Facing death together
Renkema, L.J.

IMPORTANT NOTE: You are advised to consult the publisher's version (publisher's PDF) if you wish to cite from it. Please check the document version below.

Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Publication date:
2009

Link to publication in University of Groningen/UMCG research database

Citation for published version (APA):

Copyright
Other than for strictly personal use, it is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

Take-down policy
If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

Downloaded from the University of Groningen/UMCG research database (Pure): http://www.rug.nl/research/portal. For technical reasons the number of authors shown on this cover page is limited to 10 maximum.
Chapter 3

Terror and Politics

Why do people vote as they do? What determines people’s political preferences? These questions have puzzled many psychological and political scientists (e.g., Dalton & Wattenberg, 1993). The democratic system is a dynamic one, and as society changes, electoral preferences and voting behavior is subject to change. Thus, what determines political preferences now may be different from what drove such preferences then: political preferences are shaped by the time and context in which they are made (Zaller, 2004).

Some of the most influential events of the last years that are likely to have affected voting behavior and political preference are the events that took place on September 11th 2001 and more recently the attacks against mass transit systems on March 11th 2004 in Madrid and on July 7th and 21st 2005 in London. These tragic events and their aftermath had an enormous impact on people’s attitudes and opinions. Several researchers argued and demonstrated that the events of September 11th led to increased mortality salience because they reminded people of the temporary nature of life (Landau, Solomon, Greenberg & Pyszczynski, 2004; Pyszczynski, Solomon, & Greenberg, 2003). A prominent and successful model that may be used to explain and predict how people react in these situations is Terror Management Theory (TMT, Solomon, Greenberg & Pyszczynski, 1991), because this theory points out that mortality threats (such as the events on September 11th) lead to a broad range of important behavioral and cognitive responses.

The aim of this article is to examine the effects that threatening situations, and mortality salience in general, have on voting behavior and political preferences. Although there are several examples of social psychological research on the relationship between psychology and political ideology (e.g., Jost, Banaji &

---

4 This chapter is based on Renkema & Stapel (2009).
Nosek, 2004; Jost, Glaser, Kruglanski & Sulloway, 2003), as far as we know to date, systematic analyses of the relationship between mortality salience and party size have been lacking. We propose that mortality salience leads to greater support for and affiliation with bigger rather than small political parties. More precisely, we suggest that mortality salience leads to a greater preference for bigger parties. In times of terror, people have a high need to confirm the norms and standards prescribed by culture (Solomon et al., 1991), and mainstream viewpoints are more likely to fulfill this need than perspectives that are only supported by a few (Renkema, Stapel & Van Yperen, 2007). Furthermore, we argue that mortality salience not only affects the evaluation of political parties, but also affects subsequent behavior like voting and support for policy change.

The central idea behind the present research is that, according to TMT, mortality salience creates the need to have a meaningful and stable concept of reality. Because of this, people are more likely to turn to mainstream groups, since these often aid in validating the cultural worldview.

TMT

Since September 11th 2001, words like fear and terror are part of daily discourse. A relatively young theory that explains how people deal with these threats and how these threats influence our cognitions and behavior is TMT. Inspired by the writings of Becker (1973) and Rank (1941), TMT proposes that reminders of one’s mortality trigger defensive mechanisms (see Pyszczynski, Greenberg, & Solomon, 1997). The theory posits that human beings have developed these defensive mechanisms to buffer the death-related anxiety caused by mortality salience. According to TMT, one of the most important defensive mechanisms is cultural worldview affirmation (norms and standards that imbue the world with meaning). TMT states that cultural worldview protects people from experiencing mortality related anxiety by providing a meaningful and stable concept of reality. When mortality is salient, people are motivated to defend, affirm or justify their cultural worldview in order to keep the world meaningful.
and predictable. Several Terror Management experiments support this hypothesis and show that mortality threat activates behavioral and cognitive responses that aid in validating the cultural worldview (see Solomon, Greenberg, & Pyszczynski, 2004, for an overview).

