COVID-19 THREAT PERCEPTIONS AND VOTING IN THE 2020 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION

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Maria D. Musumeci

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COVID-19 THREAT PERCEPTIONS AND VOTING IN THE 2020 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION

Name: Musumeci, Maria D

APPROVED BY:

_____
Erin O'Mara Kunz, Ph.D.
Committee Chair
Associate Professor of Psychology

_____
Joy E. Losee, Ph.D.
Faculty Advisor
Assistant Professor of Psychology

_____
Jack Bauer, Ph.D.
Faculty Advisor
Professor of Psychology

_____
Lee J. Dixon, Ph.D.
Associate Professor & Chair
Department of Psychology

ABSTRACT

COVID-19 THREAT PERCEPTIONS AND VOTING IN THE 2020 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION

Name: Musumeci, Maria D.
University of Dayton

Advisor: Dr. Erin O'Mara Kunz

The thesis examined associations regarding COVID-19 realistic threats (i.e., concerns about physical health and material well-being) and symbolic threat (i.e., sociocultural concerns) with the likelihood of voting for Joe Biden or Donald Trump in the 2020 Presidential Election. Political ideology and attitudes about racism, sexism, and right-wing authoritarianism (RWA) were considered as well. It was hypothesized that realistic threat concerns would be positively associated with the likelihood of voting for Biden, but this association would be modified by political ideology, with more liberal ideologies strengthening the association between realistic threat and the likelihood of voting for Biden. It was also hypothesized that symbolic threat would be positively associated with the likelihood of voting for Trump, but that this association would be qualified by a significant interaction between political ideology and symbolic threat, showing that more conservative ideologies strengthen the predicted association. Both hypotheses controlled for racism, hostile and benevolent sexism, and RWA. The study was a cross-sectional, correlational design and the hypotheses were tested in two separate regressions, one examining the likelihood of voting for Biden and the other examining the likelihood of voting for Trump. Broadly, the hypotheses were not supported; it was found that political ideology and symbolic racism accounted for most of the variance within the sample. Exploratory regression analyses examined the unique contributions of

threat, sex differences, and tested interactions between threat perceptions and sex. In these models, the likelihood of voting for Biden was positively associated with realistic threat and the likelihood of voting for Trump was positively associated with symbolic threat. Results showed that sex did not moderate realistic threat but did moderated the association between symbolic threat and the likelihood of voting for each candidate. Specifically, in men, symbolic threat was positively associated with the likelihood of voting for Trump and negatively associated with the likelihood of voting for Biden. However, for women, symbolic threats had no effects on voting for either candidate. This work showed that University of Dayton students with realistic threat perceptions related to COVID-19 were likely to vote for Biden, regardless of sex. However, symbolic threat effects were only associated with how men said they would vote in the election, thus, sex and gender differences should be considered in future research regarding threat perceptions.

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INTRODUCTION

In March 2020, the outbreak of the COVID-19, coronavirus was declared a pandemic. As the pandemic spread across the world, the United States (U.S.) also prepared for the 2020 Presidential Election. Both events divided the country by creating physical and ideological distance among Americans. This distance was partly impacted by differing threat perceptions and concerns regarding the severity of the virus and how it should be handled. On one side, there were concerns about the COVID-19 virus threatening people's physical health and well-being. Meanwhile, others perceived COVID-19 as a threat to American traditions and sociocultural norms. Differences in threat-related concerns seemed to be divided along political lines (Rathgeber et al., 2020; Byrd & Bialek, 2020), which became even more apparent as the country approached the Presidential Election. The pandemic became a critical topic for both Republican candidate Donald Trump and Democratic candidate Joe Biden to address in debates and campaign advertainments. Thus, the aim of the current paper is to examine associations between COVID-19 threat perceptions and voting in the 2020 Presidential Election.

COVID-19 Threat Perceptions

COVID-19 related threat perceptions can be characterized using the *Integrated Threat Theory* (ITT). Broadly, the ITT has been used to study intergroup anxiety, outgroup dislike, and prejudice (Stephan et al., 1999). However, the ITT is an attractive theory for studying the COVID-19 pandemic because it differentiates types of concerns, or threats, in ambiguous and novel situations (Kachanoff et al., 2020).

The ITT conceptualizes threat through two lenses, *realistic threat,* and *symbolic threat*. Realistic threats are tangible dangers to physical or material well-being. In the context of COVID-19, Kachanoff et al (2020) interpreted realistic threats as worries about one's physical health, the health of the community (e.g., contracting or spreading the virus), and economic consequences of the pandemic (e.g., financial security). Alternatively, symbolic threats are more abstract and describe risks to sociocultural identity and values. Symbolic threat functions to maintain group identity and arises from a belief that the group's system of thinking is morally sound (Stephan et al., 1999). In the context of COVID-19 in American, symbolic threats aligned with American values (e.g., freedom and democracy) and social consequences of the pandemic (e.g., social norm disruptions). For example, social distancing regulations have resulted in changes to routines, traditions, and ceremonial gatherings (Kachanoff et al., 2020); these changes would constitute as symbolic threats.

Politically Divided

Early in the pandemic, the Pew Research Center asked Americans various questions about their thoughts and behaviors surrounding COVID-19. The inquires targeted thoughts about life in quarantine and opinions about pandemic management. For example, some reports focused on adherence to CDC social distancing regulations, holiday travel and family plans, or people's mental health in isolation (for more see https://www.pewresearch.org/topics/coronavirus-disease-2019-covid-19/). One report specifically focused on the potential threats of the pandemic by asking people how much they felt COVID-19 was a threat to the U.S. economy, the health of the population, day-to-day life in American, their personal finances, and their personal health (Pew Research

Center, 2020a). Notably, the questions asked in this poll represent realistic threats and were later used by Kachanoff et al (2020) to measure COVID-19 realistic threat perceptions.

The results of the Pew Research Center poll about realistic threat perceptions showed partisan trends emerging (Pew Research Center, 2020a). Democrats indicated concerns for physical health and financial well-being at individual and national levels. However, few Republican people indicated concern for most realistic threats, except for concerns about the U.S. economy (Pew Research Center, 2020a). However, this does not mean Republicans and conservative people did not have concerns about the pandemic. Rather, their fears involved the dismantling of traditions in America. Republicans were also motivated to protect their individual rights and freedoms, even if that meant the virus would spread (Byrd & Bialek, 2020).

