
Threat, Authoritarianism, and Voting: An Investigation of Personality and Persuasion

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The authors examined whether the influence of persuasive messages emphasizing reward versus threat was moderated by authoritarianism. Five days before the 1996 presidential election, participants (N = 86) received either a reward-related message (emphasizing the positive benefits of voting) or a threat-related message (emphasizing the negative consequences of failing to vote) recommending that they vote in the election. We found that high authoritarians perceived the threat message as stronger in argument quality than the reward message, and low authoritarians perceived the reward message as stronger in argument quality than the threat message. In turn, subjective perceptions of message quality exerted a direct influence on participants' postmessage attitudes toward voting in the election. Finally, behavioral intentions mediated the influence of voting attitudes on actual voting behavior. Discussion focuses on the implications of the message frame and authoritarianism.

Rocky Mountain Media Watch has coded local news broadcasts for content of crime, violence, terrorism, and disaster. The 1997 survey of 55 cities found that 42% of local news content falls into these overlapping categories, and 33% fits the crime category alone. Moreover, the lead story in 72% of the newscasts was either crime or disaster.

—Rocky Mountain Media Watch (1997)

Increasingly, our citizens' information environment is permeated with threatening messages of all types. Local news programs attempt to hook viewers with teas-

ers—followed by more detailed messages—about threats to their personal safety, loved ones, pocketbooks, psychological well-being, health, social relationships, political values, and so forth. These insidious messages about imminent dangers large and small appear to be quite effective in gaining and holding viewers' attention. Ratcheting the emotional ante upwards seems to pay dividends for an increasingly lucrative media industry.

The use of fear appeals has long played a central role in attempts to change and shape attitudes by means of persuasive messages (e.g., Hovland, Janis, & Kelley, 1953; Janis & Feshbach, 1953; Leventhal, 1970; Rogers, 1983). From attempts to persuade people to visit their dentist, use seat belts, and stop smoking to politically threatening ads designed to motivate citizens to vote a certain way, threat has been used to invoke fear and shape attitudes and behaviors. What is new, however, is the apparent recognition of the generic value of fear and threat in attempts to grab and hold citizens' attention in a society increasingly characterized by information overload cou-

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pled with a low-grade but constant cacophony of competing messages. For example, these considerations led the organization Rock the Vote to rely heavily on non-partisan, threat-laden ads to motivate young people to vote in 1992 and 1996. Some of these ads emphasized the idea that unnamed others (such as uncaring cynical politicians and vaguely described people with values diametrically opposed to those held by the viewer) would seize power and use it against the interests of young people. In the present research, we wish to examine the implications of relying on threat messages to motivate individuals' political behavior—specifically, the act of voting.

Scholars have examined the impact of threat perceptions and fear reactions on individuals' political attitudes and behaviors, ranging from the most extreme forms of political aggression (Staub, 1989) to attitudes of intolerance toward unpopular racial (Kinder & Sanders, 1996; Mendelberg, 1997) and political (Gibson, 1987; Marcus, Sullivan, Theiss-Morse, & Wood, 1995; Stouffer, 1955; Sullivan, Piereson, & Marcus, 1982) groups. Taken together, these affective, cognitive, and behavioral reactions can be conceptually understood as manifestations of authoritarianism (Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswik, Levinson, & Sanford, 1950; Altemeyer, 1988, 1996; Fromm, 1941; Lipset, 1963; Rokeach, 1960). Findings are relatively consistent across research domains: Individuals who are chronically fearful and who perceive a great deal of threat from their immediate and broader environment have a greater propensity to adopt more authoritarian tendencies and behaviors; authoritarians, in turn, are more responsive to threatening stimuli.

At the aggregate level, archival studies have shown that people exhibit heightened authoritarian propensities and behaviors during periods marked by social, economic, and political threat (e.g., high unemployment, high crime, civil disorder, war) (Doty, Peterson, & Winter, 1991; Jorgenson, 1975; Sales, 1972, 1973). For example, Sales (1973) found that during periods of high threat (e.g., 1930s, 1967-1970), there is an increase in a wide variety of indicators of authoritarianism, such as a concern for power, toughness, sex, and authoritarian aggression, submission, cynicism, and superstition compared to periods of low threat (e.g., 1920s, 1959-1964). The threat-authoritarianism connection has also been demonstrated in laboratory research. Within the context of terror management theory, experimentally heightening the salience of subjects' mortality (i.e., one operationalization of personal threat) has been demonstrated to increase high authoritarians' negative reactions to dissimilar others (Greenberg et al., 1990). Similarly, several investigators have found that failure-induced threat heightens authoritarian tendencies (e.g., hostility toward members of experimentally

created out-groups) (Berkowitz & Knurek, 1969; see also Dittes, 1961; Sales & Friend, 1973).