The cultural worldview is partly derived from one's membership to a specific social group. Correspondingly, one would expect the way people cope with mortality threats to have a strong effect on group identification. Indeed, several studies have shown that mortality salience leads to a more positive evaluation of groups that support the cultural worldview (e.g., Greenberg et al., 1990, 1992; McGregor et al., 1998; Rosenblatt, Greenberg, Solomon, Pyszczynski, & Lyon, 1989). Moreover, it has been found that mortality salience can change political attitudes in order to validate the cultural worldview. Previous research for example found that support for the German reunification increased (Jonas & Greenberg, 2004) and support for the introduction of the Euro decreased (Jonas, Fritsche, & Greenberg, 2005) after Germans were reminded of their own mortality. In other words, affirming the German identity may serve a terror managing function for Germans. Thus, by pointing out the psychological significance of possessing a cultural worldview, TMT directly addresses the relation between psychology and politics.

However, the effect of mortality salience goes beyond the evaluation of the in- and outgroup, it also affects perceived consensus of one’s personal beliefs. For instance, Pyszczynski and colleagues (1996) found that participants exaggerated consensus estimates for their personal beliefs when they were confronted with their own mortality. Participants thought that they were a part of the mass, while in fact only the minority supported their beliefs. This supports our hypothesis that belonging to big groups aids in validating a socially shared reality, and thus serves a terror managing function. Accordingly, in the present article we suggest that people are more eager to identify with the majority when mortality is salient. More specific, we assume that people have a greater preference for bigger
political parties when mortality is salient because these are more likely to validate norms and standards prescribed by culture, and thus buffer potential existential anxiety. We hereby assume that political parties in itself are not always a stable part of people’s cultural worldview.

TMT and Politics

Identifying with groups that support and distancing from groups that oppose one’s cultural worldview has proven to be an effective strategy to cope with mortality threats (Greenberg et al., 1990; Rosenblatt et al., 1989). However, not all groups people identify with are a part of the cultural worldview. Although some group memberships are relatively fixed, most groups people identify with change over time and are not a chronic part of their social identity (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). We are all either men or women, but whether we identify with, for example, a certain group of politicians, (democrats vs. republicans) or a certain group of sports fans (Lakers vs. Bulls) is more likely to depend on changes in time and context. So, even though some people have relatively fixed political preferences, it is quite common that political preferences change as a result of situational factors (Zaller, 2004). People who are susceptible to shifting back and forth between political parties are defined as “floating voters”. The boundaries between the different political parties are seen as relatively permeable by these voters. Accordingly, floating voters are susceptible to contextual influences (Zaller, 2004). Previous TMT research has shown that, under mortality threat, people are especially prone to such contextual influences, especially when boundaries are perceived as relatively permeable (Dechesne, Janssen, & Van Knippenberg, 2000). For example, when mortality is salient, group status (Dechesne, Greenberg, Arndt, & Schimel, 2000; Dechesne et al., 2000), leadership style (Cohen, Solomon, Maxfield, Pyszczynski & Greenberg, 2005), minimal groups (Harmon-Jones, Greenberg, Solomon, & Simon, 1996) and charisma (Gordijn & Stapel, 2005; Landau et al., 2004) are important contextual factors in determining support for a group or a leader respectively. Following the same
logic, we expect “group size” to be an important contextual variable in the current studies. In situations where mortality is salient, big groups will be seen as more attractive. Specifically, we propose that people have a greater preference to belong to and affiliate with “big political parties” when mortality is salient because affiliating with and supporting these groups provides a meaningful and stable concept of reality. Thus, in times of terror and threat, people will like bigger political parties better than in safer times, when the need to affirm the norms and standards prescribed by culture is not as high.

