum in favor of anti-terrorism policies following September 11th. Threat may have played a substantial role in bridging the divide between ideological opposites, an effect that persists years after the attacks.

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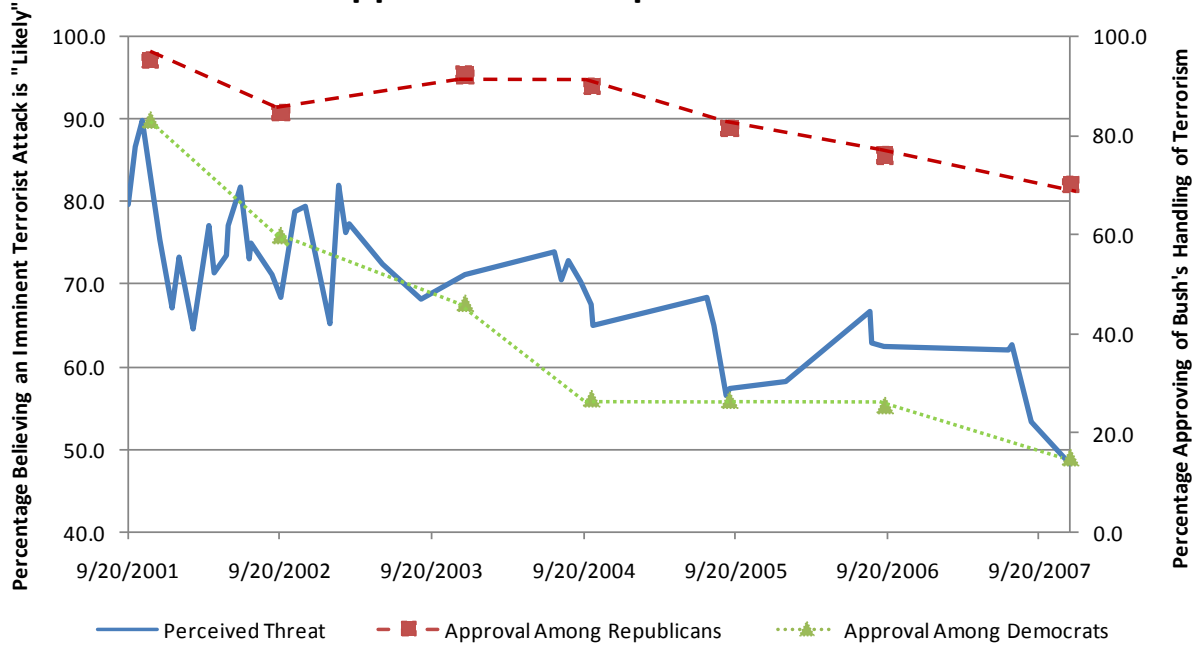
Table 1: The Effect of Threat on Political Attitudes