Perhaps the most extensive program of research in the area of authoritarianism has been conducted by Altemeyer (1981, 1988, 1996). Specifically, Altemeyer has examined the antecedents and consequences of what he calls right-wing authoritarianism (RWA), defined as high levels of adherence to conventional values, aggression toward out-groups, and submission to established authority figures. For example, high RWAs are predisposed to view the world as dangerous and chaotic ("Any day now, chaos and anarchy could erupt around us. All the signs are pointing to it"). In the studies reported by Altemeyer, high RWAs were more likely than their low RWA counterparts to feel threatened by a wide variety of stimuli. For example, compared to low authoritarians, high authoritarians expressed greater fear of being victimized by terrorists, auto accidents, and AIDS and felt far more vulnerable and at the mercy of dangerous forces in the world at large. Altemeyer (1996) concluded that "High RWAs stand about ten steps closer to the panic button than the rest of the population" (p. 100) and that "the 'cry havoc' items have continuously struck a chord in the authoritarian psyche, because authoritarians always perceive society as going to hell in a hand basket" (p. 101). Consistent with Altemeyer (1988) (see also Adorno et al., 1950), we view a chronic fear of a dangerous and threatening world to be a key component of the authoritarian personality.

Not only are authoritarians more chronically fearful and threatened than nonauthoritarians, but they are likely to react to threat by becoming even more authoritarian. For example, Feldman and Stenner (1997) examined the effects of perceived political threat, perceived economic threat, and fear of war on different manifestations of authoritarianism, such as attitudes toward minority groups and in-group and out-group attachments. Under conditions of high perceived threat, authoritarians became more punitive and ethnocentric, whereas nonauthoritarians became less punitive and ethnocentric. Feldman and Stenner concluded that threat activates authoritarians' predispositions to favor punitive social and political policies. Research on the impact of threatening messages on attitudes of political tolerance provides converging evidence that those chronically predisposed to threat will become even more authoritarian when faced with politically threatening information. Specifically, Marcus et al. (1995) demonstrated that individuals who had stronger threat predispositions became much less tolerant after reading a threatening message, whereas those with lower threat predispositions were relatively unaffected by the threatening message.

In the political context, authoritarians' heightened reactions to threat make them particularly responsive to

candidates' attempts to "play the race card" (Kinder & Sanders, 1996). Playing the race card occurs when candidates attempt to increase their support among White voters by alleging that African Americans pose a threat to Whites' livelihood, property, and/or safety. One of the most notorious uses of the race card in recent elections was the 1988 Willie Horton ad, which emphasized the danger posed by the weekend furlough of an African American man who had been convicted of murdering a boy in the course of a robbery and went on to kidnap a young couple "stabbing the man and repeatedly raping his girlfriend." Mendelberg (1997) demonstrated that media coverage of the Willie Horton ads activated racial resentment among individuals who already held highly prejudiced attitudes toward African Americans. Specifically, Mendelberg found that prejudiced individuals who were not exposed to the coverage of the Horton ads were 25 percentage points more likely than relatively nonprejudiced people to oppose racially egalitarian policies; with exposure to Horton, prejudiced individuals were 40% more likely than were nonprejudiced people to oppose such policies. Analysis of data from the National Election Survey conducted before and after the Horton ads were aired provides converging evidence that exposure to the Horton ads (and subsequent news coverage of the ads) enhanced the effects of racial resentment that were already present in the minds of many voters (Kinder & Sanders, 1996).

In sum, evidence suggests that threatening messages are particularly likely to increase intolerance and authoritarianism among individuals who already possess high levels of authoritarianism. It is important to emphasize, however, that the behaviors examined in these studies are those directly related to and congruent with the ideological content of authoritarianism, such as intolerance toward unpopular racial and political groups. The question remains whether authoritarians' reactions to threat remain confined to direct actions against nonconformists and minorities or whether mobilization of authoritarians will spill into conventional politics. To our knowledge, no studies to date have examined whether threat motivates authoritarians to engage in behaviors that are not related to actions against minorities and nonconformists. We sought to expand on the extant research by examining a political behavior unrelated to political ideology—specifically, the act of whether to vote in a presidential election. In addition, we designed persuasive messages emphasizing the importance of voting in the 1996 presidential election that, although threatening, did not include specific references to ethnic minorities or members of politically unpopular groups. In this way, we could examine whether threat has a mobilizing effect on authoritarians apart from the specific content

of the threatening message or the political behavior in question.