Given the differing concerns between political parties and the extent to which COVID-19 has infiltrated life around the world, it is important to examine how threat perceptions might be associated with political ideology and voting in the 2020 Presidential Election. Would people concerned by realistic threat be more likely to vote for Biden? Moreover, would people concerned by symbolic threat be more likely to vote for Trump?

Realistic Threat and Voting for Biden

Other information collected by the Pew Research Center throughout the spring, summer, and fall of 2020 supported that people likely to vote for Biden were concerned by realistic threats. Democrats and Biden supporters continued to identify COVID-19 as a major threat to American health (Pew Research Center 2020b) and repeatedly expressed

concerns for the spread of the virus when asked about various topics. These concerns were demonstrated through positive reactions to increasing COVID-19 related restrictions (Pew Research Center, 2020c), expressing concerns about teachers and students contracting and spreading the virus if resuming in person classes (Pew Research Center 2020d), and many opting to vote by mail to reduce risks of contamination (Pew Research Center, 2020c). Furthermore, Democrats displayed their concerns for the U.S. economy by indicating that a second relief package was necessary for people's financial well-being (Pew Research Center, 2020e). Perhaps most informing for voting behaviors was Democrats consistent disapproval (from March to August) of President Trump's management of the pandemic (Pew Research Center, 2020f), indicating that his handling of the outbreak did not ease their concerns and likely did not persuade Democratic voters to support him. Taken together, the information about Biden voters and Democrats consistently aligned with realistic threat concerns for health and material well-being.

Symbolic Threat and Voting for Trump

Throughout the pandemic, Trump supporters were less concerned by the severity and health consequences of COVID-19 compared to Biden supporters. For example, studies examining political ideology in relation to adherence of COVID-19 guidelines (e.g., social distancing) found that conservativism was negatively associated with social distancing (Rothgerber et al., 2020), mask wearing, and cleaning behaviors such as hand washing (Byrd & Bialek, 2020). Moreover, a majority of Republicans indicated that they felt safe continuing in person gatherings like attending worship services (79%), visiting people who live outside of their home (88%), going to salons/barbershops (72%), and eating in restaurants (65%; Pew Research Center, 2020g; Pew Research Center, 2020e).

Trump supporters focused on potential sociocultural threats and norm deviations. For example, when asked about in person versus online learning, Republicans prioritized academic progress (i.e., not wanting students to fall behind traditional instructions) and social interactions with peers. Comparatively, the group indicated less concern for the spread of COVID-19 to children and teachers (Pew Research Center, 2020d). Thus, when symbolic and realistic threats did not coincide, the priority was tradition and social norm maintenance, which both fall in line with symbolic threat concerns. Additionally, it was found that Trump voters were against maintaining or increasing COVID-19 restrictions (e.g., social distancing; Pew Research Center, 2020c). The disapproval of regulations could be due to a perceived threat to freedoms, as many may have felt masks were restrictive. Concerns about freedom and integrity carried over into the election as well. For example, Trump voters tended to vote more often in person than by mail due to concerns about election fraud from mail-in voting (Pew Research Center, 2020c). Byrd and Bialek (2020) provided further support for rights and freedoms being a concern for Republicans by finding a positive association between conservative ideologies and prioritizing individual liberty over others' health. Thus, evidence supports the claim that Republicans and Trump voters seemed to be concerned with symbolic threats throughout the pandemic.

Other Voting Considerations

While the pandemic did retain much attention leading up to the election, it did not exist in a vacuum, and other important social factors and events likely weighed on people's voting intentions. What is likely to be recognized as perhaps the most impactful event occurred on May 25, 2020, when George Floyd, an unarmed Black man, was

murdered in public by a police officer in broad daylight. This ignited protests throughout the United States that lasted for weeks. Accordingly, policy addressing systemic racism, white supremacy, and police brutality was at the forefront of many people's minds during the 2020 Presidential Election. Attitudes towards civil rights have been of interest in previous elections, particularly during the 2016 Presidential Election, in which Trump was also a candidate. Post-2016 election research found voting for Trump was positively associated with prejudice toward Black Americans (Drakulich et al., 2020; Frasure-Yokley 2018). This finding aligns with other work demonstrating conservative ideology positively associating with discriminatory attitudes (Blatz & Ross, 2009).

Hostile and benevolent sexism were also positively associated with voting for Trump in the 2016 election (Brock et al., 2017; Cassese & Barnes, 2019; Frasure-Yokley, 2018). Hostile sexism is aversive generalizations and negative prejudice toward women. Benevolent sexism captures positive stereotypes about women, which constrain women's roles in society by categorizing all women as caring, intimate, or fragile (Glick & Fiske, 1996). While both types of sexism weighed on voting in 2016, hostile sexism was a particularly strong predictor of support for Trump (Ratliff et al., 2019). Many felt Trump himself was disrespectful toward women based on crude comments (Bullock, 2016) and documented history of sexual harassment.

However, Trump's disdaining comments and opposition to political correctness appealed to the right-wing base (Womick et al., 2018), particularly those favoriting authoritarian leadership. Right-wing authoritarianism (RWA) describes a preference for hostile and violence rhetoric in addition to aggression targeted at outgroup members (Womick et al., 2018; Smith & Hanley, 2018). In the 2016 election, RWA was positively

associated with support for Trump and negatively associated with Hillary Clinton, the democratic candidate (Choma & Hanoch, 2017; Conway & McFarland, 2019). Notably, authoritarian aggression was more strongly associated with support for Donald Trump compared to other Republican candidates (Womick et al., 2018).

Current Study

Data from the Pew Research Center and previous research (Rothgerber et al., 2020; Byrd & Bialek, 2020) suggests partisan trends are associated with behaviors and thoughts about COVID-19. The current study addressed the question of whether perceptions of realistic and symbolic threat regarding the pandemic were associated with voting in the 2020 Presidential Election, while controlling for factors relevant from the 2016 election. Two primary hypotheses were tested:

1. The likelihood of voting for Joe Biden will be positively associated with realistic threat. However, this main effect will be qualified by a significant realistic threat by political ideology interaction. The association between realistic threat and likelihood of voting for Biden will be stronger for people with a more liberal ideology than for people with more conservative ideology, while controlling for RWA, racism, hostile sexism, and benevolent sexism.
2. The likelihood of voting for Donald Trump will be positively associated with symbolic threat. This main effect, however, will be qualified by a significant symbolic threat by political ideology interaction. The association between symbolic threat and likelihood of voting for Trump will be stronger for people with a more conservative ideology than for people with a more liberal ideology, while controlling for RWA, racism, hostile sexism, and benevolent sexism.