Initial support for our hypothesis is given by Wisman and Koole (2003). In a series of studies on the effects of mortality salience on group affiliation these researchers showed that mortality salience leads people to have a greater tendency to sit with others instead of alone. Moreover, they showed that, when mortality was salient, participants preferred to sit close to an ingroup instead of an outgroup member. These affiliation strivings seem to support the basic idea of TMT that mortality salience leads to a greater support for one’s ingroup, since the affiliation with the ingroup supports one’s worldview and buffers anxiety. However, Wisman and Koole (2003) also showed that when mortality was salient, participants increased their affiliation with both people who supported and people who threatened their worldview. Thus, even when participants knew that the group criticized their opinions, they preferred to sit in the group over sitting alone. These findings suggest that affiliating with groups is a potential defensive mechanism that helps people to deal with mortality threats.

Translated to the current hypothesis, this suggests that when there is no mortality threat, people could prefer a smaller political party when the ideas of this party come closer to their personal beliefs compared to the ideas of the bigger political parties. However, when mortality is salient, and if party identification is not that strong, the bigger political party is preferred over the smaller political, because bigger parties are more likely to foster the cultural worldview. This means
that people should have a greater preference to belong to, affiliate with and support bigger political parties when mortality is salient.

An important contribution of the present research is thus that we distinguish between bigger and smaller groups. We think that it is not just affiliating with a group that serves as a defensive mechanism, but affiliating with a big (mainstream) group. When mortality is salient, identifying with mainstream groups is more likely to provide a meaningful and stable concept of reality than minority groups. Accordingly, people will like bigger political parties better than in safer times, when the need to validate the cultural worldview is not as prevalent.

**Research Overview**

TMT is useful in interpreting and clarifying responses to mortality threats. In the present research we show that mortality salience can direct people’s values, norms and standards and affect preference for and identification with political parties. These effects should especially emerge if there is no specific party tied to one’s cultural worldview. We hereby propose that maximizing affiliation with bigger political parties serves as a buffer against terror threats by providing and affirming a stable concept of reality and thus acting as a “terror managing” mechanism. The current research aims to directly test these proposed effects of mortality salience in two separate studies.

**Study 3.1**

The Dutch political system provides an interesting case to put our hypothesis concerning the relation between mortality salience and political preferences to a test, because the Dutch parliament consists of a combination of small and big parties. At the time these studies were performed, the Netherlands were governed by a coalition of three parties: the center-right Christian Democratic (CDA), the Liberals (VVD) and the Liberal Democrats 66 (D66).
Together, the three government parties had 78 of the 150 seats in Parliament. The opposition included the Labour (PvdA) party with 42 seats and 5 smaller parties, each with less than 10 seats (see Table 3.1).

**Study 3.1**

In the first experiment we wanted to examine whether mortality salience would increase actual support for policy proposals made by a coalition of big rather than small political parties. Thus, are people more likely to support a policy proposal put forward by a big, rather than a small party when mortality is salient? To test this hypothesis, we created an experiment where the participants had to read a fictitious proposal made by either a coalition of the big or small parties. Thus, the policy proposal was fictitious but the parties were well-known (to the Dutch) political actors, familiar to all the participants. We hypothesized that under mortality salience conditions, participants should judge the proposal made by the bigger parties more positive compared to the proposal made by the smaller parties, whereas no such effects should occur under neutral conditions.

**Method**

*Participants and design*

Participants were 90 psychology students who took part for course credit. The participants were randomly assigned to experimental conditions of a 3 (Salience: mortality, TV, dental pain) x 2 (Party Size: large, small) between-participants design.

*Procedure and material*

Upon entering the laboratory, participants were told that they had to complete three ostensibly unrelated studies. Mortality salience was manipulated
in the first study. In this study the participants had to answer two open-end questions (used in previous TMT research, e.g., Greenberg et al., 1990). In the mortality salient condition the participants were asked: “Please briefly describe the emotions and thoughts 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 when you physically die and once you are physically dead”. Participants in the control condition responded to parallel questions about “watching television” or “dental pain”. The dental pain control condition was included to control for non-death related fear (e.g., Arndt, Greenberg, Schimel, Pyszczynski, & Solomon, 2002), and the TV condition as a neutral control. The salience induction was followed by an unrelated filler task where the participants had to complete an easy word unscrambling task. The filler task was included in order to create a delay between the mortality salience induction and our dependent measure. This delay was functional because previous research (Greenberg, Pyszczynski, Solomon, Simon, & Breus, 1994) has shown that the effects of mortality salience emerge more clearly over time.