The Matching Effect in Persuasion

In persuasion research, the notion that authoritarians resonate to messages that are congruent with their worldview that emphasizes threat is an example of what is known as the matching effect. Whereas early theory and research on the personality-persuasion relationship focused on the question of whether certain types of people were particularly susceptible to a variety of social influences (for a review, see Eagly, 1981), more contemporary research has sought to evaluate the role of dispositional factors within the context of different types of persuasive appeals. From the perspective of this interactional (Snyder & Ickes, 1985) or personality-attitude change strategy (Eagly, 1981), rather than hypothesizing that personality exerts a main effect on persuasion, the influence of chronic (e.g., personality) and transient (e.g., mood) characteristics of the recipient are assumed to be importantly moderated by factors inherent in the persuasion setting (e.g., message type, argument quality). Specifically, the interactional perspective posits that persuasion effects will be maximal when qualities of the recipient and aspects of the persuasion situation are psychologically congruent or matching (e.g., Cacioppo, Petty, & Sidera, 1982; DeBono, 1987; Edwards, 1990; Lavine & Snyder, 1996, in press; Snyder & DeBono, 1985). That is, persuasive communications should be successful to the extent that they are specifically tailored to relevant motivational or cognitive characteristics of the message recipient.

In one program of research, Snyder and DeBono and their colleagues (e.g., DeBono, 1987; DeBono & Harnish, 1988; Lavine & Snyder, 1996, in press; Snyder & DeBono, 1985; see also Petty & Wegener, in press) have argued that the attitudes of individuals high in self-monitoring serve a social-adjustive function, whereas the attitudes of those low in self-monitoring serve a value-expressive function. Consistent with the matching hypothesis, this research has shown that low self-monitors are particularly responsive to a persuasive message that informed them that a new attitude would better serve to express important values than their present attitude (a value-expressive message) and that high self-monitors are particularly responsive to a message that informed them that a majority of their peers favored the recommended position (a social-adjustive message).

Researchers have recently begun to investigate the processes that mediate the trait-situational matching effect in persuasion (e.g., Lavine & Snyder, 1996, in press; Petty & Wegener, in press). One set of potentially relevant findings is that recipient characteristics can bias the

evaluation of externally provided information. For example, people's prior attitudes can bias their judgments of the validity of attitude-relevant information (Chaiken, Pomerantz, & Giner-Sorolla, 1995; Houston & Fazio, 1989; Lord, Ross, & Lepper, 1979). More relevant to the persuasion setting, prior attitudes, self-schemata, political predispositions, stereotypic beliefs, and personality-based attitude functions can influence recipients' judgments of the validity and cogency of a persuasive communication (e.g., Ansolabehere & Iyengar, 1995; Cacioppo et al., 1982; Lavine & Snyder, 1996, in press; Sherif & Hovland, 1961; Snyder & DeBono, 1985).

On the basis of this research, Lavine and Snyder (1996, in press) reasoned that message arguments that make direct contact with a relevant characteristic of the recipient (e.g., a value-expressive argument for low self-monitors) should be perceived as more valid and persuasive than message arguments that contain functionally irrelevant information. In turn, they argued that message recipients should use their subjective perceptions of message quality to determine whether to adopt the recommended attitude position. Consistent with this reasoning, Lavine and Snyder (1996) found that matched messages directly influenced recipients' perceptions of message quality and persuasiveness, which in turn influenced postmessage attitudes and behavior. Thus, subjective perceptions of message quality represent one mediator of the influence of matched versus mismatched messages on persuasion. Along these lines, it is likely that authoritarians will be more persuaded by threatening appeals in part because they find such appeals more well-reasoned and convincing.

THE PRESENT RESEARCH

Given the robust link between threat and authoritarianism, the present research examined whether individuals high in authoritarianism would be especially receptive to a voting-related persuasive message framed in terms of threat. Specifically, 5 days before the 1996 presidential election, we presented recipients with a persuasive message advocating that they vote in the upcoming election. Some participants received a message framed in terms of the rewards that may accrue for engaging in such behavior. Other participants received a message framed in terms of the threatening personal and political consequences that may occur for failing to engage in such behavior.