Exploratory Research Questions

Though no a priori predictions were made, one exploratory analysis of specific interest was whether the association between COVID-19 threat perceptions and voting would be moderated by sex. Previous research suggests that realistic and symbolic threat associated with COVID-19 may vary by sex. For example, masculinity seems to decrease adherence to health-related practices, suggesting on average males may not adhere to CDC guidelines as well as females (Griffith et al., 2021). Furthermore, women have shown higher COVID-19 contamination concerns than men (McCarthy, 2020) and consistently have higher pathogenic disgust sensitivity (Tybur et al., 2011). Given the connections between health behaviors and sex, women may have higher realistic threat concerns than men. Furthermore, research regarding the ITT suggests that symbolic threat may also vary by sex (Makashvili et al., 2018). For example, it was found that symbolic threat effects were stronger for men compared to women in predicting prejudice, but realistic threat and sex did not interact (Makashvili et al., 2018). Nevertheless, few other studies have explored whether sex or gender moderates the associations between perceived threat and relevant outcomes. For these reasons, the current study will explore if each threat varies as a function of sex, and whether sex interacts with realistic threat and with symbolic threat to further explain any associations between threat perceptions and voting.

METHODS

Design

The study was a cross-sectional, correlation design. Data was collected during the month of October 2020. Voting was assessed by two separate variables, one asking the likelihood of voting for Biden and the other asking the likelihood of voting for Trump. These functioned as dependent variables in all primary analyses. The two primary predictors were realistic and symbolic threat, with political ideology as a moderating variable. Furthermore, covariates were included to account for other voting associations, including symbolic racism, hostile sexism, benevolent sexism, and RWA.

Participants

The total sample consisted of 154 University of Dayton undergraduate students (women = 108; 78.6% Non-Hispanic White (Caucasian)). All students received course credit for their introductory to psychology research requirement in exchange for participating. Eleven students did not provide answers to the primary dependent variables, thus reducing the sample to 143 students (women =101; 79% Non-Hispanic White (Caucasian)). Another five students did not answer questions regarding political ideology and were also excluded from primary analyses, further reducing the sample used to test the primary hypotheses to 138 participants (women = 98; 79.7 Non-Hispanic White (Caucasian)).

Design and Procedure

After providing consent, participants completed measures of COVID-19 realistic and symbolic threat, political ideology, racism, sexism, authoritarianism, and voting behavior. Participants were also asked to report their biological sex at birth. The data

included in the current study was collected as a part of a larger study examining political attitudes and identity and was collected during the Department of Psychology's Mass Testing session that took place during the month of October 2020. Thus, the participants also completed questionnaires unrelated to the current research question.

Measures

COVID-19 related Realistic and Symbolic Threat

The *COVID-19 Threat Scale* (Kachanoff et al., 2020) was used to assess threat perceptions related to the coronavirus pandemic. All items were rated on a Likert scale of 1 (*not a threat*) to 4 (*major threat*). The measure consisted of two sub-scales to assess realistic ($\alpha = .71$[1]) and symbolic threat ($\alpha = .89$). The items of the realistic threat subscale were based on Pew Research Center's (2020a) poll questions (e.g., "How much of a **threat**, if any, is the coronavirus outbreak to your personal health?"). Symbolic threat items were created from definitions published by Stephan and colleagues' (2009; e.g., "How much of a **threat**, if any, is the coronavirus outbreak to American values and traditions").

Voting Behavior

A political and voting behavior questionnaire was created for this study. This measure was used to evaluate the likelihood of voting for Presidential candidates Joe Biden and Donald Trump. Participants were asked about their voting intentions toward each candidate. Two items, rated on a scale of 1(*No, not at all*) to 7 (*Yes, definitely*), directly addressed the likelihood of voting for each candidate and were used in the current study as separate dependent variables. The items were: 1) I will vote for Joe

[1] For all Cronbach's alpha values reported in text $N = 154$, except for political ideology, for which missing data was excluded ($n = 144$).

Biden for President of the United States, and 2) I will vote for Donald Trump for President of the United States.

Political Ideology

The *Political Polarization Survey* (Mason, 2013) was modified and used to assess political ideology. Participants were asked about their orientations regarding political ideology (*Thinking about Political Issues, indicate your Ideological Strength*), social ideology (*Thinking about Social Issues, indicate your Ideological Strength*), and economic ideology (*Thinking about Economic Issues, indicate your Ideological Strength*). The choices for each of these questions were: *Extremely Liberal, Liberal, Slightly Liberal, Moderate, Slightly Conservative, Conservative, and Extremely Conservative*. The responses were transformed into continuous values ranging from 1 (*Extremely Liberal*) to 7 (*Extremely Conservative*), then the average was calculated and used to determine one score for political ideology ($\alpha = .93$). Thus, lower scores represent liberal ideologies and higher score indicate conservative ideologies.

Racism

The eight-item *Symbolic Racism Scale* (SRS; Henry & Sears, 2002) measured modern attitudes toward Black Americans, specifically attending to racial prejudice and animosity. The 8-item measure consists of questions asking about abstract concepts related to racial animosity, such as "It's really a matter of some people not trying hard enough; if Blacks would only try harder, they could be just as well off as Whites". Response options to items varied but were scored a 1 to 4 scale, with the exception of one item that was scored on a 1-3 scale ($\alpha = .83$).

Sexism

The *Ambivalent Sexism Inventory* (ASI; Glick & Fiske, 1996) consisted of 22 items pertaining to attitudes toward women and men in contemporary society. The measure consists of two subscales that were separately scored and analyzed. The first, measured hostile sexism (α = .91), or negative and harmful generalizations and prejudice toward women (e.g., "Many women are actually seeking special favors, such as hiring policies that favor them over men, under the guise of asking for 'equality'"). The second assessed benevolent sexism (α = .77), or positive stereotype about women's roles in society (e.g., "No matter how accomplished he is, a man is not truly complete as a person unless he has the love of a woman"). Participants were asked to rate their level of agreement with all items on a scale ranging from 0 (*disagree strongly*) to 5 (*agree strongly*).

