The Grim Reaper Might Be a Republican: Analyzing the 2024 Presidential Election Through the Lens of Terror Management Theory

Shay Ginzburg

Schechter School of Long Island

ABSTRACT

With tensions rising between the Democratic and Republican parties of America as the 2024 presidential election approaches, I attempted to predict the outcome of the election by applying the rules of Terror Management Theory. In order to gather the information needed to reach my conclusion, I reviewed scholarly research collected from Google Scholar and explored the opinions of American civilians as reported on news and social media sites. I investigated Terror Management Theory and its possible relationship to politics, and the "right-shift," or switch to more conservative values, present in voters who are made salient of their mortalities. Ultimately, the evidence gathered supports the notion that a right-wing candidate will emerge victorious from the 2024 presidential election.

Tensions between the Democratic and Republican parties have been on the rise in recent years. Whether it was the storming of the capital in January of 2022, or the countless attempts made in the media to cancel each party's respective representatives, some Americans have been taking drastic measures to promote their beliefs and support their favored leaders. Unceasing, the battle between these two groups continues to escalate as the 2024 United States presidential election approaches (Bacallao et al., 2023).

As a result of the apprehension, curiosity, and preference for president that a majority of the population experience, many political scientists have attempted to predict the outcome of the election via regression models or implied probability statistics (Short, 2023). While these fixed equations offer valuable quantitative data, they fail to factor in the psychology of the people they are tallying.

One theory, believed by numerous scientists to be an invisible influencer of political views, is Terror Management Theory (TMT) (Arndt et al., 2008). I believe that this theory, which suggests that the awareness humans possess over the inevitability of their deaths heavily influences their behaviors, can produce a unique perspective when applied to predictions for America's next president (Arndt et al., 2015).

Terror Management Theory, explored in the 1980s by Jeff Greenberg, Tom Pyszczynski, and Sheldon Solomon, posits that the combination of the innate human need for survival and the salience humans possess over their mortalities can put them in "constant danger of being incapacitated by overwhelming terror" (Greenberg et al., 2004; "Terror," 2002). As a result of this debilitating anxiety, many coping mechanisms have been formed by humans to help distance themselves from the panic they experience. Researchers of the theory claim that one commonly used technique, applied consciously or subconsciously, is the creation and upholding of certain worldviews (Schmeichel, 2005). Adopting specific cultural views allows people to feel as though the world has meaning, and that therefore their existences have purposes (Cohen et al., 2017). Researchers Cohen et al. explained that adopting such values works exceptionally well as an anxiety-buffering mechanism because they often answer questions about the origin of life. Additionally, the individuals associated with these worldviews constantly assess their behaviors in comparison to the standards or morals which their worldview supports as a method of maintaining high self-esteem and distance from terror-related thoughts. The combination of believing in a meaningful worldview and the idea that one meets the

standards that the worldview values can effectively manage one's terror, and provide a significant psychological barrier for their anxiety (Schmeichel, 2005).

In order to better understand TMT's relationship to politics, I researched the theory using the search engine Google Scholar. This decision allowed me to form a foundational understanding of the theory based on scholarly reports that I could ensure were credible before looking at news articles and learning about the opinions of individuals. While researching, I found a number of sources (e.g. Burke et al., 2013; Cohen et al., 2017; Vali, 2019) that supported the notion that TMT is best applied to a specific political party's perspectives. I reported strictly on what I discovered when applying a TMT lens and attempted to remove any political biases I held.

As a method of testing how Terror Management affects politics, scientists recorded their subjects' opinions on certain cultural topics before and after making them salient of their mortality. According to a study done by Anson et al. (2009), when humans are prompted to think about death, they tend to cling to "whatever element of their worldview provides the quickest, most efficient, and most secure buffer against the potential for anxiety…" (p. 223). The "right-shift" is a term for the idea that when prompted to acknowledge their mortality, subjects tend to "shift toward conservative attitudes that [are] specifically independent of preexisting political orientation" (Burke et al., 2013). For example, in a study done about gun violence, after being prompted to think about their deaths, the majority of participants favored pro-gun laws rather than anti-gun laws (Menta, 2021). Similarly, in a study done about TMT's relationship to discrimination against out-groups, after being reminded of their mortalities, the majority of participants favored being unwelcoming to foreign religious groups (Abdollahi et al., 2009). These examples demonstrate the shift towards Republican-aligning values present in those prompted to acknowledge their mortality.