In the third and final task participants had to fill out the proposal judgment task which was presented as a student opinion questionnaire. The participants had to read a fictitious newspaper article. In this article either a coalition of big or a coalition of small parties (depending on the condition) proposed a card based payment system for parking tickets. The coalition of big parties consisted of CDA, PvdA and VVD (29%, 28%, and 18% of the votes during the 2003 elections), and the coalition of small parties consisted of, D66, Groen-Links, and SP (4%, 5%, and 6% of the votes during the 2003 elections). After the participants had read the article, they were asked to indicate how much they agreed to the proposal on a 9-point scale ranging from 1 (totally disagree) to 9 (totally agree).
Results and Discussion

As we expected a Univariate Analysis Of Variance (ANOVA) showed that there was no effect of party size \( (F < 1) \) on support for the proposal. However, we found a main effect of mortality salience \( F(2, 84) = 3.06, p = .05, \eta^2 = .01 \). This main effect was completely qualified by the two-way interaction between party size and mortality salience \( F(2, 84) = 3.48, p = .04, \eta^2 = .01 \). Participants were more likely to support the proposal when mortality was salient and the proposal was made by the larger political parties compared to when mortality was not salient or when the smaller political parties made the proposal (see Figure 3.1).

Figure 3.1 - Support for the policy proposal as a function of salience induction and party size.

Study 3.2

In the first study we showed that the participants, as we expected, were more likely to support a policy proposal put forward by a bigger party when
mortality was salient compared to when mortality was not salient. We also showed that these effects could only be observed for the coalition of big, and not for the coalition of small parties.

The first experiment supports our general hypothesis, but also leaves room for alternative explanations, and raises additional questions. For example, one could argue that factors like power or ideology could account for these effects. In the second experiment we address these concerns, by examining in detail how party preferences and party identification change in situations where mortality is salient. Hereby we attempt to test the hypothesis that people affiliate more with bigger parties when mortality is salient in a more direct way.

In the second study we thus examine whether mortality salience leads participants to increase their identification with bigger political parties and vote for them more often. At the same time we attempt to rule out two plausible alternative explanations by showing that party size, rather than power (government vs. opposition, e.g., Dechesne, Greenberg et al., 2000; Dechesne, Janssen, et al., 2000; Landau et al., 2004) or ideology (right vs. left wing, e.g., Jost et al, 2003; Lavine et al., 1999; Feldman & Stenner, 1997) is causing these effects.

Method

Participants and design

In total 138 students took part for course credit. The participants were randomly assigned to one of the experimental conditions (salience induction: death vs. TV).

Procedure and material

On entering the laboratory, participants were told that they had to fill out a booklet containing two unrelated studies. The participants in the experimental
Chapter 3 - 41

condition started with the same mortality salience induction as we used in the first experiment, with the TV condition as control. The participants then continued with a short unrelated word unscrambling task. After the participants finished the mortality salience induction and the filler task, they were asked to go on with the second study. The second study was presented as a small survey on political preferences. The participants were asked for which of the parties they would vote if there were elections at that time. After they ‘voted’, the participants had to indicate to what extent they identified with each of the political parties on a 10-point scale ranging from 1 (very low) to 10 (very high). Finally, the participants were asked if they voted at the past election, and if so, for which party they voted.

Results and Discussion

We divided the parties in either big (more than 25 seats, CDA, PvdA and VVD) or small (less than 10 seats, SP, LPF, GL, D66, CU, SGP). Additionally, in order to rule out the alternative explanations that these effects might be explained by either power or ideology, we divided the political parties in two additional groups: ideology (left/right wing), and power (government/opposition). Table 3.1 shows how the political parties are distributed over these groups.