Authoritarianism

The *Right-Wing Authoritarianism Scale* measures agreeableness with authoritarian leadership. RWA emphasizes messages of fear and aggression as well as promotes egocentricity and admiration for authority figures (Altemeyer, 1988). The 22 items were rated on a scale of -4 (*strongly disagree*) to 4 (*strongly agree*). Scores are averaged into a single mean to represent an individual's RWA score (α = 0.91)

RESULTS

The current study addressed if perceptions of realistic and symbolic threats regarding COVID-19 were associated with voting during the 2020 Presidential Election. The first hypothesis predicted the likelihood of voting for Biden would be positively associated with realistic threat concerns, but this association would be qualified by an interaction between political ideology and realistic threat. It was predicted that the association between realistic threat and the likelihood voting for Biden would be stronger for people who were more liberal. Alternatively, the likelihood of voting for Trump was predicted to be positively associated with symbolic threat. This association was expected to be moderated by political ideology such that it would be stronger for people who were more conservative. Both hypotheses included RWA, symbolic racism, hostile sexism, and benevolent sexism as covariates in order to control for predictors relevant to voting in past elections.

Missing Data Management

Multiple Imputation

Missing data was addressed before recoding, scoring, and scaling the variables. First, Little's Missing Completely at Random Test was conducted for each measure with missing data (ASI, RWA, COVID-19 Threat, and SRS) to examine the pattern of missingness, and particularly whether there was evidence that data for each measure was missing completely at random (MCAR; Rubin, 2004). Little's MCAR test assumes the null hypothesis is that the data is MCAR, thus a p-value >.05 is consistent with data MCAR whereas p-values of < .05 suggest the data is not MCAR (Little, 1988), but it

does not indicate the exact pattern of missingness (e.g., missing at random, not missing at random; Schafer & Graham, 2002).

Data was MCAR for the COVID-19 Threat scale ($\chi^2(77, N = 154) = 72.69, p = .618$), the ASI ($\chi^2(561, N = 154) = 570.60, p = .380$), and the RWA scale ($\chi^2(387, N = 154) = 407.53, p = .227$). However, the SRS was not missing completely at random $\chi^2(99, N = 154) = 147.33, p = .001$, which could be due to the amount of missingness among the items (12.3%-1.3% of responses across items). When data is not MCAR, multiple imputation is recommended as listwise deletion or single imputation (e.g., mean replacement) may produce more biased results (de Goeij et al., 2013). When data is MCAR, however, there is more flexibility in how missing data can be handled and though multiple imputation is not required, it is still the recommended approach. Given that multiple imputation needed to be used for the SRS measure, it was used to compute the missing values for all measures It is generally recommended to use between two and 10 sets of imputations for modest amounts of missing data (Rubin, 2004), so given the ambiguity of the SRS missingness, the current study employed five imputation sets.

Once the five imputation sets were completed, relevant items were reverse coded in all the datasets. Then, the five coded datasets were pooled into one, using the average of the five imputations for the missing items. Once the multiple imputations and pooling was complete, the scale scores were calculated.

Excluding Data

Participants with missing data regarding the three question that made up the measure of political ideology (n = 10) were excluded from the analysis, as only 3 items were used to calculate this variable. Furthermore, participants with missing data from the

dependent variables were also excluded because each dependent variable was a single-item measure; 11 participants did not provide responses to either dependent variable. Some missing cases overlapped across the measure of political ideology and the dependent variables resulting in a total of 16 participants excluded from the following descriptive and primary analyses (n=138).

Descriptive Analyses

The descriptive statistics, Cronbach's alpha, and zero-order correlations among all the predictor and dependent variables are summarized in Table 1. Importantly, the likelihood of voting for Biden was negatively correlated with symbolic racism (SRS), hostile sexism, benevolent sexism, and RWA, whereas all these factors were positively associated with the likelihood of voting for Trump. Notably, realistic threat was positively correlated with the likelihood of voting for Biden and negatively correlated with the likelihood of voting for Trump, and symbolic threat was positively associated with the likelihood of voting for Trump and unrelated to voting for Biden. Thus, all the factors considered in the hypotheses were associated with voting for at least one candidate at the zero-order level.

Primary Analyses

Hypothesis 1: Likelihood of Voting for Biden

Two regression models were conducted to test hypothesis 1. In model 1, the likelihood of voting for Biden was regressed onto mean-centered realistic threat, symbolic threat, political ideology, RWA, symbolic racism, hostile sexism, and benevolent sexism. In model 2, the realistic threat by political ideology interaction was

added to examine whether the interaction accounts for significantly more variance in likelihood of voting for Biden. Table 2 summarizes the results for each model (top).

In general, the proposed hypothesis was not supported. The realistic threat by political ideology interaction was not significant. Further, consistent across both models, realistic threat was not associated with likelihood of voting for Biden. Political ideology was negatively associated with voting for Biden, a pattern suggesting more liberal ideologies was associated with greater likelihood of voting for Biden. Additionally, symbolic racism was significant and negatively associated with the likelihood of voting for Biden; that is, people lower in symbolic racism showed a higher likelihood of voting for Biden. There were no other statistically significant factors.

Hypothesis 2: Likelihood of Voting for Trump

Hypothesis 2 was tested using two regression models. In the first model, the likelihood of voting for Trump was also regressed onto mean-centered realistic threat, symbolic threat, political ideology, RWA, symbolic racism, hostile sexism, and benevolent sexism. In the second model, the interaction between symbolic threat and political ideology was included to test whether the interaction explained significantly more variance than the main effects in model 1. The regression results are summarized in the bottom half of Table 2.

The proposed hypothesis was not supported and the interaction in model 2 was not significant. Across both models, symbolic threat did not significantly predict the likelihood of voting for Trump. Furthermore, political ideology and symbolic racism both were significantly and positively associated with voting for Trump, with no other factors registering as statistically significant. The patterns suggest that people with more

conservative ideologies were associated with a greater likelihood of voting for Trump. Additionally, people higher in symbolic racism showed a higher likelihood of voting for Trump.

