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# Authoritarianism, perceptions of security threats, and the COVID-19 pandemic: A new perspective

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## Abstract



This article offers a new perspective on when and why individual-level authoritarian perceptions of security threats change. We reexamine claims that authoritarian members of the public responded to the COVID-19 pandemic in a counterintuitive fashion. The response was counterintuitive in that, rather than a desire for a stronger government with the ability to impose measures to address the pandemic and its consequences, authoritarian individuals rejected a stronger government response and embraced individual autonomy. The article draws on perceptions of security threats—issues that directly or indirectly harm personal or collective safety and welfare—from surveys in two different contexts in England: 2012, when perceptions of the threat from infectious disease was low relative to most other security threats, and 2020, when perceptions of the personal and collective threat of COVID-19 superseded all other security threats. We argue that the authoritarian response was not counterintuitive once we account for the type of threat it represented.

**Keywords:** authoritarianism; health pandemic; security threats; COVID-19

Perceptions of threats to security are a central influence on political attitudes and behavior. They affect social and political tolerance (Chanley, 1994; Peffley et al., 2015), intergroup bias (Obadi et al., 2018), conservatism (Thorisdottir & Jost, 2011), closed-mindedness (Kruglanski, 2004), prejudice (Das et al., 2009; Echebarra-Echabe & Fernandez-Guede, 2006), support for right-wing parties (Devos et al., 2002), support for policies involving conflict or aggression (Hetherington & Weiler, 2009; Hirsch-Hoefler et al., 2016), support for democracy (Fernandez & Kuenzi, 2010; Norris & Inglehart, 2019), trust in government (Viklund, 2003), participation in politics and elections (Miller & Krosnick, 2004; Montalvo, 2011), satisfaction with democracy (Fernandez & Kuenzi, 2010), and perceptions of the desirable attributes of leaders (Merolla et al., 2007), as well as attitudes toward civil liberties (Lahav & Courtemanche, 2012), immigration (Davis & Silver, 2004; Hopkins, 2010; Lahav & Courtemanche, 2012; Stevens & Vaughan-Williams, 2016), and the environment (Arikan & Gunay, 2021). In an era when “citizen stakeholders” are part of “a new mode of governance reliant on the conscription of ordinary individuals into the state’s traditional apparatuses and projects” (Jarvis & Lister, 2010, p. 183), what citizens perceive as security threats and why is more important now than ever.

While we know a lot about perceptions of particular security threats at particular moments in time, we know surprisingly little about perceptions of a range of security threats over time.<sup>1</sup> This is especially

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<sup>1</sup>What do we mean by “security threat”? In the international relations literature, *securitization* describes a process in which issues become security threats, as opposed to having intrinsic and objective security-related properties, as a result of a “speech act” by a “securitizing actor” (Balzacq, 2010). These are usually articulated as national security threats to the state by elites. But

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surprising regarding threats from infectious diseases, given that “emerging infectious diseases have been increasing in frequency over the past five decades” (Daszak *et al.*, 2021, p. 204), most dramatically with COVID-19. Previous research attributes perceptions of particular threats at particular moments in time to a combination of contextual and individual-level influences. It is thus often focused on the consequences of dramatic contextual change—“shocks” such as a terrorist attack or health pandemic, or longer-term changes such as increases in immigration (Hirsch-Hoefler *et al.*, 2016; Hopkins, 2010; Sniderman *et al.*, 2004)—and individual-level influences including demographics such as sex, education, age, and, a major focus of contemporary research and of this article, authoritarian values (Hetherington & Weiler, 2009, 2018; Norris & Inglehart, 2019; Stenner & Haidt, 2018; Stevens & Banducci, 2022; Tillman, 2021).

Indeed, individual-level authoritarian predispositions toward “the prudent and just balance between group authority and individual autonomy” that are marked on a scale “at one end by preference for uniformity and insistence upon group authority, and at the other end by preference for difference and insistence upon individual autonomy” (Stenner, 2005, pp.17, 15)—as shorthand, we refer to individuals who prefer uniformity as “authoritarians” and individuals who prefer individual autonomy as “libertarians”—are perhaps the preeminent variable in explaining perceptions of security threats and their impact on illiberal and antidemocratic policy preferences among the public (Hetherington & Weiler, 2009; Norris & Inglehart, 2019; Stenner & Haidt, 2018; Stevens & Banducci, 2022; Tillman, 2021). For example, Norris and Inglehart (2019) say that “authoritarian values prioritize ... the importance of *security* against risks of instability and disorder (foreigners stealing our jobs, immigrants attacking our women, terrorists threatening our safety)” (p. 6), whereas libertarians, who do not prioritize these values, regard the risks as less serious and favor individual autonomy over security. Thus, authoritarian individuals are most likely to perceive security threats and to favor an antidemocratic politics to address them.

The literature has traditionally associated increased security threats with more authoritarian responses—illiberalism—among individuals with authoritarian predispositions (Altemeyer, 1996; Feldman & Stenner, 1997; Stenner, 2005). But revisionist claims have argued that it is libertarians who adopt more authoritarian responses in contexts of increased security threats (Hetherington & Weiler, 2009); in these accounts, authoritarians are on a permanent state of alert, meaning that contexts of increased security threat have little impact on their preferences for government actions and measures.

While recent studies have argued that both claims have validity (Arikan, 2023; Stevens & Banducci, 2022), the COVID-19 pandemic added an additional wrinkle to the debate. This shock event, seemingly with implications for security that are likely to elicit a response among authoritarians, did not increase their support for more authoritarian measures to address the threat (e.g., Heller *et al.*, 2022; Hibbing, 2022; Vowles, 2022). Although at first glance, this may seem to confirm the revisionist theory—indeed, it was libertarians who were more supportive of such measures—neither did the response to COVID-19 appear to reflect the permanent state of alert among authoritarians claimed by Hetherington and Weiler (2009); rather, authoritarians appeared to *diminish* the threat of COVID-19.

The COVID-19 pandemic therefore invites us to reconsider the different theoretical perspectives on authoritarianism and contextual changes in security threats. This article undertakes this exercise by analyzing changes in perceptions of security threats and their relationship with authoritarian predispositions. Using surveys of perceptions of security threats on the same 10 issues (e.g., terrorism, climate change) in England eight years apart, in 2012 and 2020, we examine changes in perceptions of

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international relations scholars are also increasingly interested in “vernacular” definitions of everyday security threats by nonelites that go beyond threats to the state (e.g., Vaughan-Williams & Stevens, 2016). Indeed, ordinary people tend to define “security” more broadly in terms of “feeling physically safe where you are” and as the absence of threats, meaning that for ordinary people, crimes such as burglary are a security threat, although they are unlikely to be securitized. We draw on this broader definition: a security threat is realistic rather than symbolic, and involves harm (or its potential) to a person or group’s welfare.

threats as a function of changes in context—which we define here in terms of changes in national newspaper attention to them.

Overall, we find that authoritarians exhibit a disproportionate increase in perceptions of threat only for threats pertaining to issues related to out-groups. We do not find an increase in perceptions of the threat of infectious disease among authoritarians, as represented by the health pandemics of avian flu (2012) and COVID-19 (2020); indeed, there is more evidence of a *decrease* in perceptions of this and other threats that we suggest share similar attributes. We argue that lower perceptions of threats among authoritarians on these issues occur because authoritarians do not regard them as especially problematic (e.g., environmental issues).

Unlike an issue such as immigration, these issues are not regarded as a threat to social norms. We conclude by discussing our findings about the kinds of individuals who are likely to respond to more threatening contexts with perceptions of increased threat and their implications for research on security threats, infectious diseases, and authoritarianism.