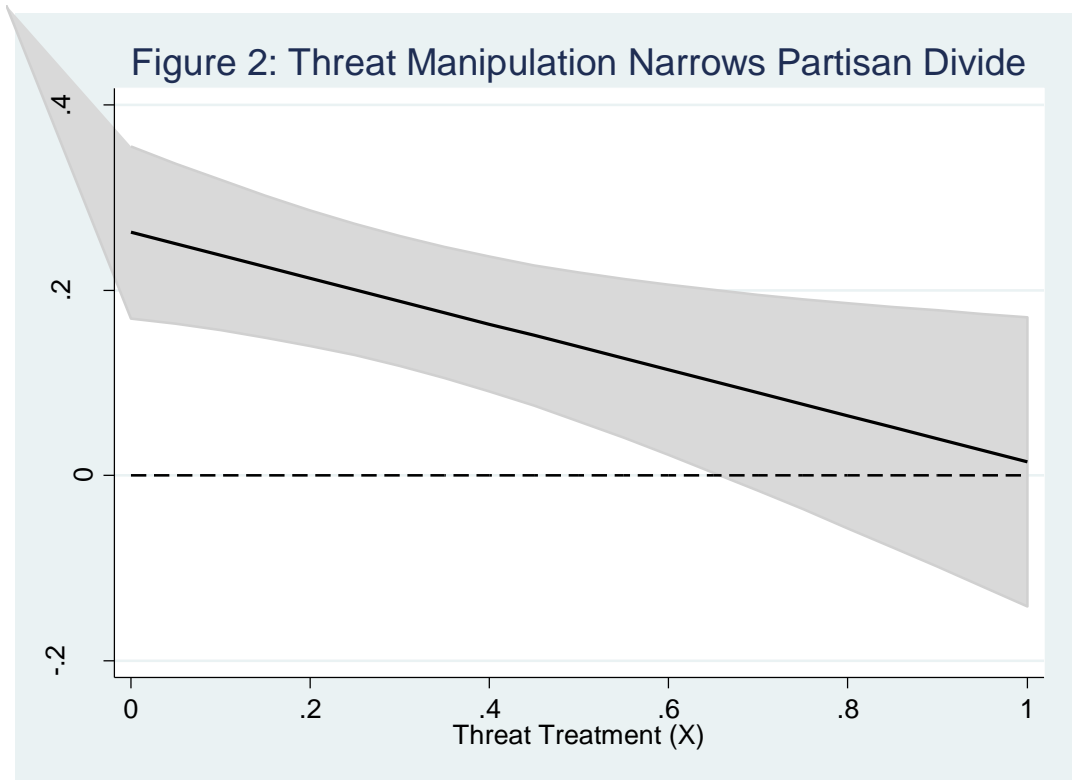
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Threat Treatment (X)	.08* (.04)	.04 (.04)	.02 (.05)	.01 (.06)	.04 (.04)	.01 (.05)
Threatened Democrats	—	-.15* (.06)	-.26*** (.07)	-.25*** (.07)	—	—
Unthreatened Democrats	—	—	-.21*** (.05)	-.20*** (.05)	—	—
Threatened Republicans	—	—	—	.07 (.07)	—	—
Threat Treatment (X) × Threatened Democrats	—	.23* (.10)	.25* (.10)	.26* (.11)	—	—
Threat Treatment (X) × Unthreatened Democrats	—	—	.04 (.08)	.05 (.08)	—	—
Threat Treatment (X) × Threatened Republicans	—	—	—	.01 (.11)	—	—
High Prior Threat	.07** (.03)	—	—	—	-.01 (.05)	.07** (.03)
Democrat	-.17*** (.02)	—	—	—	-.17*** (.02)	-.23*** (.04)
Threat Treatment (X) × High Prior Threat	—	—	—	—	.14 (.08)	—
Threat Treatment (X) × Democrats	—	—	—	—	—	.10 (.07)
Age	-.05 (.05)	-.03 (.05)	-.03 (.05)	-.04 (.05)	-.04 (.05)	-.04 (.05)
Education	-.18*** (.03)	-.17*** (.04)	-.17*** (.03)	-.17*** (.03)	-.18*** (.03)	-.17*** (.03)
White	.06 (.03)	.10*** (.03)	.06* (.03)	.05 (.03)	.06* (.03)	.05 (.03)
Male	-.05* (.02)	-.05 (.02)	-.05* (.02)	-.05* (.02)	-.05* (.02)	-.05* (.02)
Constant	.68*** (.04)	.58*** (.04)	.72*** (.05)	.71*** (.05)	.70*** (.04)	.71*** (.05)
R ²	.20	.09	.20	.21	.20	.20

*** $p < .001$; ** $p < .01$; * $p < .05$ (two-tailed).

Note: OLS regressions predicting anti-terrorism policy attitudes. N=646 for all regressions.