Follow-up Analyses

Given the lack of support for the primary hypotheses, further analyses were conducted in order to better understand the data. Given the significant correlations between voting behavior and each predictor variable, variables that were most strongly associated with each dependent variable, namely symbolic racism and political ideology, were likely explaining most of the variance within the current sample (leaving little variance left for realistic and/or symbolic threat to account for likelihood of voting). Therefore, additional regression analyses were conducted for each dependent variable, based on the results from the tests of the proposed hypotheses, in order to test the R^2 change and explore unique contributions of the variables significantly associated with each dependent variable. For each DV, multiple models were specified, and they were the same for each dependent variable. In the first model, likelihood of voting for a given candidate was regressed onto mean-centered political ideology. In model 2, symbolic racism was added, followed by model 3, in which the other covariates (hostile sexism, benevolent sexism, and RWA) were added. Next, the fourth model added symbolic and realistic threat. Lastly, model 5 included the relative interactions (i.e., realistic by political ideology in the Biden model and symbolic by political ideology in the Trump model). The results are summarized in Tables 3 (Biden) and Table 4 (Trump).

In general, almost all of the variability in voting for either candidate was accounted for by political ideology and symbolic racism. In the analysis examining

voting for Biden, political ideology alone accounted for 59% of the variance and symbolic racism significantly accounted for an additional 4%. However, adding the other variables did not significantly account for any more of the variance. The same pattern was shown in the analysis examining voting for Trump, with political ideology account for 55% of the variance and symbolic racism accounting for another 4%. Again, the other variables did not significantly explain any additional variance. Failure to support Hypothesis 1 and 2 may be due to realistic and symbolic threat being unrelated to the likelihood of voting for each candidate, or due to not enough variance in likelihood of voting remaining after including the covariates and moderators in the analyses.

Exploratory Analyses

Exploratory analyses were conducted for several reasons. First, to examine the extent to which each type of threat (realistic and symbolic) was uniquely associated with the likelihood of voting for each candidate, excluding all covariates and moderators from previous analyses. This analysis provides a straightforward test of the extent to which each type of threat is associated with the likelihood of voting for each candidate, thus providing information about whether the proposed hypotheses were not supported because these concepts are unrelated. Additionally, the extent to which sex moderates the association between each type of threat and likelihood of voting for a given candidate was explored.

Exploration regarding the role of sex (biological, at birth) was first addressed within both types of threat. Two, one-way, ANOVAs were conducted to examine any sex differences regarding threat. The Levene's test of equality of error variances indicated

that homogeneity assumptions were satisfied on both the realistic threat analysis $F(1, 141) = 0.34$, $p > .05$ and the symbolic threat analysis $F(1, 141) = 0.69$, $p > .05$.

First, realistic threat functioned as the dependent variable, with sex as a fixed factor and symbolic threat as a covariate. There were significant main effects of both symbolic threat $F(1, 140) = 4.95$, $p = .028$, $\eta^2 = .03$ and sex $F(1, 140) = 5.52$, $p = .02$, $\eta^2 = .04$. Females ($M = 2.79$, $SD = .57$) had higher realistic threat concerns than males ($M = 2.56$, $SD = 0.58$). Alternatively, when assessing symbolic threat with sex as a fixed factor and realistic threat as a covariate, females and males did not significantly differ $F(1, 140) = 1.05$, $p = .308$, $\eta^2 = .01$.

To test if an interaction between sex and threat would modify the association with likelihood of voting, multiple regressions were conducted to predict voting for each candidate. The likelihood of voting for Biden was regressed onto effects coded sex and mean-centered realistic threat[2], while controlling for mean-centered symbolic threat; interactions for realistic threat by sex and symbolic threat by sex were also included in the model, $R^2 = .181$, $F(5, 137) = 6.07$, $p < .001$. Table 5 summarizes the results. Realistic threat was significantly and positively associated with the likelihood of voting for Biden, whereas symbolic threat was significantly negatively associated with the likelihood of voting for Biden. Sex was also associated with voting for Biden such that women showed a greater likelihood of voting for Biden than men. However, these latter main effects were qualified by a significant interaction between symbolic threat and sex. The interaction was decomposed by examining the simple slope of symbolic threat for

[2] Realistic and symbolic threat were each recentered because missing data from political ideology was no longer excluded (n = 143). There was a minuscule difference for threat means with the additional participants.

men and for women (with each sex dummy-coded as the reference group in the relevant analysis). For men, symbolic threat was negatively associated with voting for Biden, B= -1.40, *SE* = .48, *t*(137) = -2.94, *p* = .004, whereas for women symbolic threat was not related B= -0.05, *SE* = .79 *t*(137) = -0.17, *p* = .866.

A similar analysis was conducted regressing the likelihood of voting for Trump onto effects coded sex, mean-centered symbolic threat, and controlling for mean-centered realistic threat. The full model included interactions between sex and realistic threat as well as sex and symbolic threat, R^2 = .23, *F*(5, 137) = 8.11, *p* < .001 (see Table 5 for regression summary). Symbolic threat was significantly and positively associated with the likelihood of voting for Trump and realistic threat was negatively associated. Additionally, sex was significantly associated, suggesting men were more likely than women to vote for Trump. However, these main effects were qualified by a significant sex by symbolic threat interaction. Simple slopes showed that symbolic threat in men was positively associated with the likelihood of voting for Trump B= 1.98, *SE* = .44, *t*(137) = 4.49, *p* < .001, but the association was not significant for women B= -0.01, *SE* = .27, *t*(137) = -0.02, *p* = .985.

DISCUSSION

Primary Findings

The current study tested two hypotheses regarding the likelihood of voting for presidential candidates Joe Biden and Donald Trump. The first hypothesis predicted that the likelihood of voting for Biden would be positively associated with COVID-19 realistic threat perceptions, but that this association would be modified by political ideology, with more liberal ideologies strengthening the association. The second hypothesis predicted that the likelihood of voting for Trump would be positively associated with symbolic threat, however, the association would be qualified by a significant interaction between symbolic threat and political ideology, with more conservative ideologies strengthening the association. Realistic threat, hostile sexism, benevolent sexism, and RWA were controlled for in each of these analyses.