Our key prediction was that message type (reward vs. threat) would interact with recipients' authoritarianism propensities such that high authoritarian recipients would perceive the threat message as more valid and persuasive than the reward message. Because high authoritarians perceive the world as a dangerous and threaten-

ing place, they should resonate to a message highlighting the potential negative consequences of not voting. Moreover, high authoritarians should be more likely than their low authoritarian counterparts to find threat-related persuasive arguments to be credible and valid. We also explored the possibility that a threat-related persuasive message would lead to less persuasion among low authoritarian recipients, relative to the reward message. That is, we tested whether low authoritarian recipients would react more positively to a message emphasizing reward than to a message emphasizing threat. The idea that the effectiveness of threat on persuasion may depend on the personality type of the recipient has been suggested by Janis (1967). Specifically, Janis hypothesized that threat should facilitate persuasion among recipients with an obedient personality style (e.g., high authoritarians) but should inhibit persuasion among those with a resistant personality style. The notion of an obedient personality style is consistent with high authoritarianism (e.g., obedience to authority is one of the defining components of authoritarianism) (Adorno, et al., 1950; Altemeyer, 1988, 1996), thereby lending support to our prediction that, among high authoritarians, threat messages should lead to more persuasion than reward messages. Moreover, a resistant or low obedience personality style is consistent with low authoritarianism, thus providing some suggestion that, among low authoritarians, threat might lead to less persuasion than reward. Alternatively, it may be the case that individuals low in authoritarianism will not be differentially affected by whether the message is framed in terms of threat or reward.

Thus, we expected the influence of message type on subjective perceptions of message quality to be moderated by authoritarianism. Moreover, following Lavine and Snyder's (1996, in press) work on the cognitive mediation of the functional matching effect, we predicted that subjective perceptions of message quality would be directly related to postmessage attitudes toward voting in the presidential election. Finally, because recipients were exposed to the message approximately 1 week before the election, we considered the concept of behavioral intention to understand the manner in which postmessage voting attitudes might influence voting behavior. Fishbein and Ajzen's (1975) theory of reasoned action specifies that volitional social behaviors are proximally mediated by people's intentions to act in a particular manner. Within this framework, behavioral intentions represent people's conscious and deliberate plans for engaging in volitional behavior and that attitudes toward behaviors exert their influence on behavior through influencing the construction of such behavioral intentions or plans. The behavioral intention

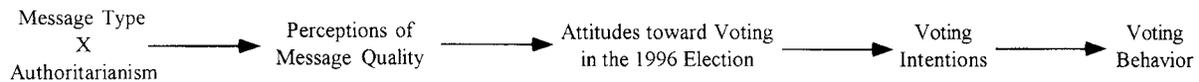


Figure 1 Hypothesized model of the influence of message match on perceived message quality, attitudes toward voting in the election, behavioral intentions, and voting behavior.

component of the theory of reasoned action is especially applicable within the voting context because voting is a well-specified, volitional behavior that is enacted through a deliberate process (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1981; Lavine & Snyder, 1996).

In summary, we hypothesized that high authoritarians would perceive threat-related voting appeals as more valid and persuasive than reward-related appeals. In addition, we explored whether low authoritarians would perceive reward-related voting appeals as more valid and persuasive than threat-related appeals. In turn, we hypothesized that subjective perceptions of message quality would directly lead to more favorable attitudes toward voting in the 1996 presidential election. Moreover, we hypothesized that postmessage attitudes toward voting in the election would directly influence message recipients' behavioral intentions (to vote or not), which in turn, would exert a direct influence on their actual decisions of whether to vote in the election. Thus, we hypothesized that the interaction between message type and authoritarianism would influence attitudes indirectly through directly influencing perceptions of message quality and that postmessage attitudes would in turn exert an indirect influence on behavior through directly influencing recipients' behavioral intentions. To evaluate this chain of reasoning, we estimated the structural equation model depicted in Figure 1.

METHOD

Participants

Participants were 86 voting-eligible (i.e., >17 years old and American citizens) students ($n = 34$ men; $n = 52$ women) at the University of Minnesota, who participated in the study for extra credit in their introductory psychology course. Scores on a shortened 10-item version of the Right Wing Authoritarianism Scale (RWA) ($\alpha = .70$) (Altemeyer, 1988) suggested by Haddock, Zanna, and Esses (1993) permitted a classification of these students as low in RWA ($n = 39$) or high in RWA ($n = 46$) (one participant failed to complete most items in the question-

naire and was thus excluded from the analyses reported below).