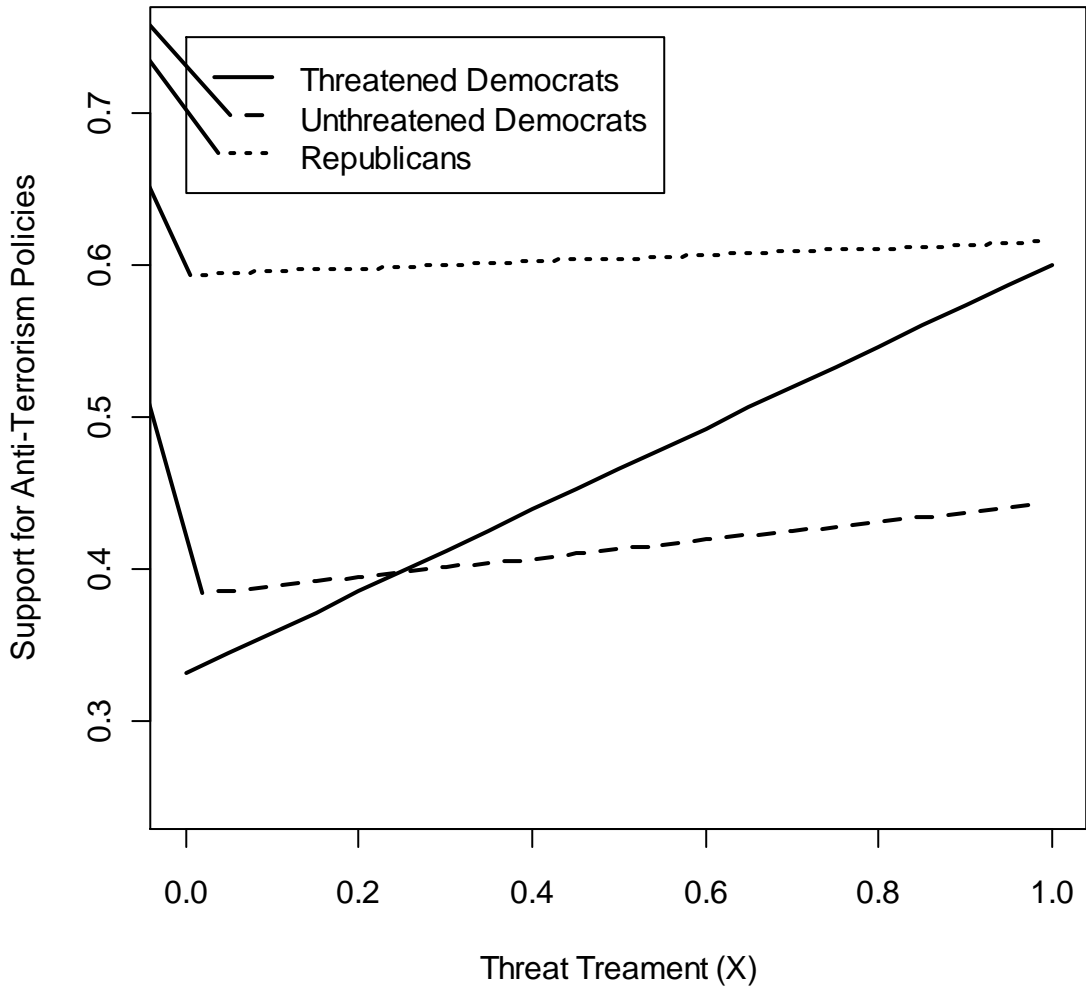
Figure 1: Terrorist Threat Perceptions and Bush Approval Since September 11th





Note: 95% confidence interval shaded in gray. Dotted line at 0 presented for reference.

Figure 3: Threatened Democrats Are Most Sensitive to Threat Information



Appendix A: The Effect of Threat on Political Attitudes by Individual Policies

	<u>Wiretapping</u>	<u>Library Records</u>	<u>Liquids on Planes</u>	<u>Attack on Iran</u>
Threat Treatment (X)	.28 (.32)	.23 (.31)	.37 (.34)	.05 (.29)
Threatened Democrats	-.20 (.45)	-.99* (.43)	-.51 (.49)	-1.61** (.48)
Threat Treatment (X) × Threatened Democrats	.10 (.64)	1.85** (.66)	.52 (.70)	2.44** (.73)
Age	.85* (.39)	-1.10** (.41)	.58 (.39)	-.91* (.41)
Education	-.59* (.27)	-1.05*** (.26)	-.70* (.28)	-1.45*** (.24)
White	.81*** (.20)	.42* (.20)	.34+ (.20)	.55** (.21)
Male	-.01 (.17)	-.48** (.17)	-.43* (.18)	-.16 (.17)
N	648	648	648	646
Pseudo R ²	.02	.02	.02	.03

*** $p < .001$; ** $p < .01$; * $p < .05$ (two-tailed)

Note: Ordered logistic regressions predicting support for anti-terrorism policies. Cutpoints not reported; available from the authors upon request.

Appendix B:
Randomization Check of X

HH Internet Access	-.01 (.03)
Strong Republican	.01 (.05)
Weak Republican	-.01 (.05)
Leans Republican	.01 (.04)
Independent	.05 (.07)
Leans Democrat	.01 (.04)
Weak Democrat	.01 (.04)
Age	.04 (.07)
High School	-.02 (.04)
Some College	-.03 (.04)
College	.01 (.05)
White	.04 (.03)
Male	.01 (.02)
Response Order	.01 (.02)
HH Size	.01 (.01)
HH Income	.00 (.00)
Married	-.02 (.03)
Metropolitan Area	-.03 (.03)
Homeowner	.03 (.03)
Employed	.00 (.03)
Head of HH	-.02 (.03)
No Children	.00 (.04)
Midwest	-.03 (.04)
South	.00 (.04)
West	-.03 (.04)
Constant	.54 (.10)
N	677
R ²	.02
<i>F</i> _{25, 651}	.51

**p*<.10 (two-tailed)