

# The politics of mortality

Some psychologists say that Americans' fears of death could have given President Bush the edge in the 2004 election.



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President Bush is a classic “value-driven” leader, according to recent research, and so may benefit from voters’ fears about their own mortality.

**BY LEA WINERMAN**  
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Exit polls in November’s election showed a variety of reasons why voters chose either George W. Bush or Democratic challenger John Kerry: moral values, the war in Iraq, terrorism and the economy, among others.

All of those reasons are valid, says Skidmore college psychology professor Sheldon Solomon, PhD. “Some people may have logically thought through the issues they care about and voted based on those,” he says.

But exit polls don’t tell the whole story, says Solomon. He and his colleagues believe that they have uncovered a subtle application of a psychological effect—terror management theo-

ry—that may have helped tip the election to Bush. According to the theory, Americans traumatized by the 9/11 terrorist attacks turned to Bush in part because, subconsciously, his clear and values-driven message helped assuage their fear of death.

In fact, years of research have demonstrated that people are often bad at understanding their own motivations. If pollsters ask voters to come up with an explanation for their vote, they will—but that explanation may not really reflect their primary motivation, says University of Virginia psychology professor Timothy Wilson, PhD, who studies people’s knowledge of their motivations.

“There’s fairly good evidence that people vote from the heart,” Wilson

says, “but if you ask them why they vote they’ll come up with all sorts of logical reasons.”

## Terror-management theory

Solomon and two of his colleagues, Tom Pyszczynski, PhD, and Jeff Greenberg, PhD, first developed terror-management theory in the 1980s. According to the theory, based on the work of cultural anthropologist Ernest Becker, PhD, human beings deal with the knowledge that they will someday die by maintaining a strong belief in their cultural worldview. That faith provides meaning to their lives and a sense that their individual lives matter, as well as the promise of symbolic—or literal—immortality if they uphold their society’s values.

One consequence of the theory, according to previous studies by the researchers, is that reminding people of their own mortality—by asking them to think about their own deaths, for example—makes them cling strongly to elements of their worldview like religious beliefs or national pride.

Now, two recent studies point to another consequence of terror-management theory—one that might well be able to influence a presidential election. People reminded of their own mortality tend to favor charismatic leaders with a grand vision of the future over more mundane leaders who focus on day-to-day tasks.

In a study in the December issue of *Psychological Science* (Vol. 15, No. 12), the researchers assigned 190 college student participants to two groups. Half of the participants responded to the two open-ended requests, “Please briefly describe the emotions that the thought of your own death arouses in you,” and “Jot down, as specifically as you can, what you think will happen to you as you physically die and once you are physically dead.”

The control group of participants answered the same two questions, but in regard to an important upcoming exam instead of their death. Both groups also filled out unrelated questionnaires, one about neuroticism and one about romantic attachment, in order to hide the true purpose of the experiment. Then, the participants read an unrelated literary passage to provide a delay before the second part of the experiment, because previous research has shown that terror-management theory’s effects are more clear when people are not thinking directly about death, but instead when they are more subtly aware of death around the edges of their conscious thoughts.

Next, the participants read statements written by three hypothetical politicians running for governor and cast their votes for one. The “charismatic, value-driven” politician talked about his overarching vision, the identity of the state as a whole, and his high expectations for its citizens. The “task-oriented” candidate talked about setting high yet achievable goals, and his detailed plans to achieve those goals. The “rela-

tionship-oriented” politician talked about how he would listen to and respect all of the state’s citizens.

The results were striking: The charismatic leader received only four out of 95 votes from the control group, but received 31 out of 95 from participants who had been reminded of their own mortality.

### A case study

The 2004 presidential election, says Solomon, provided an opportunity to test terror-management theory in the real world. President Bush is a classic value-driven leader, he says, with a clear message of defeating evil in the world.

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### People reminded of death may favor the candidate they believe would better ensure their safety.

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“Psychologically terrorized people are attracted to clear vision of where evil lurks in the world and clear vision of how to obliterate it,” Solomon says. And in our post-9/11 world, he continues, Americans are, in some ways, a psychologically terrorized people, with thoughts of death a hazy but ever-present reality.

In a series of studies completed before the election, the researchers first repeated the experiment above, dividing 97 participants into an experimental group who were reminded of their own mortality and a control group who were not. But this time, instead of judging hypothetical candidates, the participants read an excerpt of an essay that praised President Bush’s response to 9/11 and the war in Iraq. The participants then rated their support of Bush and his policies. Those who had been asked to think of their own deaths rated Bush much more favorably (4.16 on a five-point scale) than those in the control group (2.09 on a five-point scale).

In three more experiments in the series, the researchers continued to tie terror-management theory to real-world events. They demonstrated that subliminal 9/11-related images stimulated

nonconscious death-related thoughts, that reminders of 9/11 increased support for Bush, and finally, that reminders of mortality increased people’s support for Bush and decreased their support for Kerry—regardless of whether the participants considered themselves liberal or conservative. The studies were published in the September issue of *Personality & Social Psychology Bulletin* (Vol. 30, No. 9).

Of course, Solomon acknowledges, many questions remain to be answered. First, it’s unclear how much stimulating thoughts of death would benefit *any* sitting president, and how much of the benefit is due to Bush’s particular personality. After all, leaders’ approval ratings have almost always risen in times of war or similar national crisis.

Also, some critics have suggested that the researchers’ findings could be explained by participants’ rational thought processes: People who are reminded of death, those critics say, might begin to rationally think about which candidate would better ensure their safety, and could come to the conclusion that President Bush would do so.

But Solomon says that the results of an upcoming study suggest that this is not the case. In this not-yet-published study, the researchers, working with a colleague in the Middle East, have found that for some citizens in an Islamic republic, reminders of death prompted more favorable evaluations of suicide bombers and greater interest in becoming one. This, Solomon says, shows that inducing thoughts of death does not make people think more rationally.

“We’re not saying that there were no rational reasons to vote for President Bush, or that everyone who voted for Bush did it because of this effect,” he says. “But a huge chunk of people in the middle may have been swayed by this.”<sup>ψ</sup>

### FURTHER READING

- Pyszczynski, T., Solomon, S., & Greenberg, J. (2003). *In the wake of 9/11: The psychology of terror*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.