Procedure

Five days before the 1996 presidential election, participants completed a booklet containing the message manipulations and relevant dependent measures. Each participant was randomly assigned to the threat or the reward message condition. To determine whether participants actually had voted in the 1996 presidential election, we contacted each one by telephone approximately 1 month after the election. To corroborate the self-report behavioral data, we obtained official voting information (i.e., whether each participant had voted in the election) from the Hennepin County Board of Elections. Forty-four of 86 participants (51.16%) reported having voted in the election. However, the county reported that only 37 of these 86 (43.02%) had actually voted.¹ We used the county's record rather than participants' self-reports to determine who had voted in the election; however, results using participants' self-reports were highly similar.

Persuasive Messages

Threat versus reward messages. The message type manipulation concerned whether participants were exposed to a voting appeal framed in terms of the rewards or benefits to be derived from voting versus a message framed in terms of the threats or punishments that may occur from failing to vote. To bolster the construct validity of the threat versus reward manipulation, we generated two types of rewarding and threatening messages so that the effects of our manipulation could be assessed independently of the specific message arguments. One set of messages used arguments related to personal values, and the other set of messages used arguments related to social considerations.² Table 1 provides the specific arguments used in each of the four messages (complete transcriptions of the messages are available from the authors).

TABLE 1: Message Arguments by Experimental Condition

Reward
Personal values
People who vote place a higher value on individual freedom, liberty, and democracy than those who do not.
Voting provides a way for you to express and live in accordance with important values.
Voting enables people to translate their attitudes and beliefs into action.
Voting allows one to be heard.
Voting enables one to bring about the kinds of public policies he or she believe in.
Voting allows one to play an active role in the direction taken by your government.
Social considerations
Voting rates among college students are sharply on the rise.
Voting is in.
People perceive the act of voting to be associated with popularity, success, intelligence, and status.
Voting conveys a positive image.
Voting provides one with the opportunity to be part of a team.
Participating in election day festivities can help you make professional connections.
Threat
Personal values
People who vote place a higher value on ensuring that their individual freedom, liberty, and democratic values are not taken away by the wrong people getting into power.
Voting provides a way for you to prevent basic American values from being undermined.
Voting enables you to act on your beliefs by preventing the other side from advancing their political agenda.
Voting prevents your values from being undermined.
Not voting allows others to take away your right to express your values.
There is no better way to act on your beliefs than by voting against a congressional or presidential candidate who stands in opposition to what you believe.
Social considerations
Voting rates among college students are sharply on the rise.
Not voting is out.
People perceive those who do not vote to be less popular, less successful, less intelligent, and more likely to have social problems.
Not voting conveys a negative image.
Not voting denies people the opportunity to be part of a team.
People who do not vote do not participate in election day festivities that provide professional connections.

Dependent Variables

Perceptions of message quality. To directly assess perceptions of message quality, participants completed a scale composed of 12 7-point Likert-type items (where $-3 =$ *strongly disagree* and $+3 =$ *strongly agree*) developed and used by Lavine and Snyder (1996). These items included "I found the material to be convincing," and "The material did not contain persuasive arguments." We averaged these items to create an aggregate index of perceptions of message quality ($\alpha = .85$). Scores on the composite index could thus range -3 to $+3$, with positive numbers indicating more positive perceptions of message quality.

Attitudes. To assess attitudes toward voting in the 1996 presidential election, we presented participants with 12 7-point Likert-type items (where $-3 =$ *strongly disagree* and $+3 =$ *strongly agree*) developed and used by Lavine and Snyder (1996). These items included "It would be a good thing if all American citizens over the age of 18 were to vote in elections" and "There is no use in voting since politicians just do what they want once elected." In addition, we used four 7-point bipolar scales (*bad/good*, *harmful/beneficial*, *wise/foolish*, *positive/negative*) taken from

the evaluative dimension of the semantic differential (Osgood, Suci, & Tannenbaum, 1957). We averaged these 16 items to create an index of attitudes toward voting in the 1996 presidential election ($\alpha = .86$). Scores on the composite index could range from -3 to $+3$, with higher numbers indicating more positive attitudes toward voting.

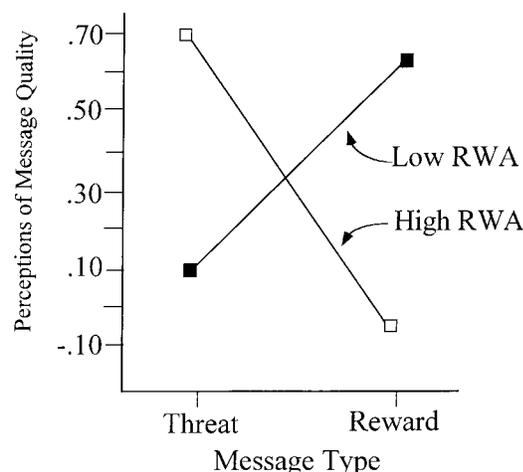
Behavioral intentions. Participants indicated their intention to vote in the 1996 presidential election by estimating the probability (expressed as a percentage) that they would vote.