### Previous research

Perceptions of security threats are a function of the *probability* of a threatening event occurring combined with the *severity* of its consequences (HM Government, 2010, p. 37; Sjoberg, 1999). Thus, a security threat with a high probability of occurrence may still be regarded as less serious than a security threat with a low probability of occurrence if the consequences of the former are regarded as far less serious than the consequences of the latter. Perceptions of probabilities and consequences, in turn, are driven by contextual changes, including changes in an issue's salience and framing (Haider-Markel & Vieux, 2008), and individual-level factors such as education, media habits, and authoritarian predisposition. Examples of contextual change, such as terrorist acts like 9/11, have the capacity to shift public opinion as a result of the shock of death and destruction and the shifts in media attention that follow (Berrebi & Klor, 2008; Croft & Moore, 2010; Davis & Silver, 2004).<sup>2</sup> These influences, in turn, are moderated by the individual-level attributes through which information is filtered, interpreted, and experienced, with authoritarianism being the key moderator according to contemporary research (e.g., Hetherington & Weiler, 2009, 2018; Huddy et al., 2005; Norris & Inglehart, 2019; Stevens & Vaughan-Williams, 2016).

While infectious disease may also be regarded as a security threat (Stevens & Vaughan-Williams, 2016)—indeed, there is “an entire scientific literature on how infectious diseases promote authoritarianism” (Kealey, 2021)—the focus of much of that literature is on its relationships with authoritarian attitudes and practices at the aggregate rather than at the individual level, with countries that have a high incidence of infectious disease being more authoritarian. Parasite- or pathogen-stress theory (Thornhill & Fincher, 2014) finds a link between authoritarian governance and infectious disease over space and time (Pericas, 2020) that may be due both to evolutionary psychology and to the need for conformity in cultures to limit its spread (Tybur et al., 2016), and mediated by the behavioral immune system (Helzer & Pizarro, 2011; Murray & Schaller, 2012; Murray et al., 2013). Zmigrod et al. (2021) confirm a relationship between authoritarian attitudes and infectious disease in the 47 countries they examine, but they make an additional connection to voting behavior, with data from the United States showing a path from prevalence of infectious disease through authoritarian attitudes to voting for Donald Trump. Mixing individual-level survey data with county-level data on mortality rates,

<sup>2</sup>“Shocks” may not inevitably raise threat levels, however. According to Marshall et al. (2007), for that to happen, there needs to be a sense that what led to the shock is ongoing rather than a one-off—that is, the probability of recurrence is significantly different from zero. Elites may also frame issues as serious or emerging threats, regardless of any objective change, to promote more stringent security policies, expand government power into new spheres, or win votes, rather than in response to events, as when Donald Trump focused attention on the caravan of immigrants approaching the U.S. border in the days before the 2018 midterm elections, only to drop the subject soon after (Buzan et al., 1998; Fuchs, 2013; Huijboom & Bodea, 2015; Schneider, 2003, 2008; Strauß, 2017).

Hinckley (2021) also finds a relationship between existential threat and positive views of Donald Trump. However, other studies question the causal explanations in pathogen-stress theory (Bromham *et al.*, 2018; Pollet, 2014) or suggest that the relationships are conditional on other societal-level factors such as economic wealth (Kusano & Kemmelmeier, 2018).

More importantly for this article, most of the research on authoritarianism and infectious disease leaves questions about the micro-level processes open. We know little about how changes in context, such as increased threat of infectious disease over time, are related to individual-level perceptions of threat or their interaction with individual-level authoritarianism. Thus, they, too, cannot solve the puzzle of why the COVID-19 pandemic did not increase authoritarian support for more authoritarian measures.

How might contextual changes in security threats such as terrorism or infectious diseases combine with authoritarianism?<sup>3</sup> Stenner's (2005) answer is that authoritarians are highly sensitive to changes in context that have implications for threats to social norms or societal division: she describes authoritarians as "relentlessly sociotropic boundary maintainers" (p. 32). Indeed, authoritarianism has been identified as contributing to emergent cleavages in British public opinion, the focus of this article, because of perceptions of threats to social norms from immigration, which are then reflected in right-wing vote preferences in elections (Chrisp & Pearce, 2019; Fox & Pearce, 2018; Golec de Zavala *et al.*, 2017; Hetherington & Weiler, 2018; Kaufman, 2016; Norris & Inglehart, 2019; Peitz *et al.*, 2018). Tillman (2021) argues that as a result of immigration, the predisposition toward authoritarianism increasingly divides other publics in Western Europe, and Hetherington and Weiler (2009, 2018) that it divides Republicans from Democrats in the United States.

However, little of this research has examined (1) the claim that authoritarians are especially sensitive to changes in context that have implications for social norms; (2) the corollary that perceptions of other threats over time—those without implications for social norms—are more stable for authoritarians; or (3) the kinds of contextual change, beyond shocks such as terrorist attacks, that may affect authoritarians. This reflects two problems. First, there is a tendency toward a narrow focus on security issues related to conflict, terrorism, and prejudice. This tells us neither about other threats to welfare, such as those from infectious diseases, nor about the "everyday threats," such as crime that individuals experience, and whether there are differences in responses to these types of threats as opposed to the threats to social norms to which Stenner (2005) refers. Second, we possess knowledge of perceptions of various different security threats in a series of changing contexts, such as after a terrorist attack, and their relationship with authoritarian predispositions (e.g., Stevens & Banducci, 2022), but we know less about the same security threats in different contexts, such as the threat of terrorism when there is little discernible threat, and *their* relationship with authoritarian predispositions. We also know about the relationship between authoritarian attitudes and practices and the threat from infectious diseases, but neither how the threat from infectious diseases is actually perceived nor its relationship with authoritarian predispositions.

### Theory and hypotheses

If perceptions of threat are a function of perceptions of the probability of an event occurring and the likely severity of its consequences, perceptions of threat will increase given (a) perceptions of an increase in the likelihood that an event will occur (e.g., another terrorist attack after 9/11) or (b) perceptions of an increase in the severity of a threat's consequences (e.g., environmental degradation or fallout from an economic depression). Perceptions of the probability and severity of a threat will be affected not only by the real world but also by signals such as media attention to an issue (regardless of whether those signals

<sup>3</sup>We share the perspective of Feldman (2013) and Stenner (2005) that authoritarianism is a predisposition—"any pre-existing and relatively stable tendency to respond in a particular way to certain events" (Stenner, 2005, p. 14)—and thus relatively stable; indeed, the British Election Study (BES), which has asked Feldman's authoritarianism questions in four waves, shows high correlations between waves and a barely changing mean.

reflect real-world change): as Ridout et al. (2008) put it, “individuals adjust their perception of reality to fit the image of the world around them” (p. 576), rather than vice versa. Media agenda-setting research tells us that the amount of media attention to an issue is taken as a signal of its importance. With regard to security threats, such changes in attention alone may be taken to signal changes in the probability and/or consequences of threats, but particularly if the framing is negative: both point to a context of increased threat.

The question then becomes how authoritarian predispositions interact with such changes in context. Previous research offers four answers.

1. *Authoritarians are impervious to contextual change.* Authoritarians are in a permanently elevated state of threat, which, in turn, implies that they are relatively unresponsive to changes in security threats. It is libertarians who are more likely to respond to increased attention to an issue with perceptions of elevated threat (Hetherington & Weiler, 2009) because perceptions of high levels of threat are built into authoritarians’ worldviews.

2. *Authoritarians are responsive to any contextual change.* Altemeyer (1996) argues that “authoritarians stand about ten steps closer to the panic button than the rest of the population” (p. 100) rather than being in a permanently elevated state of threat. This implies that in contexts of increased threat, authoritarian perceptions of threat should increase regardless of the issue.