When looking at the candidates that represent the "right" to which the public might shift when voting in the 2024 election, it is still unclear which Republican candidate will be nominated to run for president. One potential nominee is former president Donald J. Trump, whose campaign seems to work exceptionally well when used alongside reminders of death. Although Trump does not explicitly mention death often, many of the beliefs he supports tend to "lead to the accessibility of death thoughts…" (Cohen et al., 2017, p. 146). Trump has vocalized his support for the termination of illegal immigration, his arguments against terrorism, and his dislike of out-groups (Miller, 2020; Sales, 2021; "Tearing," 2020). These three topics all target groups that share a common trait: They can cause others to feel threatened, and in the face of that threat, those who feel endangered will look for a source of stability. Perfectly using the vulnerability of the voters to his advantage in a speech of his, Trump stated, "Nobody knows the system better than me, which is why I alone can fix it" (Jackson). By indirectly reminding voters of their deaths and soon after promising to be the sole redeemer they need, Trump perfectly uses the psychology of the public as a campaign strategy.

Additionally, Trump has defended the religious beliefs of certain groups in various instances (Dias, 2020). Religion also plays a role in the management of death-induced terror; like politics, religion acts as a stabilizing worldview. Perhaps more importantly, it often provides the reassuring promise of an afterlife (Vali, 2019). In January of 2016, during a campaign speech of his, Trump said to a group of evangelical Christians, "Christianity is under tremendous siege, whether we want to talk about it or we don't want to talk about it …. [But] Christianity will have power. If I'm there, you're going to have plenty of power, you don't need anybody else" (Dias, 2020). In just a few breaths, Trump had perfectly used TMT to his advantage whether he was aware of it or not. He reminded the people of their fragility and the threats upon their most important worldviews, and then immediately provided them with another worldview they could adopt in order to cope: the support of his campaign.

Despite the miraculous success of Trump and his use of TMT, he lost to a left-wing candidate in the 2020 election (Andre et al., 2020). His ardent supporters justify his loss by saying that the election was tampered with, but assuming they are incorrect, why shouldn't Donald Trump have won (Bruggeman & Rubin, 2023)? This question brings about many interesting ideas: Could TMT be inaccurate in some way, or could there be an unidentified psychological factor that can outweigh the effects of the human response to death? When considering TMT, 2020 should have served as the perfect breeding ground for a Republican leader to arise; after all, a national pandemic provided constant reminders of death and an intense yearning for stability. And yet, no right-shift was present enough to help

the Republican president maintain his position. Perhaps Trump himself began to be perceived as the threat to life that people initially flocked to him to find saving from. His radical actions have come across as aggressive and dangerous to some, so it is possible that he became a reminder of death himself (Arnsdorf, 2023). He has been seen taking improper approaches to decreasing the spread of COVID-19 which led to the deaths of thousands, and contributing to the rise of the death toll of US troops in Afghanistan (Lee, 2021; Bergengruen, 2017). In order to make sense of what happened, more data should be collected about the turnout of the 2020 election and the circumstances surrounding it, and hopefully an explanation for these contrasting results can be produced.

Uncertainty plagues the citizens of America as they await learning who their next leader will be. However, Terror Management Theory provides in-depth insight as to why voters elect the candidates that they do. A conscious or subconscious fear of death can motivate voters and cause them to align with right-wing values. As discussed earlier, Trump specifically appeals to that fear due to the reminders of death he indirectly delivers and the promises of religious salvation he pledges. Not enough evidence has been gathered in order to understand why the ideas discussed in this paper do not align with the turnout of the 2020 election, but when focusing on the data collected by trials of TMT and thinking ahead to the 2024 election, it is clear that the Republican candidate who is nominated is favored to win.

References

Abdollahi, A., Pyszczynski, T., & Rothschild, Z. (2009). Does peace have a prayer? The effect of mortality salience, compassionate values, and religious fundamentalism on hostility toward out-groups. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology, 45*(4). https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jesp.2009.05.016.

Andre, M., Aufrichtig, A., Beltran, G., Bloch, M., Buchanan, L., Chavez, A., Cohn, N., Conlen, M., Daniel, A., Elkeurti, A., Fischer, A., Holder, J., Houp, W., Huang, J., Katz, J., Krolik, A., Lee, J. C., Lieberman, R., Marcus, I., Patel, J., Smart, C., Smithgall, B., Syam, U., Taylor, R., Watkins, M., & White, I. (2020). Presidential election results: Biden wins. *The New York Times.* *https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/11/03/us/elections/results-president.html*.

Anson, J., Greenberg, J., Pyszczynski, T., Solomon, S. (2009). *Social and psychological bases of ideology and system justification.* Oxford University Press, Inc., 210-240. https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780195320916.001.0001.

