

How the COVID-19 Pandemic Polarizes American Public Opinion

Justin Brandon Berrios, Ayisha Khalid, Robert Patterson IV, Jessica Perez, Jack Rice, & Samuel Wright



Introduction

Public opinion around the COVID-19 pandemic reflects partisan polarization and individual dispositions such as ideology and worldviews (e.g., Panzeri et al., 2023). This Kilmer Lab project expands on previous research by examining how the pandemic has influenced political attitudes.

Drawing on terror management theory (Greenberg et al., 1997), we test the possibility that prompting people to think about the implications of becoming ill with COVID-19 will make them more likely to adopt attitudes that reflect their worldviews. Terror management theory suggests this will occur because individuals manage the fear of death by clinging to worldviews that provide a sense of order and transcendence. Moreover, individuals defend their worldviews by expressing more prejudice towards those viewed as cultural outsiders.

Hypotheses

Pandemic Reminder Hypothesis

Exposure to a reminder of the COVID-19 pandemic will result in more positive views of immigrants among those low in the social dominance orientation (SDO) and more negative views among those high in SDO compared to a control group.

Mortality Saliency (MS) Hypothesis

Exposure to reminder of one's own mortality will result in more positive views of immigrants among those low in the social dominance orientation (SDO) and more negative views among those high in SDO compared to a control group.

Methods

Data

The data for this Kilmer Lab project are from an online national survey (N=1518) of American adults. The quota sample reflected the adult population in terms of gender, age, education, state residency, and race/ethnicity. Data collection occurred between June 14th and 29th, 2022. A subsample of 758 individuals were randomly assigned to participate in the experiment.

Measures

Short version of the social dominance orientation (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999) scale (M=9.9, SD=2.7). SDO reflects an individual's support for group-based hierarchies. Attitudes towards immigrants were measured using a three item additive index (M=7.76, SD=3.3).

Experimental Design

Participants were randomly assigned to one of three groups. The short writing prompts were:

Control group (N=250)

Please briefly describe the emotions that the thought of dental pain arouses in you; Describe, as specifically as you can, what you think will happen as you experience dental pain.

MS treatment (N=249)

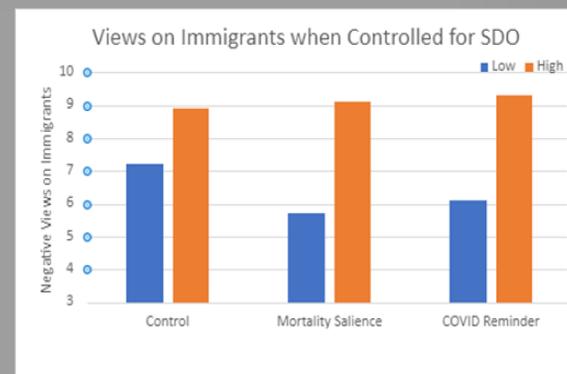
Please briefly describe the emotions that the thought of your own death arouses in you; Describe, as specifically as you can, what you think will happen to you as you physically die and once you are physically dead.

COVID reminder treatment (N=260)

Please briefly describe the emotions that the thought of becoming sick with the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) arouses in you; Describe, as specifically as you can, what you think will happen to you as you become ill with COVID-19.

Results

The two study hypotheses were tested by examining the interaction between each treatment (compared to the control group) and SDO. Mixed support was found for both hypotheses.



In both experimental groups, those low in SDO expressed more positive attitudes about immigrants than in the control group.

	Full Sample		Sample Low SDO (Bottom third)		Sample High SDO (Top third)	
	B	Statistical Significance	B	Statistical Significance	B	Statistical Significance
COVID Reminder	-.482	.104	-1.529	.002	.221	.679
Mortal Saliency	-.629	.032	-1.137	.023	.371	.486
Control Group (REF)	-		-		-	
R	.081		.210		.048	
N=	758		233		221	

A set of regression analyses confirmed that the change in attitudes towards immigrants was limited to the low SDO group. Those scoring in the lowest third of SDO had less negative (or more positive) views of immigrants in the COVID reminder group vs. the control group ($b=-1.53$, $p<.01$) and in the MS group vs the control group ($b=-1.14$, $p<.05$). Among those with the highest third of SDO, a negligible change in attitude was found.

Conclusion

We conclude the COVID-19 pandemic, like other existential threats, can increase worldview polarization even in an already politically polarized society.

- Major attitude change was encountered in the group characterized by low social dominance orientation, with their views towards immigrants becoming more positive.
- Those high in social dominance did not change their attitudes toward immigrants, possibly because they already held very negative views of immigrants before participating in this study.
- The MS and COVID reminder treatments produced the same effects, suggesting that pandemics shape public opinion in the same way as other mortality threats.
- Additional tests for attitude polarization based on authoritarianism and partisanship showed no significant differences.

In sum, polarization can result from one side moving further apart politically from the other.

References:

Greenberg, J., Solomon, S., & Pyszczynski, T. (1997). Terror management theory of self-esteem and cultural worldviews: Empirical assessments and conceptual refinements. In M. P. Zanna (Ed.), *Advances in experimental social psychology*, Vol. 29, pp. 61–139. Academic Press. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0065-2601\(08\)60016-7](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0065-2601(08)60016-7)

Panzeri, A., Mignemi, G., Bruno, G., Granzio, U., Scalavici, C., Bertamini, M., Bennett, K. M., Spoto, A., & Vidotto, G. (2023). The role of the COVID-19 impersonal threat strengthening the associations of right-wing attitudes, nationalism and anti-immigrant sentiments current psychology. *Current Psychology*. <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s12144-023-04305-w>

Sidanius, J., & Pratto, F. (1999). *Social Dominance: An intergroup theory of social hierarchy and oppression*. Cambridge.