3. *Authoritarians are responsive to changes in security threats with implications for “normative threat” but impervious to contextual changes to security threats that do not have implications for normative threat.* Stenner (2005) suggests a more dynamic relationship between perceptions of threats and authoritarianism. She argues that while authoritarians are more likely to see the world as dangerous and “are inclined towards this peculiar fear of a dangerous world under *any* conditions” (Stenner, 2005, p. 69; italics in original), they are particularly attentive to “normative threat,” which can be defined as “threats to unity and consensus, or ‘oneness and sameness” (Stenner & Haidt, 2018, p. 180). Moreover, in stable contexts, Stenner suggests “somewhat wishful thinking” among authoritarians in which perceptions of normative threat are lower than for libertarians. But, at the same time, authoritarians have a “hypersensitivity” to changes with implications for normative threat (Stenner, 2005, pp. 69–70). The combination of “a dangerous world” with respect to perceptions of threat in general and wishful thinking and hypersensitivity to normative threat suggests that authoritarians are in a permanently elevated state of threat on most issues, but not those issues that have implications for normative threat. Therefore, we should expect greater responsiveness to changes in security threats with implications for normative threat among authoritarians; for security issues without implications for normative threat, authoritarians should have consistently elevated perceptions of threat that are impervious to contextual change.

4. *Authoritarians are responsive to changes in security threats with implications for normative threat. They are also responsive to changes in security threats that do not have implications for normative threat but may respond to increased attention to them with decreased perceptions of those threats.* A fourth set of research findings suggests that while Stenner (2005) may be correct about normative threat, the notion that authoritarians simply perceive “a dangerous world,” implying a lack of sensitivity to other threats, also needs refining. Kahan et al. (2007) contend that “individuals selectively *credit and dismiss* asserted dangers in a manner supportive of their cultural identities” (p. 465, emphasis added; see also Hibbing, 2020), implying that authoritarians should discount threats to difference and diversity (i.e., to individual autonomy). In addition, Duckitt and Sibley (2010) argue that authoritarians are relatively unperturbed by security threats linked to inequality or scarcity because they tend not to impinge on authoritarians’ most fundamental concerns about group conformity and social norms (p. 1869). This also suggests that authoritarians may diminish threats that affect subgroups of society, such as hate crimes, rather than the whole of society. Finally, Choma et al. (2013) argue that another salient characteristic of threats such as the environment is that they have diffuse rather than personal risks. It is not clear, however, that the threats that do seem to exercise high authoritarians, such as immigration, are perceived as personal (Stevens & Vaughan-Williams, 2016).

These perspectives imply that while there may be some consensus that an issue like the environment is a growing security threat, to the extent that environmentalism is associated with resource scarcity, authoritarians will be more likely to downplay the threat relative to libertarians. Even an existential threat like the COVID-19 health pandemic, while likely to be identified as a threat by the vast majority of people given its prominence, may be viewed as less of a threat by authoritarians if the emphasis is on its unequal economic effects or on mortality among out-groups that is unlikely to threaten social norms. We discuss this in more detail later. Similarly, signals of change in threat from crimes that affect all groups (e.g., burglary) may be viewed differently by authoritarians than threats from crimes that affect subgroups (e.g., hate crimes and crimes against women).

In sum, this fourth perspective suggests that for some issues beyond normative threat, rather than perceiving a dangerous world or being in a permanently elevated state of threat, authoritarians may respond to changes in context signaling increased threat from an issue by minimizing that threat. Authoritarians will respond to signals with implications for heightened normative threat with increased perceptions of threat but diminish other types of threat, such as those with diffuse risks or implications for inequality or scarcity.

A further important variable that may moderate perceptions of threats for authoritarians is whether they are sociotropic or personal. The corollary of Stenner's (2005) description of authoritarians as relentlessly sociotropic boundary maintainers is her claim that they are relatively unconcerned with personal threats. This is because personal threats have implications for the exercise of individual autonomy rather than the social norms and sociotropic boundary maintenance that authoritarians care most about (see also Feldman, 2013). However, Asbrock and Fritsche (2013) argue that perceptions of the personal more than the national threat of terrorism provoke authoritarian expression and suggest that "authoritarian responses may operate as a group-level coping strategy for a threat to the personal self" (p. 35). But their argument is based on two experiments rather than over-time analysis. More promisingly, Stevens and Banducci (2022) use survey data before and after a terrorist attack to claim that increases in perceptions of personal threat from terrorism increase perceptions of normative threat for authoritarians. But their claims are limited to a single issue over a short space of time.

In sum, we have gleaned three different categories of threat from the literature on threat and authoritarianism:

1. Threats to social norms and the in-group, such as threats from immigration or perceptions of weak border control
2. Threats with implications for inequality and resources, such as threats from the economy or infectious diseases such as COVID-19
3. Threats from crime, with an additional distinction between those that affect everyone (e.g., burglary) and those that affect subgroups (e.g., hate crimes and crimes against women), as well as between threats that are national versus personal.

Threats from infectious diseases *could* have implications for social norms. Indeed, with COVID-19, there was some initial focus on potential threats to social norms such as food hoarding or from a severe economic depression. There was also evidence of growing racial antipathy in countries like the United Kingdom and the United States, manifesting in increased hate crimes (Borkowska & Laurence, 2021; Strassle et al., 2022), perhaps fed by policies that closed borders to out-groups. However, over time, the emphasis shifted to other subjects, including the drag on resources affecting the health service and the economy and the unequal death rates by race (i.e., to resources and inequality). In addition, Ollerenshaw (2022) and Geana et al. (2021) argue that right-wing opinion leaders in the United States, such as Donald Trump, diminished the threat from COVID-19—the overall message was "don't worry about this" (Geana et al., 2021, p. 6)—and that the perceptions of their supporters, who tend to be more authoritarian, were influenced by this messaging (Geana et al., 2021; Ollerenshaw, 2022; see also Hibbing, 2022). Similarly, in the United Kingdom, the right-wing prime minister, Boris Johnson, initially diminished the threat of COVID-19. While he then introduced measures such as lockdowns,

these were largely attributed to “following the science” (Andreouli & Brice, 2022), and the government subsequently transitioned to initiatives such as “eat out to help out” (a government-subsidized scheme in which people could get up to a 50% reduction on food and drinks at restaurants, cafés, and pubs) that appear to have contributed to a second wave of infections and deaths toward the end of 2020 (Morales, 2020; Parker & Payne, 2021; Lintern, 2021). Finally, Pretus and Villarroya (2022) point out that the absence of a clearly defined “enemy” with respect to COVID-19 and other such catastrophes and natural disasters may reduce the influence of group threat.

Thus, perceptions of threats from COVID-19 to social norms or from out-groups were likely lessened in the United Kingdom (as in the United States) by right-wing elites’ efforts to minimize the overall threat of the disease. Indeed, our analysis here confirms that COVID-19 was viewed by the public as a threat more like the environment or problems of resource scarcity than terrorism or immigration.

Following from our categorization of threats to social norms, threats with implications for inequality and resources, and threats from crime, we test the following hypotheses:

**H1:** In contexts indicative of increased security threats from out-groups, increases in perceptions of these issues as threats are greater for authoritarians than for libertarians.

**H2:** In contexts indicative of increased security threats pertaining to (a) inequality or resources or (b) crimes that affect subgroups rather than being universal, increases in perceptions of these issues as threats are smaller (or negative) for authoritarians than for libertarians.

*H1* implies a positive interaction between authoritarianism and signals of increased threat for issues pertaining to out-groups, whereas *H2* implies a negative interaction between authoritarianism and signals of increased threat pertaining to inequality, resource scarcity, or crimes against subgroups in society. *H1* implies an interaction between authoritarianism and out-group threat that is consistent with the third and fourth possibilities suggested by the literature and inconsistent with the first (which implies a negative interaction) and second (which implies main effects of authoritarianism and context but no interaction). *H2* implies an interaction between authoritarianism and threats pertaining to inequality, resources, and crimes against subgroups in society that is only consistent with the fourth.

