

An Experimental Investigation of the Choice of Terror and Support for Taking Action

Project: Modeling and Simulation of Individual and Group Decision-Making

Project Leads: Victor Asal, Anthony Lemieux, & Jonathan Wilkenfeld

Overview

Using experimental research methods, this project explores factors that influence the likelihood that an individual would be willing to use, or justify the use of, terrorism and whether he/she would mobilize (i.e., take any form of action - whether protest or terror). We explore how the likelihood of such action is related to individuals' levels of perceived grievance and risk, their desire for social dominance, and their attitudes towards authority.

Findings:

More than 300 individuals participated in experimental research (presented in the subsequent "Methods" section) and generated the following significant findings:

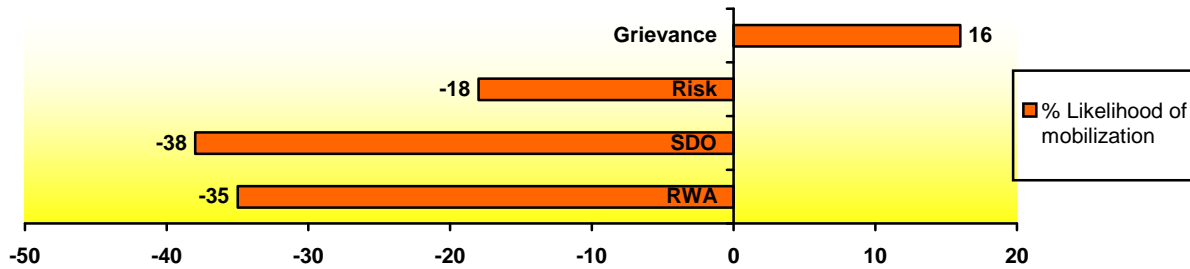
a) **Willingness to Use Terror**

- Willingness to use terror is rare: Approximately 10% of our total sample (31 of 309 participants) indicated that they planned to use terrorism in the context of the experiment.
- Willingness to use terror is *not* directly influenced by individuals' level of grievance (in the form of past and ongoing discrimination and oppression).
- Willingness to use terror is related to individuals' level of Social Dominance Orientation (SDO; a general desire for group based dominance and hierarchy rather than equality; coupled with endorsement of ideologies that legitimize inequality). While those who are higher on SDO are less likely to take any form of action, those who are higher on SDO who *do* support action are 14% more likely to choose terror (rather than protest).
- An individual's *justification* of the use of terrorism by others is 16% more likely with higher grievance.

b) **Support for Mobilization and Taking Action**

- Higher levels of grievance make mobilization 16% more likely. (See Figure 1.)
- Higher levels of risk (as indicated by individual's perception of effective and harsh state repression for taking action) make mobilization 18% less likely.
- Women are 11% less likely to mobilize than men.
- Those who are higher on SDO were 38% less likely to take *any* form of action. They are 49% less likely to engage in protest, and 16% less likely to feel that protest is justified. Those who are higher on Right Wing Authoritarianism (RWA; a robust measure of individual attitudes toward authority and a predictor of higher levels of prejudice against a wide range of racial and religious minorities) are 35% less likely to mobilize in general, 29% less likely to engage in protest, and 22% less likely to feel that protest is justified.

Figure 1. Likelihood of mobilization



Project Background:

This project draws from the psychological and political science literatures to identify both structural and psychological factors that might move individuals towards violence. We posit that certain traits, including SDO and RWA will influence individual mobilization. The scenario that we've created for this experiment includes factors such as oppression and discrimination that have been identified in the literature on contentious politics.

Method:

In this research, we developed four scenarios which systematically vary level of grievance and level of risk. These scenarios were presented as vignettes that ask participants to imagine themselves as residents of an ethnically divided society (a fictional country called Bucharastan) where they belong to a weaker and historically discriminated-against ethnic group (a fictional group called the Estamese).

Participants

- 309 Participants (including 221 undergraduates from the University at Albany, SUNY & 88 undergraduates from Purchase College, SUNY).
- 140 females (45%), 169 males (55%), mean age = 19.7

Measures and Procedure

- Participants were given measures of SDO (16-items) and RWA (30-items).
- Participants were asked to assume a first-person perspective as they read a vignette describing the experience as an Estamese in Bucharastan that contained 2 levels of both risk (high, low) and grievance (high, low). (See Figure 2).

Figure 2. Key elements of scenarios

	LOW GRIEVANCE • Parents killed in auto accident. • Low level of current discrimination	HIGH GRIEVANCE • Parents killed in govt. "crackdown." • Ongoing (severe) discrimination
Requests	One student named Dalig has asked you to help organize and march in a protest . Dalig argues that only through civil protest will the structural discrimination against the Estamese and the cause of Estamese nationalism be brought to the attention of both the Bucharastan government and the rest of the world. Another student named Vadan has asked you if you would be willing to help plan an explosive attack against the Student Union. Vadan argues that only by striking out at this symbol of oppression and hurting the oppressors can the spirit of Estamese nationalism be rekindled.	
	LOW RISK The police and security personnel are incompetent and there is a low level of risk	HIGH RISK The police and security personnel are highly effective and there is a high level of risk

- After they read the vignette, participants were asked:
 - How likely they would be to engage in *any* form of political action (1 = extremely unlikely, 7 = extremely likely),
 - Whether they would join the protest or the attack
 - Whether both protest and attack were justified (1 = extremely unjustified, 7 = extremely justified)

Note. All participants are presented with both requests; levels of risk and grievance are experimentally manipulated so that each participant is exposed to one of four possible combinations.

Future Directions:

We plan to collect additional data on the impact of grievance, risk, and psychological factors using broader representative samples of U.S. adults, as well as samples of foreign participants from regions that have been exposed to intergroup conflict. Comparison of data collected from areas that have experienced such conflicts, versus areas that have not, will allow us to assess the role of exposure to conflict and political violence in shaping different responses to the option of political violence.

Contact Information:

Name: Dr. Victor Asal	Name: Dr. Anthony Lemieux
Telephone Number: 518.591.8729	Telephone Number: 914.251.6672
Mailing Address:	Mailing Address:
Rockefeller College, University at Albany, SUNY	Purchase College, State University of New York
Milne Hall, 135 Western Avenue	735 Anderson Hill Road
Albany, NY 12222 USA	Purchase, NY 10577 USA
Email: vasal@email.albany.edu	Email: anthony.lemieux@purchase.edu

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