Party Preference. First we looked at party preferences as a dependant measure. Six participants were excluded from these analyses because they did not indicate their preferred party. A chi-square test was conducted in order to test our hypothesis that people are more likely to vote for a bigger party instead of a smaller party when mortality is salient. The chi-square test, comparing the observed frequencies of cases on this measure with the actual (or expected) frequencies, was significant: $\chi^2(1, N = 132) = 14.76, p = .01$. Figure 3.2 shows that indeed participants were more likely to vote for a bigger party instead of a smaller party when mortality was salient. Furthermore, in the control condition this effect
was the other way around. When mortality was not salient, participants preferred a smaller over a bigger party. We repeated this procedure for the voting behavior during the past election to rule out possible baseline effects. As expected no differences were found $\chi^2(1, N = 78) = 0.58$, ns.

Table 3.1 - Overview of party characteristics.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Party</th>
<th>Size</th>
<th>Position</th>
<th>Left / Right</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CDA</td>
<td>Big</td>
<td>Government</td>
<td>Right</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christen Unie</td>
<td>Small</td>
<td>Opposition</td>
<td>Right</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D66</td>
<td>Small</td>
<td>Government</td>
<td>Right</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Groen Links</td>
<td>Small</td>
<td>Opposition</td>
<td>Left</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LPF</td>
<td>Small</td>
<td>Opposition</td>
<td>Right</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PvdA</td>
<td>Big</td>
<td>Opposition</td>
<td>Left</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SGP</td>
<td>Small</td>
<td>Opposition</td>
<td>Right</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SP</td>
<td>Small</td>
<td>Opposition</td>
<td>Left</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VVD</td>
<td>Big</td>
<td>Government</td>
<td>Right</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

We computed an additional chi-square test to rule out two plausible alternative explanations that could account for the observed effects. First, a chi-square test was conducted in order to test the alternative explanation that people are more likely to vote for a government rather than an opposition party when mortality is salient (power). The chi-square revealed that there was no different voting pattern for government and opposition parties between the mortality salient and TV condition ($1, N = 132) = 0.44$, ns. The same procedure was repeated for the left/right wing distinction. Again a chi-square showed the expected non-significant effect, ($1, N = 132) = 0.01$, ns. This supports our hypothesis that the effects we found on party preference are caused by differences in party size rather than that power or ideology.
Now we have shown that size is more likely to drive or results than power or ideology, we want have a more in-depth look at the voting preferences per party. As we can see in Table 3.2, the two bigger parties clearly gained support in the mortality salient condition. Votes for both CDA and PvdA more than doubled. The alternative explanations can not account for the effects found on party identification. Power could not explain this finding because CDA is part of the government, and PvdA part of the opposition. Similarly, ideology can not account for these effects because CDA is generally seen as moderately right winged, and PvdA, left winged.

The smaller parties all became less popular in the mortality salient condition, supporting the results found on the grouped variable. Unexpectedly however, VVD, one of the bigger parties shows a slight drop in popularity. An explanation for this unexpected finding might be that, in hindsight, VVD could
perhaps be better described as a medium-size party. That is, VVD is the smallest party of the bigger parties. During the election prior to the experiment, the other two big parties received 29% (CDA) and 28% (PvdA) of the votes, compared to 18% for the VVD. Perhaps VVD was just not seen as big enough, especially compared to these other two parties.