Although *H1* and *H2* do not distinguish between perceptions of national and personal security threats, there is additional disagreement about whether authoritarians are concerned mainly by national (sociotropic) security threats (Feldman, 2013) or whether perceptions of personal security threats are paramount (Asbrock & Fritsche, 2013). Therefore, we test two additional, mutually exclusive hypotheses:

**H3a:** Contexts of increased national security threats have greater effects on authoritarians than contexts of increased personal security threats.

**H3b:** Contexts of increased personal security threats have greater effects on authoritarians than contexts of increased national security threats.

What if there is *less* media attention to an issue over time—that is, a signal of decreasing threat? All else being equal, in this context, we would expect perceptions of threat to decrease for both authoritarians and libertarians. But for issues with implications for normative threat, Stenner (2005) would lead us to expect such “normative reassurance” to lower threat levels for authoritarians *more* than libertarians.

We summarize the combinations of expectations around different kinds of security threats and changes in their prominence in Table 1: 0 represents no moderating influence of authoritarian predispositions, + a positive moderating effect, and – a negative moderating effect. We also indicate whether there is an expected main effect of authoritarian predispositions.

## Research design

The ideal test of our hypotheses would examine within-person changes in perceptions of security threats and their context with longitudinal panel data. However, longitudinal panels such as Understanding



**Table 1.** Expectations of interactive relationships between authoritarian predispositions and attention to threats

Threat type	Increased media attention	No change/decreased media attention
a. From out-groups (e.g., immigration)	+	0 (main effect of authoritarian predisposition)/–
b. Inequality/resources (e.g., environment)	–	0
c. Crime that affects everybody (e.g., burglary)	0	0 (main effect of authoritarian predisposition)
Crime that affects subgroups (e.g., hate crimes, crimes against women)	–	0

Society do not ask about security threats. The British Election Study (BES) regularly asks “most important issue” questions, but these do not necessarily elicit answers related to threat, and the BES does not regularly ask about perceptions of security threats.<sup>4</sup> To test our hypotheses without panel data, we thus draw inferences from two cross-sectional surveys that are unique in asking samples of (English)<sup>5</sup> respondents identical questions about perceptions of 10 security threats at two points in time: the June 2012 Perceptions of Security in an Age of Austerity online survey conducted by ICM for Stevens and Vaughan-Williams (2016)<sup>6</sup> and an online survey conducted for the authors by Opinion Research Business (ORB) in July 2020.

The Perceptions of Security in an Age of Austerity survey asked whether 22 issues were a serious security threat to “(1) the world, (2) UK, (3) community in which you live, (4) you and your family at the moment.” The issues ranged from terrorism and the threat of Russia and China to burglary and online fraud. We replicated these questions in an online survey administered by ORB in July 2020, with four differences. First, we did not ask about community-level threats because Stevens and Vaughan-Williams (2016) found minimal differences with perceptions of personal threats. Second, we randomly split the sample and asked different subsamples of respondents about their perceptions of threats to the United Kingdom or to “you and your family” to guard against possible effects of respondent fatigue—in the ICM survey, each respondent was asked four times about 22 issues. Third, because of additional concerns about respondent fatigue, we asked about a subset of the original 22 issues, dropping those such as “the far right” and “Islamophobia” that had been identified as threats by few respondents in 2012. And fourth, our sample in 2020 was from England rather than Great Britain. The analysis that

<sup>4</sup>Wave 4 of the 2014–2023 BES panel included a question about the government’s success in dealing with threats, but this was not asked in other waves of the survey. The annual Pew Global Attitudes Survey includes the United Kingdom, but there are four problems. First, the issues it asks about vary somewhat over time—for example, in 2012, they were limited to various types of economic threats, and in 2014, they were not asked at all. Second, Pew does not ask questions about individual-level characteristics in their surveys beyond demographics—that is, nothing that captures authoritarianism or media habits. Third, Pew does not ask about personal threats. Fourth, Pew asks whether up to eight “international concerns” are a “major threat,” “minor threat,” or “not a threat,” putting the onus on the respondent to say that an issue is “not a threat” to the country, whereas the question wording in the surveys we use ask respondents which of a list of issues *is* a threat at the moment. Pew indicates high perceptions of threat on almost all the issues it asks about: if we take major or minor threat responses as indicators of threat, an average of more than six of the eight issues were identified as major or minor threats by respondents in each of the 2013, 2016, 2017, and 2018 (data for 2019 and 2020 are not yet available) surveys that ask about the same issues as the surveys we use. Factor analysis also shows that these perceptions always load onto a single factor, suggesting that the question wording does not effectively capture variation in perceptions of threat. Nevertheless, we might expect the Pew surveys to show similar patterns of *change* over time—and they do. They show increases in perceptions of threats from the environment and little change or a slight decrease in perceptions of the threat from ISIS/terrorism, for example. Perceptions of the overall number of threats also show an increase, as in our surveys.

<sup>5</sup>We said earlier that the focus of this article is Britain: 87% of the British population resides in England.

<sup>6</sup>The data can be found in the UK Data Service repository at <http://doi.org/10.5255/UKDA-SN-851004>.

follows excludes from the 2012 data respondents who resided in Scotland or Wales. In addition, given that our hypotheses include claims about perceptions of minority out-groups, we exclude non-White respondents,<sup>7</sup> providing a sample size of 1,414 for the 2012 survey and 2,926 in total for the 2020 survey, but with the latter sample split between respondents asked about national *or* personal threats rather than both.

The surveys captured authoritarian predispositions using Feldman's (1997) four-question child-rearing values measure, in which respondents are given a choice of attributes and asked which is preferable in children—*independence/respect for elders, obedience/self-reliance, curiosity/good manners, and considerate/well behaved*. The premise of the scale is that child-rearing values reflect fundamental orientations toward conformity or autonomy—they are not affected, for example, by actual child-rearing practices (Hetherington & Weiler 2009, p. 50; Stenner, 2005, p. 24). The scale has been used widely to capture authoritarian predispositions, both in other research (e.g., Arikan, 2023; Hetherington & Weiler, 2009; Stenner, 2005; Zmigrod, 2021) and in major election studies in the United States, Britain, France, New Zealand, and Switzerland. Respondents with the highest authoritarian predispositions choose respect for elders, obedience, good manners, and well behaved. Respondents with lower levels of authoritarian predisposition choose one to three of these values, while libertarians choose independence, self-reliance, curiosity, and considerate. Both surveys also include the control variables for mortality salience, television news consumption, sex, age and education employed in Stevens and Vaughan-Williams's (2016) analysis.<sup>8</sup>

For the comparison of the two surveys to be valid, we checked that the samples were similar on the observed demographics—and they were on age, sex, and education (see [Table A1 in the Appendix](#)). We also examined the mean levels of mortality salience and authoritarianism in the two surveys, for completeness rather than because we would expect them to be the same; there are differences of one-quarter to one-third of a standard deviation, with mean levels of authoritarianism slightly higher in 2012 and mean levels of mortality salience slightly lower.

The analysis that follows focuses on 10 issues that appear in both surveys and capture the kinds of security threats outlined in *H1* and *H2*: immigration; terrorism; weak border control; health pandemics, such as avian flu (2012) or COVID-19 (2020); environmental issues, such as global warming or greenhouse gas effects; resource scarcity; economic depression, financial crisis, and unemployment; burglary; crimes against women; and racial or religious hate crimes.