Behavior. As noted above, participants' voting behavior was based on the county's voting records for the 1996 election (for the structural equation analyses reported below, participants were given a score of 0 if they did not vote and a score of 1 if they did vote).

RESULTS

Perceptions of Message Quality

To assess whether high authoritarians perceived the threat message to contain more persuasive and valid



■ Low	.10	.63
□ High	.69	-.04

Figure 2 The influence of message type and authoritarianism on perceived message quality.

(i.e., stronger) arguments than the reward message and whether low authoritarians perceived the reward message to contain more persuasive and valid arguments than the threat message, we performed a 2 (message type: threat vs. reward) \times 2 (authoritarianism: low vs. high) between-subjects ANOVA on participants' perceptions of message quality. This analysis produced only the expected interaction, $F(1, 81) = 8.63, p < .01$ (see Figure 2). Follow-up contrasts revealed that high authoritarians did indeed perceive the threat message ($M = 0.69$) as more persuasive than the reward message ($M = -0.04$), $t(44) = 2.52, p < .01$. Moreover, there was a marginally significant effect such that low authoritarians perceived the reward message ($M = 0.63$) as containing more persuasive arguments than the threat message ($M = 0.10$), $t(37) = 1.71, p < .10$. Finally, as expected, high authoritarians ($M = 0.69$) perceived the threat message as more persuasive than did low authoritarians ($M = 0.10$), $t(42) = 2.03, p < .05$, whereas low authoritarians ($M = 0.63$) perceived the reward message as more persuasive than did high authoritarians ($M = -0.04$), $t(39) = 2.16, p < .05$.

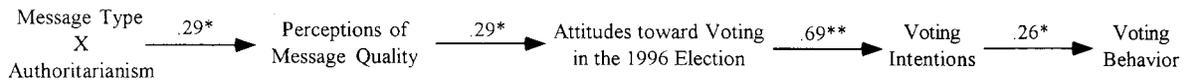
Structural Equation Analyses: Assessing the Mediating Role of Perceived Message Quality

The primary question of the present research is to evaluate whether the interaction of threat- versus reward-based messages and authoritarianism indirectly influenced postmessage attitudes through its direct in-

fluence on perceived message quality and whether the influence of attitudes toward voting in the 1996 presidential election on voting behavior is mediated by participants' voting intentions. To test these mediational hypotheses, we used LISREL 8 (Jöreskog & Sörbom, 1993) to estimate the maximum likelihood parameters of a structural equation model. Because the analysis of latent variable structures is unwieldy with large numbers of observed variables (Drawsgow & Kanfer, 1985; Jöreskog & Sörbom, 1993), item composites are frequently used by forming subscales of mutually exclusive sets of items from larger scales. Therefore, we arbitrarily divided the items assessing perceived message quality into three item clusters, and the items assessing attitudes toward voting in the election into four item clusters. Based on the results of the ANOVA indicating a crossover interaction of message type and authoritarianism, we constructed a dichotomous exogenous variable by assigning a 1 to high authoritarian participants exposed to the threat message and low authoritarian participants exposed to the reward message and a 0 to low authoritarian participants exposed to the threat message and high authoritarian participants exposed to the reward condition.

The structural model depicted in Figure 3 assesses whether the influence of the Message Type \times Authoritarianism interaction on attitudes toward voting in the election is mediated by perceived message quality and, in turn, whether the influence of attitudes toward voting in the election on voting behavior is mediated by voting intentions. As Figure 3 indicates, all of the paths in the model are significant ($t > 2.23, ps < .05$); moreover, the model provided a very good fit to the data, $\chi^2(df = 34) = 35.62, p = .39, \chi^2/df = 1.05$ (ratios less than 2 are considered a good fit) (see Carmines & McIver, 1981). Because the chi-square index is strongly affected by sample size, we examined three other fit indices that have been shown to be less dependent on sample size: the goodness of fit index (GFI) (Jöreskog & Sörbom, 1993), the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) (Steiger, 1990), and the comparative fit index (CFI) (Bentler, 1985). Values of the GFI and CFI range from 0 to 1, with values exceeding .90 generally accepted as indicating superior fit. Smaller values of the RMSEA represent better fit, with values less than .05 suggesting a very good fit to the data. Inspection of all of these indices confirmed the fit of the model, GFI = .91, CFI = 1.00, RMSEA = .06.