Arndt, J., Cox, C. R., Greenberg, J., Koslof, S., Pyszczynski T., Solomon, S., Weise, D. (2008). Interpersonal politics: the role of terror management and attachment processes in shaping political preferences. *Sage Journals, 19*(5). https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9280.2008.02108.x.

Arnsdorf, I., Dawsey, J., & User, A. (2023). The deepening radicalization of Donald J. Trump. *The Washington Post.* https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2023/05/24/trump-language-policy-2024-race/

Bacallao, A., Stelloh, T., Steward, K. (2023). Tensions flare over gun violence after house democrat calls republicans 'cowards' as they walk by. *National Broadcasting Company News.* https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/congress/democrat-calls-republicans-cowards-tense-exchange-gun-violence-rcna77342

Bergengruen, V. (2017). These US Troops Were Killed In Combat During Trump's First Year In Office. *BuzzFeed.News.* https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/verabergengruen/these-us-troops-were-killed-in-combat-during-trumps-first

Bruggeman, L., & Rubin, O. (2023). Fox news hosts called 2020 election fraud 'total BS' in private, new dominion court filing says. *American Broadcasting Company News*. https://abcnews.go.com/US/fox-news-hosts-called-2020-election-fraud-total/story?id=97261751.

Burke, B., Kosloff, S., & Landau, M. (2013). Death goes to the polls: A meta-analysis of mortality salience effects on political attitudes. *JSTOR, 34*(2). https://www.jstor.org/stable/23481741.

Cohen, F., Pyszczynski, T., Solomon, S., Thompson S. (2017). *Why irrational politics appeals: Understanding the allure of Trump* (M. Fitzduff, Ed.). ABC-CLIO. https://books.google.com/books?id=XrT5DQAAQBAJ.

Dias, E. (2020). Christianity will have power. *The New York Times.* https://www.nytimes.com/2020/08/09/us/evangelicals-trump-christianity.html.

Goldenberg, J. L., Heflick, N., Wisman, A. (2015). The great escape: The role of self-esteem and self-related cognition in terror management. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology, 60,* 121-132. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jesp.2015.05.006.

Greenberg, J. L., Pyszczynski, T., & Solomon, S. (2015). Advances in experimental social psychology. *Academic Press, 52,* 1-70. https://doi.org/10.1016/bs.aesp.2015.03.001.

Greenberg, J. L., Pyszczynski, T. A., & Solomon, S. (2004). *Lethal consumption: death-denying materialism.* American Psychological Association. https://doi.org/10.1037/10658-008 (2004).

Jackson, D. (2016). Donald Trump accepts GOP nomination, says 'I alone can fix' system. *USA Today.* https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/elections/2016/07/21/donald-trump-republican-convention-acceptance-speech/87385658/

Lee, B. Y. (2021). Death toll associated with Trump Administration goes beyond Covid-19, says Lancet Report. *Forbes.* https://www.forbes.com/sites/brucelee/2021/02/11/report-trump-associated-with-461000-deaths-in-2018-others-deserve-blame-though/?sh=345d5eac2a31

Menta, B. (2021). Guns and terror management theory: how exposure to gun violence in the news media affects attitudes of gun endorsement. *The University of Arizona.* https://repository.arizona.edu/handle/10150/666683.

Miller, G. (2020). Allegations of racism have marked Trump's presidency and become key issue as election nears. *The Washington Post.* https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/trump-race-record/2020/09/23/332b0b68-f10f-11ea-b796-2dd09962649c_story.html.

Sales, N. (2021). Counterterrorism in the Trump administration and beyond. *U.S. Department of State.* https://2017-2021.state.gov/counterterrorism-in-the-trump-administration-and-beyond/index.html.

Schmeichel, B. (2005). Self-affirmation and mortality salience: affirming values reduces worldview defense and death-thought accessibility. *Sage Journals, 31*(5). https://doi.org/10.1177/0146167204271.

Short, J. (2023). 2024 Presidential election odds. *Empire Stakes.* https://www.empirestakes.com/ny-sports-betting/presidential-election-odds.

"Tearing families apart." (2020). *Fwd.us.* https://www.fwd.us/news/the-impact-of-trumps-immigration-agenda/.

"Terror management theory." (2022). *Ernest Becker Foundation.* https://ernestbecker.org/resources/terror-management-theory/.

Vali, K. (2019). *Handbook of terror management theory.* Academic Press. https://doi.org/10.1016/B978-0-12-811844-3.00011-1.