[Table 2](#) presents summary data on the proportions of the samples identifying each issue as a security threat. It shows that at the national level, perceptions of the top five issues of terrorism, the economy, immigration, weak border control, and racial or religious hate crimes as threats are quite stable across the two surveys, while the new issues of health pandemic, environmental issues, and racial and religious hate crimes loom larger in the later survey. At the same time, [Table 2](#) indicates increases in perceptions of almost all issues as personal threats compared to 2012—only burglary shows a small decrease. While the economy and terrorism are among the top-ranked personal threats in both years,

<sup>7</sup>The decision of whether to exclude non-White respondents from analysis depends on the research question. It is common to exclude Blacks or Latinos in trying to understand racial attitudes in the United States and Canada (Harell et al., 2012; Hartman et al., 2014). Similarly with British data, in trying to understand the impact of the ethnicity of the candidate on voting, Fisher et al. (2015) focus only on White respondents in some of their analysis. If the research question is broader, one might include all respondents and control for race. In our case, the threats from immigration and racial hate crimes in particular are different for minorities and likely to have different relationships with authoritarian predispositions and context. We therefore exclude non-White respondents from the analysis. [Tables A2 and A4](#) in the [Appendix](#) show the analysis with non-White respondents included and a control variable for race. The substantive implications of the analysis do not change.

<sup>8</sup>These were coded in the same way and recalculated to a 0–1 scale, with the exception of news consumption. In the 2012 survey, news consumption was operationalized by Stevens and Vaughan-Williams (2016) as the number of hours spent watching television news as a proportion of the total hours spent watching television. In the 2020 survey, respondents were asked how often they watched BBC news, other national television news stations, and local television news. We employ *z*-scores from each of the two measures to make them comparable. The results do not change if we exclude this variable.

**Table 2.** Perceptions of threats in 2012 and 2020

	National			Personal		
	2012	2020	Change in %	2012	2020	Change in %
Terrorism	51	55	+4	11	35	+24
Economic depression, financial crisis, unemployment	46	61	+15	39	47	+8
Immigration	35	31	-4	12	24	+12
Weak border control	32	33	+1	6	22	+16
Racial or religious hate crimes	24	44	+20	5	17	+12
Resource scarcity	16	13	-3	10	11	+1
Environmental issues	12	45	+33	7	38	+31
Health pandemic	10	71	+61	9	68	+59
Burglary	8	15	+7	26	24	-2
Crimes against women	6	25	+19	6	14	+8
<i>n</i>	1,414	1,451		1,414	1,475	

Note: Figures for 2012 and 2020 are percentages.

some of the increases in perceptions of threats from other issues are large, particularly a health pandemic and environmental issues. Reasons for the increase in the personal threat from terrorism could be related to the number of relatively small-scale attacks that were not a feature of Islamic terrorism in the United Kingdom up to 2012, such as those at Westminster, the Manchester Arena, and London's Borough Market in 2017, as opposed to the larger-scale terrorism and loss of life of 9/11 and 7/7.<sup>9</sup> As we show later, media attention to the personal threat of terrorism was much greater in 2020 than in 2012.

It is worth noting some of the differences between the threat presented by avian flu in 2012 and COVID-19 in 2020 that are reported in Table 2, as well as that while the survey question gave avian flu as an example of a health pandemic in 2012, there had been an outbreak of swine flu in 2009. According to the Office for National Statistics (2022), COVID-19 was the leading cause of death in England and Wales in 2020, with roughly 75,000 deaths within 28 days of a COVID-19 test by the end of the year, of which about 40,000 had occurred by the time the ORB survey was in the field. In October 2020, the reproduction rate (R0) of the coronavirus, or the average number of additional people infected from a single infection case, was estimated to be 1.40 to 6.49, compared to 1.30 to 1.71 for other flu viruses, with a case fatality rate (CFR) of 1.40% to 3.67% (Bai & Tao, 2021). Infection rates for the swine flu in 2009 were high, with an estimated 11% to 21% of the world's population contracting the virus, but the CFR was much lower at 0.1% to 0.5%. The estimated global number of deaths varies widely, but even the highest of more than 1 million is a fraction of the deaths from COVID-19 (Roser, 2020). In contrast with the high case rate of swine flu, in the 20 years from 2003 to 2023, there were 878 cases of avian flu reported

<sup>9</sup>The increase in the number of issues identified as threats in 2020 at the national and personal levels may be partly a function of the research design differences discussed earlier. COVID-19 may also account for some of the increase because its effects were so universally felt. But there seems to have been an overall increase in perceptions of threats that is not explained by research design or COVID-19. The Pew surveys (from 2013 to 2018) referred to in note 4 show several similar patterns of increases to those we find in our surveys for national threats.

**Table 3.** Exploratory factor analysis of the 10 security threats

	National (sociotropic)		
	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3
Immigration	-.0924	.7641	.0951
Terrorism	.1500	.4633	.2585
Weak border control	.0664	.7767	.0853
Health pandemic	.6514	.0248	.2707
Environmental issues	.6945	-.0570	.2707
Resource scarcity	.3324	.1339	.1807
Economic depression	.4915	.0366	.1527
Burglary	.1460	.3491	.5651
Crimes against women	.4171	.0809	.6708
Racial or religious hate crime	.3905	.1699	.5033
	Personal		
	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3
Immigration	.8005	.0164	.1119
Terrorism	.6795	.2845	.3148
Weak border control	.8508	.1339	.0798
Health pandemic	.3293	.6797	.1513
Environmental issues	.0709	.7350	.1541
Resource scarcity	.1559	.3589	.1807
Economic depression	.0234	.4313	.2047
Burglary	.2259	.0187	.4626
Crimes against women	.2014	.3165	.6142
Racial or religious hate crime	.3609	.1933	.5359

globally, of which 458 were fatal (World Health Organization, 2023)—it had a higher CFR, estimated at 20% to 40%, but person-to-person transmission was limited to nonexistent (FutureLearn, 2020).

Table 3 presents the factor analysis of the 10 issues as national and personal threats. Given that the data are categorical—an issue is identified as a threat or not—the factor analyses are of the polychoric correlation matrices for national and personal threats. Three factors have eigenvalues greater than 1 in each factor analysis. Table 3 highlights the factors (with orthogonal varimax rotation) on which the issues have the highest factor loading. The issues in each factor are the same for national and personal threats; they reflect *threats from out-groups*, such as those from immigration, terrorism, and weak border control; *threats from crime*, such as burglary and hate crimes; and *threats to health and resources*, such as those from health pandemics, the environment, and the economy. Thus, the factor analysis confirms that these 10 issues cover the threat types described in

**Table 4.** Coverage in national newspapers one year before June 2012 and July 2020 surveys

	National			Personal		
	2012	2020	Change (%)	2012	2020	Change (%)
Health pandemic	7,999	20,897	+161	5,531	13,043	+236
Environmental issues	1,134	2,328	+105	944	2,288	+242
Resource scarcity	528	703	+33	763	1,289	+69
Immigration	1,938	2,359	+22	3,270	3,761	+15
Crimes against women	6,845	7,555	+10	7,180	12,816	+78
Weak border control	612	585	−4	585	598	+2
Burglary	412	366	−11	2,970	1,910	−36
Terrorism	5,192	4,552	−12	5,801	6,504	+12
Economic depression/financial crisis/ unemployment	26,450	22,593	−15	10,634	10,628	−1
Racial or religious hate crimes	39,436	30,578	−22	55,221	52,710	−5
Total	90,546	92,516		92,899	105,547	

Note: Figures represent the number of stories resulting from theme and keyword searches in Nexis in the 12 months before the first day of each survey; see the [Appendix](#) for details

our hypotheses and that health pandemics load with issues such as the environment rather than threats from out-groups.<sup>10</sup>

We capture changing national and personal security threat contexts on these 10 issues by comparing newspaper attention to them in the year prior to the survey, using Nexis. We conducted a keyword and thematic search of the 10 issues in national newspaper articles (see the [Appendix](#) for a description of the keywords and themes), then used Nexis’s filters to focus only on “negative news” stories (i.e., stories that are threatening).<sup>11</sup> Nexis also allows separation of “personal news” stories—that is, stories that are more relevant to perceptions of individual-level threat—from all other stories (which we term “national-level” stories as shorthand for national and international stories on these topics). [Table 4](#) shows the analysis of