Neither hypothesis was supported, and the predicted interactions were not significant. The patterns of associations followed the direction of the hypotheses, in that realistic threat showed a positive trend with Biden and symbolic threat showed a positive trend with Trump. However, these were not statistically significant. For both Biden and Trump, only political ideology and symbolic racism were significantly associated with voting. Follow-up analyses examining the unique contributions of each variable confirmed that political ideology and symbolic racism together accounted for almost the entirety of the variance in likelihood of voting for either candidate, and left little variance for realistic or symbolic threat to account for. It was not surprising that political ideology accounted for much of the variance in the current study as people often vote for the

candidate representing their party. However, it is important to ask why symbolic racism prevailed over the other covariates.

Symbolic Racism

Racially-related events that occurred prior to the election likely made thoughts about racial disparities in America particularly dominant in the 2020 election. On one side, people were cognizant about systemic bias, white supremacy, and police homicides disproportionally effecting Black Americans and people of color. People protested, people fought for justice, and people campaigned for Joe Biden and Kamala Harris, as promises were made to advance racial equity and support underserved communities (Sprunt, 2020; also see Exec. Order No. 13985, 2021). But on the other side, people did not believe there were race issues in America and behaved in ways that sought to silence or discredit racial movements, such as Black Lives Matter, by combating the movement with slogan like "all lives matter" (Victor, 2016). Furthermore, Trump's presidency worked toward reducing immigration, particularly aimed at nations with people of color, by attempting to build a wall at the U.S. and Mexico border, and administering executive orders suspending "entry of certain aliens from seven countries…" (Exec. Order No, 13780, 2017). Regardless of the intent for these orders and plans, people holding racist attitudes could find these policies appealing because they limit access to American citizenship and opportunities to live in the U.S. for people from foreign countries, including African, Middle Eastern, and Islamic countries. Thus, voting for either candidate in this election, likely was influenced by desires for inclusive or restrictive racial and ethnic policies.

Exploratory Findings

While the primary hypotheses were not supported, the exploratory research questions provided additional findings that are relevant to and inform the primary hypotheses. The aim of the exploratory analyses was to first examine the role of threat in voting without overlap from traditional voting factors (i.e., political ideology, racism, sexism, and RWA). The second goal of the exploratory analyses was to understand how sex may be associated with threat and voting.

Realistic Threat

As expected, for Biden realistic threat was positively associated with voting, thus supporting the claim that those with more concerns about realistic threat were more likely to vote for Biden. The inverse effect was observed in the Trump analysis, in that realistic threat was negatively associated with the likelihood voting for Trump. Thus, it is possible that concerns about threats to physical health and economic well-being might have deterred people from voting for Trump and encouraged people to vote for Biden.

There was a difference between the levels of realistic threat between females and males, with females showing more concerns. However, sex did not moderate the association between realistic threat and voting for each candidate. In other words, realistic threat functioned the same across sexes when it came to voting. A lack of interaction between realistic threat and sex was also observed by Makashvili and colleagues (2018). In line with the current work, Makashvili et al (2018) did not find that sex modified realistic threat and their outcome (prejudice). Are threats to the human body, or the state in which that body exists, perceived similarly by people of all sexes and genders? The findings from the current study paired with pervious work (Makashvili et

al., 2018) suggests realistic threat could have behavioral consequences inherent to humans; the current study, however, only introduces this idea. Future research should empirically address how realistic threat is interpreted across sex and diverse populations because it is important to understand the potential universality of realistic threats and the social consequences that may follow.

Symbolic Threat

Symbolic threat was positively associated with the likelihood of voting for Trump, and negatively associated with the likelihood of voting for Biden. However, sex moderated the association between symbolic threat and the likelihood of voting for each candidate. For men, symbolic threat was positively associated with the likelihood of voting for Trump, however the association was absent in women. A similar pattern was observed in examining the likelihood of voting for Biden in that symbolic threat effects were relevant for men, but not women. In men, more symbolic threat concerns decreased the likelihood of voting for Biden, whereas no effects were shown for women. Thus, women's level of concern with symbolic threats was not related to how they voted.

The pattern observed in the current study matches that of Makashvili and colleagues (2018), as they also showed the effects of symbolic threat being stronger in men than in women. Makashvili and colleagues (2018) expressed that symbolic threat could be related to values regarding power, as men on average might be more concerned by competition for power compared to women. In the context of COVID-19 symbolic threats, the questions do not explicitly address concepts of power. Rather, items asked about COVID-19 threatening *what it means to be American, American values and traditions, rights and freedoms of the U.S. population, American democracy,* and *the*

maintenance of law and order (Kachanoff et al., 2020). Concepts such as values, freedoms, traditions, and democracy are abstract and subjective. For example, what does it mean to be American? For some, this answer could elicit thoughts about power at a national, or even global level. However, the answer to "what it means to be American" will likely differ depending on who is asked, or perhaps the affect behind the answer may differ depending on the respondent's background. In other words, symbolic threats could be interpreted as threat to power, but this may not be a universal interpretation given power struggles in America and the abstract nature of the question.

Notably, the current findings showed that women and men did not differ in levels of symbolic threat perceptions; COVID-19 seemed to elicit the same level of symbolic threat across sex. Yet the behavioral consequences of this perception differed – why? Symbolic threat pertains to cultural values, social norms, and sociocultural identity. In America, values, norms, and cultural identity was designed and implemented primarily by White men. Thus, in modern society men and women may not always agree that changes or disruption of American norms are threatening in the same way. For instance, women may not be attached to traditional American ideologies (Norrander & Wilcox, 2008), thus, a threat to these norms and values may not motive behaviors. Alternatively, for men, symbolic threats might be directly perceived as dangerous to their powered and privileged position[3]. Furthermore, it has been proposed that political ideologies and priorities may be similar among women and men, but policy preferences may differ

[3] The current sample was primarily White students, so men in the sample could be experience racial and gender privilege. However, analysis including race and ethnicity were not conducted due to limited diversity.

(Norrander & Wilcox, 2008), suggesting that even if threat is perceived at similar levels among men and women the way of coping or addressing with the threat may differ.