As can be seen in Figure 3, the message type by authoritarianism interaction exerted a significant influence on perceived message quality, which in turn, significantly influenced postmessage attitudes toward voting in the election. Finally, recipients' postmessage attitudes exerted a direct effect on their behavioral decisions of whether to vote in the upcoming presidential election,



Note: * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$.

Figure 3 Structural equation model of the influence of message match on perceived message quality, attitudes toward voting in the election, behavioral intentions, and voting behavior.

which in turn, exerted a direct influence on participants' subsequent voting behavior. More important, the indirect paths from the message type by authoritarianism interaction through perceptions of message quality to postmessage attitudes ($\beta = .08$, $p < .05$) and from postmessage attitudes through voting intentions to voting behavior ($\beta = .18$, $p < .05$) are significant, indicating that recipients' perceptions of message quality significantly mediated the influence of the message type by authoritarianism interaction on postmessage attitudes and that voting intentions mediated the influence of postmessage attitudes toward voting on actual voting behavior. Moreover, there are no direct effects of the interaction between authoritarianism and message type (on attitudes, $\beta = -.02$; on behavior, $\beta = -.08$, $t < 1$) once the indirect effects are in the model.

Although the model depicted in Figure 3 provides a good fit to the data and would seem theoretically justified, the role that such factors as subjective perceptions of message quality play in the persuasion process is subject to a variety of alternative interpretations. For example, as DeBono (1987) and others have suggested (e.g., Eagly & Chaiken, 1993), it is possible that recipients' perceptions of the quality of the message merely justify their postmessage attitudes and are therefore causally consequent or simultaneous rather than antecedent to persuasion. Alternatively, perceptions of message quality and attitudes may each be directly influenced by distal variables such as trait-situational matching. Moreover, they may merely be alternative measures of the same construct (e.g., evaluations of the object); thus, as Eagly and Chaiken (1993) have argued, analyses of covariance in which controlling for cognitive responses (or subjective perceptions of message quality) reduces or eliminates the influence of distal independent variables on persuasion (e.g., Osterhouse & Brock, 1970) may be "tantamount to covarying out the baby with the bathwater" (Eagly & Chaiken, 1993, p. 294) (see also Baron & Kenny, 1986).

To assess these possibilities, we tested an alternative model. Specifically, to determine whether recipients' postmessage attitudes biased their perceptions of message quality (and are thus causally prior), we tested a model in which attitudes mediated the influence of the message type by authoritarianism interaction on perceived message quality (which in turn influenced voting intentions and ultimately behavior). Consistent with the perceived message quality as mediator model depicted in Figure 3, this alternative (attitudes as mediator) model did not produce a direct effect of the message type by authoritarianism interaction on attitudes toward voting in the election ($\beta = .09$, $t = 0.72$, *ns*); nor did this model provide a good fit to the data, $\chi^2(df = 34) = 79.76$, $p < .00002$, $\chi^2/df = 2.35$, GFI = .85, RMSEA = .13, CFI = .87. Finally, the indirect path of the message type by authoritarianism interaction through attitudes as perceptions of message quality (testing the attitudes as mediator hypothesis) was not significant ($\beta = .10$, $t = 0.69$, *ns*).

DISCUSSION

Analyses of media content attest to the fact that threat has become an ever-present feature of our current information environment (Rocky Mountain Watch, 1997). We sought to test the degree to which threatening content in persuasive messages shapes the effects of provoking messages for individuals high and low in authoritarianism. In contrast to previous research, our messages enabled us to examine the effect of threat on the political behavior of authoritarians independent of issues related to ethnic minorities or other out-groups. As expected, high authoritarians perceived messages arguing that voting prevents the occurrence of negative political and personal consequences as more persuasive and valid than messages arguing that voting brings about positive outcomes. Interestingly, low authoritarians responded in the opposite manner; they perceived reward messages as containing stronger and more convincing arguments than threat messages. That high authoritarians were

more receptive to messages emphasizing threat than reward is consistent with research demonstrating a robust relation between authoritarianism and threat. What is less clear, however, is why low authoritarians were more receptive to messages emphasizing reward than messages emphasizing threat. Some research suggests that low authoritarians are more optimistic than are high authoritarians (e.g., Arnett, 1978). Moreover, low authoritarians are less likely to believe that they live in a dangerous and threatening world (e.g., Altemeyer, 1988, 1996). Thus, low authoritarians may have found messages emphasizing the potential for garnering rewards as more credible than messages emphasizing the potential for negative consequences because reward messages were more consistent with their relatively optimistic and positive worldview.