<sup>10</sup>In additional analysis of perceptions of the threat of COVID-19 in 2020, we examined the relationship between authoritarian predispositions and perceptions of increased personal threat from COVID-19 (personal threat) and of increased divisions in British society as a result of COVID-19 (normative threat) (these were part of an experiment: we focus on the 500 respondents in the control group). Given that high authoritarians are particularly sensitive to threats that “violate traditional social conventions” (30), if COVID-19 was viewed in these terms—and the factor analysis suggests it was not—we would expect high authoritarians to be more likely to agree that it had increased societal divisions. However, the data show high authoritarians no more likely than libertarians to say that British society had become more divided. This relationship does not change with controls for partisanship (which were a more powerful influence on these perceptions). We did find a conditional relationship between authoritarian predispositions, media use, and perceptions of the personal threat of COVID-19 that implied greater consumption of media among high authoritarians was associated with reduced perceptions of threat. This is consistent with Ollerenshaw’s (2022) evidence from the United States, which also focuses on the personal threat of COVID. We also looked at British Election Study Internet Panel (BESIP) data gathered during the pandemic. These data indicate that high authoritarians were consistently more likely to say that the government had handled the pandemic well. They were also less worried about the impact of the pandemic on the economy.

<sup>11</sup>See “Finding Negative News and Information on Nexis Uni,” [https://lexisnexis.custhelp.com/app/answers/answer\\_view/a\\_id/1102519/~/finding-negative-news-and-information-on-nexis- uni#Negative%20News%20Post%20Search%20Filter](https://lexisnexis.custhelp.com/app/answers/answer_view/a_id/1102519/~/finding-negative-news-and-information-on-nexis-uni#Negative%20News%20Post%20Search%20Filter).

the 10 issues for national and personal news stories. A context of increased threat for an issue is signified by a substantial increase in the number of such newspaper stories.<sup>12</sup> By this criterion, 2020 was a context of increased threat from health pandemics, environmental issues, resource scarcity, immigration, and crimes against women and of unchanged or reduced threat from the other five issues.

Large increases or decreases in attention to threats from a national frame also tend to be accompanied by large decreases or increases in attention to threats from a personal frame. They move together in direction and size of change: exceptions are crimes against women, for which coverage with a more personal frame increased more than coverage with a national frame, although both increased, and terrorism, for which coverage with a national frame decreased by 12%, while more personal stories pertaining to terrorism increased by 12%. Overall, among the three categories of threats outlined in Table 1, we have examples of issues that grew or declined in prominence for all three categories, allowing for satisfactory tests of our hypotheses.

### Analysis of perceptions of security threats

To test the hypotheses, we pool the 2012 and 2020 surveys. We estimate two sets of models for perceptions of national and personal security threats: (1) initial examinations of the probability of identifying each of the 10 issues as a threat as a function of authoritarian predispositions, a dummy variable for 2020, and the interaction between the two; (2) the probability of identifying the three security threat types in Table 1—out-groups, inequality/resources, and crime—treating each individual's response on each issue as a separate observation by stacking the data and including dummy variables for two of three threat types, and an interaction with the 2020 dummy variable.

We control for the same influences as Stevens and Vaughan-Williams (2016) with the exception of religion and religiosity: mortality salience, television news consumption, sex, age, and education. We also interact these variables with the dummy variable for survey year to account for any changes in their relationships with threats.<sup>13</sup>

Table 5 shows the estimates for the key independent variables for the hypotheses, indicating whether the sign and significance of the interactions are consistent with *H1* and *H2* given the changes in media attention shown in Table 4. The results are consistent with the hypotheses for 7 of the 10 issues (3 of 5 for which media attention increased, and 4 of 5 for which media attention stayed the same or decreased). All three issues pertaining to out-group threat accord with expectations. Immigration, for which there was increased threat in the context of the 2020 survey according to our analysis, was disproportionately more likely to be seen as a threat by authoritarians than in 2012. In contrast, the issues of terrorism and border control, for which there was little or no change in threat according to the analysis, show only main effects of authoritarian predispositions—that is, authoritarians are more likely to identify them as a threat, but there is no difference between 2012 and 2020.

The estimates for the threats pertaining to inequality and resource scarcity confirm the hypotheses for two of the four issues—the economy and the environment. Both show authoritarians less likely to identify them as a threat than libertarians. For the environment, there is an additional, and expected, negative impact for authoritarians in 2020, when the analysis in Table 4 indicates a context of increased threat compared to 2012. Of the other two issues, perceptions of the threat of a health pandemic increased enormously in 2020: the sign on the interaction with authoritarianism is negative and close to statistical significance, in line with the expectation that authoritarians will be more resistant to conceding that COVID-19 is a national threat.

<sup>12</sup>Of primary interest to us is comparing coverage of the same issue in the two periods under examination in order to gauge whether the threat had increased, decreased or stayed the same since 2012, rather than comparing the numbers of stories across different issues—because we cannot be certain that the keyword and thematic searches represent the universe of stories pertaining to each issue.

<sup>13</sup>Reestimating the original 2012 models without those controls makes no difference to any of the substantive conclusions Stevens and Vaughan-Williams (2016) drew about influences on perceptions of threats.

**Table 5.** Perceptions of threat, authoritarianism and media coverage in 2012 and 2020—individual logit models

	Out-group threat											
	Immigration (increased threat)			Terrorism (no change/decreased threat)			Border control (no change/decreased threat)					
	National	Consistent with H1	Personal	National	Consistent with H1	Personal	National	Consistent with H1	Personal			
Authoritarianism	1.06 (.19)*		.76 (.28)*	.74 (.18)*		.68 (.29)*	.71 (.19)*		.32 (.38)			
Year 2020	-.50 (.36)		.89 (.48)	-.24 (.32)		1.79 (.48)*	-.24 (.36)		1.71 (.60)*			
Authoritarianism * 2020	.69 (.27)*	Yes	.61 (.35)	-.08 (.25)	Yes	.45 (.34)	.39 (.27)	Yes	.51 (.43)			
<i>n</i>	2,796		2,816	2,796		2,816	2,796		2,816			
Pseudo- <i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	.05		.12	.04		.12	.05		.13			
Inequality/Resources												
	Health pandemic (increased threat)			Economy (no change / decreased threat)			Environment (increased threat)			Resource scarcity (increased threat)		
	National	Consistent with H2a	Personal	National	Consistent with H2a	Personal	National	Consistent with H2a	Personal	National	Consistent with H2a	Personal
	National	Consistent with H2a	Personal	National	Consistent with H2a	Personal	National	Consistent with H2a	Personal	National	Consistent with H2a	Personal
Authoritarianism	.18 (.29)		.09 (.31)	-.48 (.18)*		-.35 (.18)	-.64 (.27)*		-.94 (.35)*	-.68 (.23)*		-.25 (.29)
Year 2020	2.51 (.45)*		3.05 (.49)*	.53 (.32)		.95 (.32)*	2.30 (.41)*		2.37 (.53)*	.36 (.44)		.50 (.56)
Authoritarianism * 2020	-.55 (.35)	No	-.59 (.36)	-.43 (.25)	Yes	-.62 (.25)*	-.78 (.32)*	Yes	-.30 (.39)	-.09 (.34)	No	-.12 (.39)
<i>n</i>	2,796		2,816	2,796		2,816	2,796		2,816	2,796		2,816
Pseudo- <i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	.34		.33	.05		.03	.15		.19	.03		.04

(Continued)

**Table 5.** *Continued*

	Crime								
	Burglary (no change/decreased threat)			Hate crime (no change/decreased threat)			Crimes against women (increased threat)		
	National	Consistent with <i>H2b</i>	Personal	National	Consistent with <i>H2b</i>	Personal	National	Consistent with <i>H2b</i>	Personal
Authoritarianism	.94 (.34)*		.55 (.20)*	.51 (.21)*		.49 (.39)	.05 (.38)		-.02 (.39)
Year 2020	.43 (.53)		-.91 (.38)*	1.48 (.35)*		1.26 (.24)*	2.40 (.56)*		.80 (.60)
Authoritarianism * 2020	.07 (.42)	Yes	.39 (.29)	-.85 (.27)*	No	.24 (.45)	-.80 (.43)	Yes	-.30 (.45)
<i>n</i>	2,796		2,816	2,796		2,816	2,796		2,816
Pseudo- <i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	.05		.02	.05		.09	.12		.05

\**p* < .05.