Limitations and Future Directions

The current study was a cross-section correlational design, which limits causational and directional claims. While the analyses are framed for threat to predict the likelihood of voting, that does not mean threat is causing people to vote in a particular way. Additionally, the study was conducted in October before some had cast their votes, thus, the participants may have actually voted differently than they indicated in the survey. The participants in the sample were also college students at a private university in the Mid-West, which limits generalizability. Furthermore, the results regarding sex, threat perceptions, and voting were exploratory hypotheses and should be replicated in order to confirm the pattern of findings observed in the present study.

Additional research is needed to test the findings of this study across a more diverse population of U.S. voters, using information about how people actually voted, rather than how they thought they would vote. Furthermore, the associations between sex and threat perceptions should be explored further regarding voting and other polarized topics. While we provide reasoning for the interaction observed between symbolic threat and sex as well as the lack of interaction between realistic threat and sex, these associations need to be more closely examined a priori.

Concluding Thoughts

The current study examined associations between COVID-19 threat perceptions and voting in the 2020 Presidential Election. While COVID-19 threats did not have more predictive power than traditional voting factors, such as political ideology and symbolic

racism, the predicted findings did emerge when the other factors were excluded from the model. Perhaps more importantly, the effects of symbolic threat varied as a function of the participant's sex, but realistic threat behaviors did not vary across sex. This finding sets a foundation for further exploration particularly examining sex or gender difference and threat perceptions.

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Table 1.
Descriptive Statistics and Correlations

Variable	Cronbach's α	*M*	*SD*	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. Biden		4.33	2.64	--									
2. Trump		3.06	2.52	-.86**	--								
3. RT	.70	2.72	0.58	.23**	-.25**	--							
4. ST	.88	2.21	0.85	-.15	.18*	.14	--						
5. SR	.83	13.05	4.16	-.67**	.65**	-.32**	.08	--					
6. HS	.91	1.67	0.97	-.55**	.58**	-.32**	.16	.68**	--				
7. BS	.77	2.06	0.77	-.34**	.39**	-.20*	-.19*	.40**	.56**	--			
8. RWA	.92	-1.61	0.62	-.65**	.66**	-.23**	.21*	.69**	.75**	.61**	--		
9. PI	.93	3.69	1.56	-.77**	.74**	-.26**	.20**	.64**	.65**	.49**	.73**	--	
10. Sex				-.27**	.26**	-.17	.10	.30**	.31**	.31**	.34**	.22**	--

Note. $n = 138$. *$p < .05$, **$p < .001$. Biden = the likelihood of voting for Biden, Trump = the likelihood of voting for Trump, RT = realistic threat, ST = Symbolic threat, SR = symbolic racism, HS = hostile sexism, BS = benevolent sexism., RWA = right-wing authoritarianism, PI = political ideology. For sex, *females* = -1 and *males* = 1.

Table 2.

Hypotheses Tests

Variables	Model 1					Model 2				
	B	*SE*	*t*	*p*	95% CI	B	*SE*	*t*	*p*	95% CI
					Likelihood of Voting for Biden					
Intercept	4.33	.13	32.32	<.001	[4.07, 4.60]	4.32	.14	31.16	<.001	[4.04, 4.59]
Realistic	-0.05	.26	-0.92	.848	[-0.55, 0.45]	-0.04	.26	-0.15	.881	[-0.55, 0.47]
Symbolic	-0.04	.17	-0.23	.819	[-0.37, 0.30]	-0.04	.17	-0.21	.835	[-0.37, 0.30]
PI	-0.98	.13	-7.27	<.001	[-1.24, -0.71]	-0.97	.14	-7.19	<.001	[-1.24, -0.70]
SR	-0.20	.05	-4.03	<.001	[-0.30, -0.10]	-0.20	.05	-4.04	<.001	[-0.30, -0.10]
RWA	-0.25	.20	-1.22	.227	[-0.65, 0.16]	-0.25	.20	-1.24	.218	[-0.66, 0.15]
HS	0.16	.23	0.68	.500	[-0.30, 0.62]	0.15	.23	0.66	.514	[-0.31, 0.62]
BS	0.38	.23	1.65	.101	[-0.08, 0.84]	0.39	.23	1.68	.096	[-0.07, 0.85]
Realistic X Political						-0.07	.14	-0.46	.648	[-0.35, 0.22]
					Likelihood of Voting for Trump					
Intercept	3.06	.14	22.41	<.001	[2.79, 3.33]	3.06	.14	22.01	<.001	[2.79, 3.34]
Realistic	-0.10	.26	-0.37	.715	[-0.61, 0.42]	-0.09	.26	-0.35	.725	[-0.61, 0.42]
Symbolic	0.12	.17	0.70	.484	[-0.22, 0.46]	0.12	.17	0.68	.499	[-0.23, 0.46]
PI	0.80	.14	5.82	<.001	[0.53, 1.07]	0.80	.14	5.80	<.001	[0.53, 1.07]
SR	0.15	.05	3.02	.003	[0.05, 0.25]	0.15	.05	3.00	.003	[0.05, 0.25]
RWA	0.29	.21	1.38	.169	[-0.12, 0.70]	0.29	.21	1.38	.170	[-0.12, 0.70]
HS	0.02	.24	0.10	.924	[-0.45, 0.49]	0.02	.24	0.10	.922	[-0.45, 0.50]
BS	-0.20	.23	-0.85	.395	[-0.66, 0.26]	-0.20	.24	-0.86	.393	[-0.67, 0.26]
Symbolic X Political						-0.02	.09	-0.18	.856	[-0.20, 0.17]

Note. N =138. significant $p < .05$ Realistic = realistic threat, Symbolic = symbolic threat, PI= political ideology, SR = symbolic racism, RWA = right-wing authoritarianism, HS = hostile sexism, BS = benevolent sexism.

Table 3.