Our hypotheses about the mediating role of subjective perceptions of message quality were also strongly supported. Specifically, our structural equation model indicated that the message type by authoritarianism interaction exerted a significant indirect (i.e., mediated) influence on postmessage attitudes toward voting in the election through its direct effect on subjective perceptions of message quality. Also as expected, message recipients' postmessage attitudes exerted a direct effect on their behavioral intentions of whether to vote in the upcoming presidential election, which in turn, exerted a direct influence on their subsequent voting behavior. The mediating role of perceived message quality extends previous research (e.g., Haugtvedt & Petty, 1992; Lavine & Snyder, 1996; Petty & Wegener, in press) on the cognitive mechanisms through which personality influences persuasion. For example, individual differences in self-monitoring (Snyder, 1974), need for cognition (Cacioppo & Petty, 1982), as well as authoritarianism seem to condition people's reactions to specific types of persuasive messages. Taken together, this research suggests that when persuasive messages are tailored to relevant characteristics of the recipient (e.g., social-adjustive messages for high self-monitors, threat-based messages for high authoritarians), they produce more favorable thoughts than do psychologically mismatched messages, and they are viewed as more convincing, more persuasive, and more effective in motivating people to act than mismatched messages (Lavine & Snyder, 1996). Recipients' perceptions of the quality of a persuasive message would thus appear to serve as one important proximal determinant of persuasion.

One important feature of our study is that threat was manipulated independently of ideological content, unlike the Willie Horton ads that contain both racist content and a threatening frame. By disentangling the threatening frame of the persuasive voting message from the ideological content of the message, we were able to

demonstrate that authoritarians have a heightened sensitivity to threat cues regardless of the particular ideological source of the threat. This is consistent with Altemeyer's (1996) finding that high authoritarians were likely to feel threatened by a range of ideologically disparate issues, even issues that do not fall under the purview of traditional authoritarian concerns. For example, even though concern over environmental destruction and poverty are usually left-wing or centrist issues, high authoritarians were as likely as lows to describe these issues as very important problems, again underscoring the idea that authoritarians' heightened sensitivity to threat may be in part independent of ideological content.

Although the correlates of authoritarianism have been extensively studied, less is known about the dynamic processes underlying authoritarians' reactions to threat-related stimuli in their environment. That subjective perceptions of message quality in part explain authoritarians' receptivity to threat-oriented messages provides new insights into the processes underlying their information processing style. This suggests that the effect of threat among authoritarians may be at least in part cognitively mediated rather than being merely reflexive and unconscious. In other words, authoritarians may be persuaded by threat-oriented messages because they construe these messages to be more convincing, effective, sensible, relevant, and in general more persuasive. As such, authoritarians may subjectively believe that they are responding to the objective merits of a particular argument and may be unaware of the influence of threat on their decision-making process. Our findings underscore Cacioppo et al.'s (1982) claim that recipients act subjectively rather than objectively rational when evaluating the quality and cogency of a persuasive message.

In sum, the results of the current study suggest that high authoritarians find threatening messages more persuasive than do low authoritarians. Because threat messages appear to be an increasingly common feature of the political environment, high authoritarians may be politically mobilized at higher rates (see also Marcus et al., 1995, chap. 9, for a related discussion). Conversely, because low authoritarians are less receptive to threatening messages than are high authoritarians, the strategic use of threat in the political process may lead to lower rates of political participation among low authoritarians. Unfortunately, the current climate of threat may lead low authoritarians—the very citizens who possess such politically virtuous qualities as tolerance of outgroups—to withdraw from the political arena (Ansola-behere & Iyengar, 1995; Marcus et al., 1995). If this is indeed the case, the consequence could be to increase the overall representation of authoritarians among the po-

litically active segments of society and to create, as Milburn and Conrad (1996) argue, a corresponding increase in authoritarian demands of redress—including more punitive policies—from the political system.

NOTES

1. Voting turnout rates obtained by self-report are consistently higher than those obtained through more formal channels, such as county records (Silver, Abramson, & Anderson, 1986).

2. We did not expect the framing of the argument (in terms of either personal values or social considerations) to interact with authoritarianism or the valence of the message (threat vs. reward). Indeed, neither of these interactions were significant, $F_s < 1$. Moreover, the three-way interaction between authoritarianism (high vs. low), valence of the message (threat vs. reward), and framing of the message (personal values vs. social considerations) was nonsignificant, $F(1, 77) = 2.35, p > .12$.

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