Notes: Estimates are from logit models. All models control for mortality salience, media consumption, sex, education and age, along with their interactions with the survey year.



The three issues pertaining to crime also conform to expectations for burglary and racial and religious hate crimes: for the former, which affects everybody, authoritarians are more likely to identify it as a threat—and with little change in media attention in 2020, that relationship does not shift. At the same time, however, authoritarians are less likely to identify crimes against women as a threat—and the relationship is somewhat stronger in 2020, when the issue had garnered somewhat more media attention. Perceptions of hate crimes show a similar relationship, but this does not conform to expectations because the interaction term shows a stronger relationship with authoritarianism in 2020, even though the issue had receded a little in prominence.

With respect to personal threats, we tested competing hypotheses regarding whether changed national (*H3a*) or personal (*H3b*) threat contexts should have stronger relationships with authoritarianism. Table 5 suggests patterns that are generally similar. There are few interactions with different signs, but they are somewhat weaker for personal threat; there is one statistically significant interaction compared to four for national-level threat, indicating some support for *H3a*.

In the second set of tests, we stack the data, treating perceptions of threat for each of the 10 issues as a separate observation, meaning that our observations increase 10-fold (we cluster the standard errors to account for the nonindependence of observations for the same respondent). We analyze perceptions of threat as a function of authoritarian predispositions, the threat type—out-group, inequality/resources, or crime—and the interactions between threat type, authoritarian predispositions, and year.

Combining the issues into threat types also necessitates that we reconsider the implications of media coverage for increased or decreased threat. Using the net change in the percentage of stories with a national frame in Table 4 within the three different threat types to test *H1* and *H2* indicates little change in out-group threat—a net increase of 6%—and a large increase in threat from issues pertaining to inequality/resources, leading us to expect a negative interaction between authoritarian predispositions and the year dummy. The context of crimes against subgroups is mixed, with reports of crimes against women up in 2020 but of racial and religious hate crimes down by a larger percentage. On this basis, we would expect negative main effects of authoritarianism that are not moderated by year—because these are issues that are of lesser concern to authoritarians, and decreased coverage should not change that. Media coverage of the personal threat of the three threat types in Table 4 shows some variation from the context of national threat. Steep increases in stories with a more personal frame on terrorism and on crimes against women signal increases in out-group threat and crimes against subgroups rather than decreasing or staying the same as at the national level.

The estimates for national and personal threat are shown in the Appendix in Table A3.<sup>14</sup> We focus here on the relationships as represented in Figure 1, which shows simulations of perceptions of national and personal threat for the three threat types in 2012 and 2020, conditional on authoritarian predispositions, based on the model estimates.<sup>15</sup> The relationships are in the expected direction for perceptions of national threat for two of the three threat types. First, authoritarians are more likely to identify out-group threats. This is true in both 2012 and 2020. With the context of out-group threats changing little in terms of media attention with a national frame, there is also no change in the slope of the relationship. Similarly, for inequality/resource scarcity, Figure 1 shows the negative relationship suggested by *H2b* and in previous research by Duckitt and Sibley (2010), in which authoritarians are less likely to identify such issues as threats. While the increased threat posed by COVID-19 in 2020 raised threat levels on these issues for all respondents, there is the expected negative relationship between authoritarian predispositions and the 2020 context—that is, authoritarians' perceptions of these threats do not increase as much as libertarians; indeed, the marginal effect of authoritarianism in 2020 is significantly more negative than in 2012, in line with expectations. For crimes against subgroups, however, there is a statistically significant and unexpected negative interaction with year. This is not because decreased coverage of crime unexpectedly lowers perceptions of threat for authoritarians,

<sup>14</sup>Table A4 in the Appendix shows the estimates with non-White respondents included.

<sup>15</sup>All other variables are set at their mean or mode.

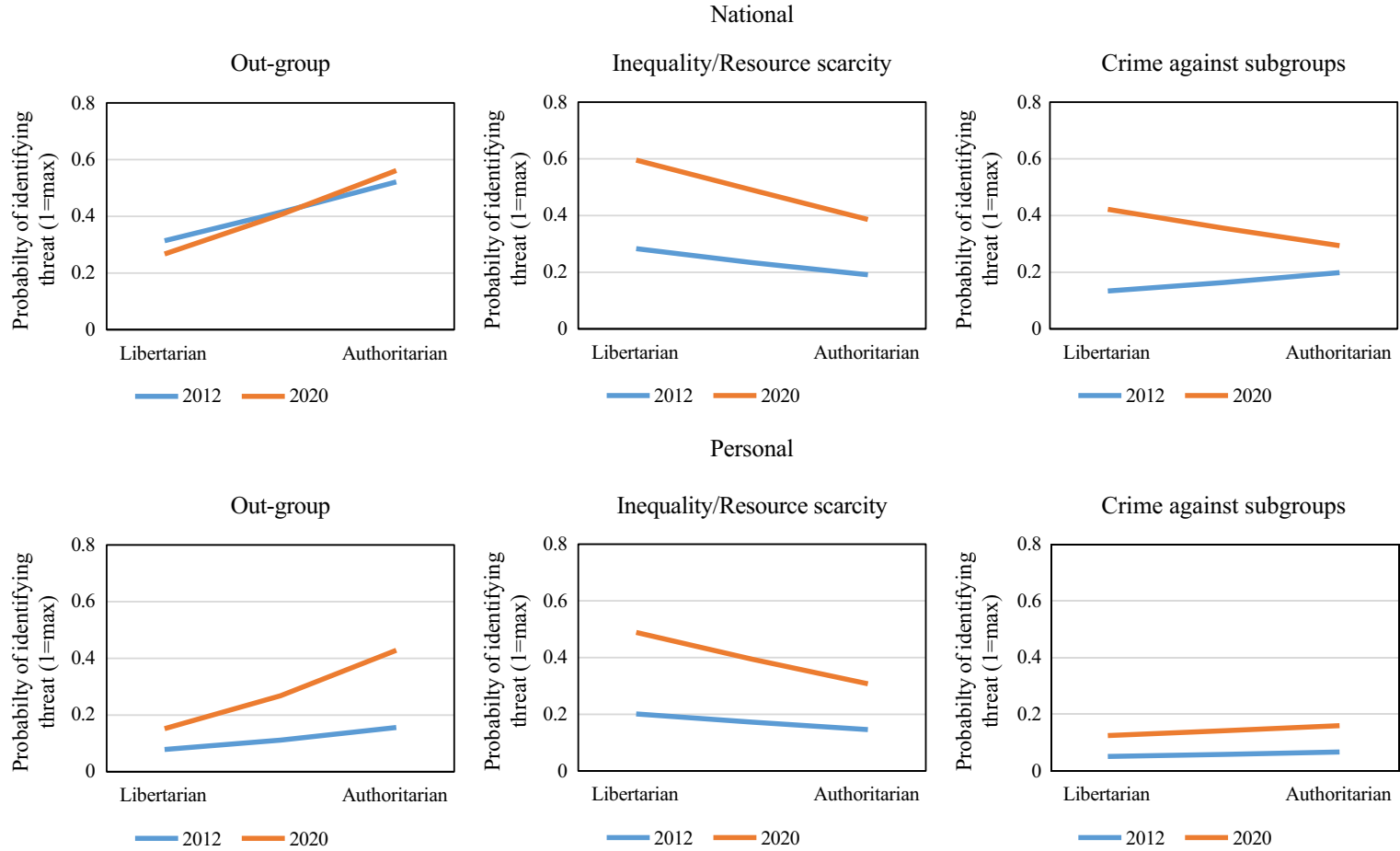


Figure 1. Relationships between authoritarian predispositions, media attention, and identifying issues as threats.

however. Authoritarian perceptions of the threat change little, as expected, but libertarian perceptions of the threat from crime against subgroups are considerably higher in 2020 than in 2012.