The Likelihood of Voting for Biden Models

Variables	B	SE	*t*	*p*	95% CI (*B*)	R^2	ΔR^2
Model 1						.59	.59**
Intercept	4.33	.14	30.16	<.001	[4.05, 4.62]		
Political Ideology	-1.31	.09	-14.09	<.001	[-1.49, -1.12]		
Model 2						.65	.06**
Intercept	4.33	.13	32.42	<.001	[4.07, 4.60]		
Political Ideology	-0.97	.11	-8.71	<.001	[-1.19, -0.75]		
Symbolic Racism	-0.20	.04	-4.71	<.001	[-0.28, -0.11]		
Model 3						.66	.01
Intercept	4.33	.13	32.55	<.001	[4.07, 4.60]		
Political Ideology	-0.98	.13	-7.38	<.001	[-1.24, -0.72]		
Symbolic Racism	-0.20	.05	-4.06	<.001	[-0.29, -0.10]		
Hostile Sexism	-0.16	.23	0.72	.475	[-0.49, 0.62]		
Benevolent Sexism	0.38	.23	1.66	.099	[-0.07, 0.82]		
RWA	0.26	.20	-1.27	.206	[-0.65, 0.14]		
Model 4						.66	.00
Intercept	4.33	.13	32.32	<.001	[4.07, 4.60]		
Political Ideology	-0.98	.13	-7.27	<.001	[-1.24, -0.71]		
Symbolic Racism	-0.20	.05	-4.03	<.001	[-0.30, -0.10]		
Hostile Sexism	-0.16	.23	0.67	.500	[-0.30, 0.62]		
Benevolent Sexism	0.38	.23	1.65	.101	[-0.08, 0.84]		
RWA	-0.25	.20	-1.22	.227	[-0.65, 0.16]		
Realistic Threat	-0.05	.25	-0.19	.848	[-0.55, 0.45]		
Symbolic Threat	-0.04	.17	-0.23	.819	[-0.37, 0.30]		
Model 5						.66	.00
Intercept	4.32	.14	31.16	<.001	[4.04, 4.59]		
Political Ideology	-0.97	.14	-7.19	<.001	[-1.24, -0.70]		
Symbolic Racism	-0.20	.05	-4.04	<.001	[-0.30, -0.10]		
Hostile Sexism	-0.15	.23	0.66	.514	[-0.31, 0.62]		
Benevolent Sexism	0.39	.23	1.68	.096	[-0.07, 0.85]		
RWA	-0.25	.20	-1.24	.218	[-0.66, 0.15]		
Realistic Threat	-0.04	.26	-0.15	.881	[-0.55, 0.47]		
Symbolic Threat	-0.04	.17	-0.21	.835	[-0.37, 0.30]		
Realistic X Political Ideology	-0.07	.14	-0.46	.648	[-0.35, 0.22]		

Note. **$p < .001$.

Table 4

The Likelihood of Voting for Trump Models

Variables	B	SE	*t*	*p*	95% CI (*B*)	R^2	ΔR^2
Model 1						.55	.55**
Intercept	3.06	.14	21.25	<.001	[2.77, 3.34]		
Political Ideology	1.21	.09	13.00	<.001	[1.02, 1.39]		
Model 2						.61	.05**
Intercept	3.06	.14	22.57	<.001	[2.79, 3.33]		
Political Ideology	0.90	.11	7.95	<.001	[0.68, 1.12]		
Symbolic Racism	0.18	.04	4.29	<.001	[0.10, 0.27]		
Model 3						.60	.01
Intercept	3.06	.14	22.53	<.001	[2.79, 3.33]		
Political Ideology	0.81	.14	5.99	<.001	[0.54, 1.08]		
Symbolic Racism	0.51	.05	3.06	.003	[0.05, 0.25]		
Hostile Sexism	0.04	.23	0.15	.882	[-0.43, 0.50]		
Benevolent Sexism	-0.18	.23	-0.79	.429	[-0.64, 0.28]		
RWA	-0.29	.21	1.42	.157	[-0.11, 0.70]		
Model 4						.60	.00
Intercept	3.06	.14	22.41	<.001	[2.79, 3.33]		
Political Ideology	0.80	.14	5.82	<.001	[0.53, 1.07]		
Symbolic Racism	0.15	.05	3.02	.003	[0.05, 0.25]		
Hostile Sexism	0.02	.24	0.10	.924	[-0.45, 0.49]		
Benevolent Sexism	-0.20	.23	-0.85	.395	[-0.66, 0.26]		
RWA	0.29	.21	1.38	.169	[-0.12, 0.70]		
Realistic Threat	-0.10	.26	-0.37	.715	[-0.61, 0.42]		
Symbolic Threat	0.12	.17	0.70	.484	[-0.22, 0.46]		
Model 5						.60	.00
Intercept	3.06	.14	22.01	<.001	[2.78, 3.34]		
Political Ideology	0.80	.14	5.80	<.001	[0.53, 1.07]		
Symbolic Racism	0.51	.05	3.00	.003	[0.05, 0.25]		
Hostile Sexism	0.02	.24	0.10	.922	[-0.45, 0.50]		
Benevolent Sexism	-0.20	.24	-0.86	.393	[-0.67, 0.26]		
RWA	0.29	.21	1.38	.170	[-0.12, 0.70]		
Realistic Threat	-0.09	.26	-0.35	.725	[-0.61, 0.42]		
Symbolic Threat	0.11	.17	0.68	.499	[-0.23, 0.46]		
Symbolic X Political Ideology	-0.02	.09	-0.18	.856	[-0.20, 0.17]		

Note. **$p < .001$.

Table 5

The Likelihood of Voting Regressed onto Sex, Threat, and Sex by Threat

Variables	B	*SE*	*t*	*p*	95% CI
Likelihood of Voting for Biden					
Intercept	4.00	.23	17.21	< .001	[3.54, 4.46]
Sex	-0.71	.23	-3.06	.003	[-1.7, -0.25]
Realistic Threat	0.83	.40	2.09	.038	[0.05, 1.61]
Symbolic Threat	-0.72	.28	-2.60	.010	[-1.27, -0.17]
Realistic X Sex	-0.39	.40	-0.97	.333	[-1.17, 0.40]
Symbolic X Sex	-0.67	.28	-2.43	.016	[-1.22, -0.13]
Likelihood of Voting for Trump					
Intercept	3.23	.22	14.97	<.001	[2.80, 3.66]
Sex	0.51	.22	2.35	.020	[0.08, 0.93]
Realistic Threat	-1.13	.37	-3.06	.003	[-1.85, -0.40]
Symbolic Threat	0.99	.26	3.83	<.001	[0.48, 1.50]
Realistic X Sex	-0.10	.37	-0.27	.787	[-0.83, 0.63]
Symbolic X Sex	0.99	.26	3.85	<.001	[0.48, 1.50]

Note. significant $p < .05$.