Turning to *H3a* and *H3b*, the lower half of [Figure 1](#) depicts the relationships between personal threat context, authoritarian predispositions, and perceptions of personal threat. If change in personal threat context has effects on perceptions like those outlined in [Table 1](#), we would expect a positive interaction between authoritarianism and out-group threat and negative interactions with inequality/resources and crimes against subgroups. We see these relationships for out-group and inequality/resources threat but, again, unexpected results for crimes against subgroups in that there is not a negative interaction with authoritarianism.

## Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic has illustrated the need to reconsider the relationship between authoritarianism and perceptions of security threats in order to account for the counterintuitive relationships between authoritarianism and opposition to strict COVID-19 policy measures in disparate studies from New Zealand to the United States. Existing research on the prevalence of infectious diseases and authoritarian attitudes, which tells us that authoritarian attitudes should increase (but not among which kinds of individuals), falls short. Revisionist claims about authoritarian/libertarian responses to increased threat also fail to explain why authoritarian perceptions of the threat were lower than those of libertarians.

The seemingly counterintuitive effects of COVID-19 have thus been attributed to factors such as elite cues, the ideology of the incumbent government, or political culture (Ollerenshaw, 2022; Vowles, 2022). But these explanations are limited and do not generalize. In this article, we have suggested that the authoritarian response to COVID-19 makes sense if we recognize that it belongs to a distinct category of threats with which authoritarians are less concerned and that they may even minimize.

Using the context of the COVID-19 pandemic to examine perceptions of a health pandemic and other security threats compared to perceptions of the same threats in the different context of 2012, we have drawn on the existing literature to test four competing theories of the relationship between changing threat contexts and authoritarian predispositions: (1) authoritarian perceptions of threats are permanently high and impervious to contextual change; (2) authoritarian perceptions of threats are responsive to any contextual change; (3) authoritarian perceptions of threats from social norms, or normative threat, are hypersensitive to contextual change, while their perceptions of other threats are permanently high, implying imperviousness to contextual change for those; and (4) authoritarian perceptions of normative threat are hypersensitive to contextual change, but authoritarians will also respond to signals of change in other kinds of threat (e.g., inequality and resource scarcity), with decreased perceptions of those threats.

We examined the four theories by studying the relationships between perceptions of 10 threats, authoritarian predispositions, and different contexts of those threats as signaled by changes in (negative) media attention. Using two surveys that asked about perceptions of the same threats at the national and personal levels in England in 2012 and 2020, our findings are most favorable to the third and fourth accounts of how authoritarians respond to changes in threat contexts; they are least favorable to the idea that authoritarians simply perceive a dangerous world and are unresponsive to contextual change (Hetherington & Weiler, 2009) or that they respond to any signal of increased threat (Altemeyer, 1996).

We confirmed that authoritarians are most responsive to changes in contexts pertaining to out-group threat, which have implications for the social norms that authoritarians care most about. The findings for threats such as COVID-19, which impinged on issues of health, resources, and inequality and did not seem to disproportionately affect authoritarian concern about social divisions in British society (see note 11), and for crimes against subgroups, on the other hand, suggest that there is either less authoritarian than libertarian sensitivity to contextual change on these issues or that high authoritarians minimize the threat. We also examined differences in perceptions of national and personal threats. We showed that the

relationships are generally as evident for personal as for national threats and contexts—indeed for personal threat from out-groups the relationship with contextual change is stronger for authoritarians. Media coverage of terrorism with a more personal frame increased considerably in 2020 over 2012 according to our analysis. It may be that this change in context resonated with authoritarians in a way that indicates their concerns about out-groups go beyond the normative threat identified by Stenner (2005). Perhaps they are the precursor to increased normative threat as suggested by Stevens and Banducci (2022), or out-group threats operate as suggested by Asbrock and Fritsche (2013), with personal threats exerting influence as a group-level coping strategy. More research is needed to understand the relationships between national and personal threats.

There are of course caveats to these findings. First, we compared two cross-sectional surveys; it would be preferable to track perceptions of the same respondents over time. It may be, for example, that the COVID-19 pandemic aroused authoritarian concern about social norms at the outset, but these concerns died down over time. Second, with regard to health pandemics, the degree of consensus that COVID-19 was a threat—and that avian flu was not—limited the variation in perceptions that can be explained and may have influenced our findings. Third, our measure of contextual change as increased or decreased newspaper attention is blunt—other indicators could be examined, such as Google search terms and real-world indicators—and it does not account for potential moderating factors such as how much attention a respondent pays to news. But our interest is in media coverage as a signal of changing threat contexts rather than its influence via exposure.<sup>16</sup> Nevertheless, future research should develop more refined measures of contextual change and how it is perceived.

Our findings show that despite the wealth of research on authoritarianism, its relationship with threats, and the consequences for phenomena such as conservative shifts and democratic backsliding, on some fairly basic questions of the dynamics of perceptions of threats we know little. Security studies has been enriched by efforts to go beyond elite perceptions and framings of threats to examine everyday or vernacular understandings of security threats (Downing et al., 2022; Jarvis, 2019; Jarvis & Lister, 2010; Nyman, 2021). While this turn has provided a wealth of new insights about perceptions of security threats, the influences on them, and their consequences, it has also raised questions about changing contexts, changing perceptions, and the extent to which different security threats should be treated as alike. The new perspective we have outlined in this article on when and why individual-level authoritarian perceptions of security threats change begins to answer these questions.

This article shows that authoritarian perceptions of threats are more responsive to contextual change pertaining to several types of threats than most previous studies have examined, but not in a single direction in which indications of increased threat are associated with increased authoritarian concern about them—different security threats should not be treated as alike. For some threats, such as those pertaining to health and resources from infectious diseases such as avian flu and COVID-19, we have shown that indications of increased threat are associated with no change or decreased authoritarian concern about them—and that rather than being a function of elite cues or political culture we should expect that given the nature of the threat. This account also suggests, however, that under conditions in which a health pandemic clearly threatened social norms or damaged social cohesion authoritarians would respond differently—and as pointed out at the beginning of this article, with emerging infectious diseases increasing in frequency over the past five decades such situations could develop. It complicates answers to questions of the individual-level causes of relationships between the prevalence of infectious diseases and authoritarian attitudes. More broadly for security studies, it shows that to understand perceptions of everyday security threats there is a need to be more sensitive to which kinds of individuals

<sup>16</sup>We examined the interactions between our measures of media exposure, authoritarian predispositions, and contextual change as a check. We found no systematic moderating effects of media exposure—which may be unsurprising, given that our measure of contextual change is media attention to an issue for the 12 months prior to the survey, a length of time for changing contexts to be noticed by individuals regardless of media consumption. We also examined models with two-way interactions between media exposure and authoritarian predispositions as a check that the year dummy variable is not merely picking up exposure effects. In contrast with Table 5, we found that these interactions were not statistically significant beyond chance.

respond to contexts of increased threat with changes such as an authoritarian shift in attitudes. This will require additional studies examining perceptions over time.

**Data availability statement.** All data and replication code for this study are available at ORE Open Research Exeter at: <https://doi.org/10.24378/exe.4725>. This study was not preregistered.

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