Table 3.2 - Overview of voting patterns and party identification per party.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Party</th>
<th>% Votes past election</th>
<th>% Votes Death (TV)</th>
<th>Identification Death</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Death (TV)</td>
<td></td>
<td>(TV)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CDA</td>
<td>14.3 (16.7)</td>
<td>19.4 (9.2)</td>
<td>4.39 (3.67)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CU</td>
<td>0 (0)</td>
<td>0 (0)</td>
<td>2.00 (2.18)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D66</td>
<td>4.8 (5.6)</td>
<td>11.9 (15.4)</td>
<td>4.36 (5.04)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GL</td>
<td>19 (19.4)</td>
<td>6 (21.5)</td>
<td>4.41 (5.15)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LPF</td>
<td>2.4 (2.8)</td>
<td>0 (1.6)</td>
<td>2.81 (3.01)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PvdA</td>
<td>42.9 (25)</td>
<td>43.3 (15.4)</td>
<td>6.59 (5.52)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SGP</td>
<td>0 (0)</td>
<td>0 (0)</td>
<td>2.41 (2.66)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SP</td>
<td>7.1 (13.9)</td>
<td>9 (21.5)</td>
<td>4.30 (5.18)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VVD</td>
<td>9.5 (16.7)</td>
<td>10.4 (15.4)</td>
<td>4.06 (4.57)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Party Identification.* We hypothesized that people identify more with bigger parties when mortality is salient compared to when mortality is not salient. An ANOVA showed that participants identified more with bigger parties ($F(1, 136) = 5.92, p < .05, \eta^2 = .02$) when mortality is salient compared to when mortality is not salient (see Table 3.2). In addition, an ANOVA showed that participants identified less with small parties $F(1, 136) = 11.79, p < .05, \eta^2 = .01$ when mortality is salient compared to when mortality is not salient. In accordance with our earlier reasoning we found that participants who switched to another party
identified less with the party they voted for \((M = 6.60, \ SD = 0.22)\) compared to participants who did not switch \((M = 7.93, \ SD = 0.19, \ F(1, \ 76) = 20.78, \ p < .001, \ \eta^2 = .22)\).

Again, it might be insightful to look at the differences in party preference in the mortality salience and the TV condition on a party level, rather than at a group level. An ANOVA for every party was computed and showed that participants identified more with CDA \(F(1, \ 136) = 5.24, \ p = .02, \ \eta^2 = .04\) and PvdA \(F(1, \ 136) = 12.16, \ p = .001, \ \eta^2 = .08\), and less with Groen Links \(F(1, \ 136) = 4.72, \ p = .03, \ \eta^2 = .03\), SP \(F(1, \ 136) = 5.17, \ p = .03, \ \eta^2 = .04\), and D66 \(F(1, \ 136) = 5.00, \ p = .03, \ \eta^2 = .04\) when mortality is salient compared to when mortality is not salient (see Table 2). Thus, as expected, people identified more with bigger parties (CDA & PvdA) when mortality is salient. Consistent with the results we found earlier on voting behavior, people identified and less with smaller parties (D66, Groen Links, & SP) when mortality was salient. No significant effects were found for VVD, LPF, SGP, and CU. We did not hypothesized less identification with smaller parties in the mortality salient condition, so the results of the latter three parties were as expected. However, it could be that we did not observed less identification with these three small parties because the initial identification level was very low. Moreover, only one of these three parties (LPF) received a vote in our experiment (SGP and CU received no votes at all). Perhaps we would have found an effect on party identification if initial identification would have been higher. An explanation for absence of an effect on party identification with VVD, one of the bigger parties, may be that this party is in between the big and the smaller parties, consistent with the reasoning we used earlier to explain the unexpected effect in voting preference for VVD.

Overall the analyses of the voting behavior and party preference results per party support our hypothesis that people identify more with bigger parties when mortality is salient. The alternative explanations can not account for the effects found on party identification. Participants identified more with both CDA
and PvdA, the two biggest parties. Power could not explain this finding because CDA is part of the government, and PvdA part of the opposition. Similarly, ideology can not account for these effects because CDA is generally seen as a moderately right winged party, as opposed to the more left winged PvdA.

**General Discussion**

The findings from these two studies clearly support our hypothesis that mortality salience affects the evaluation of political parties and support for policy change. In the first study we showed that participants were more likely to agree to a policy proposal when mortality was salient and the proposal was made by the bigger political parties compared to when mortality was not salient or when the smaller political parties made the proposal. Accordingly, the results of Study 3.2 we show that, after having thought about their own death, participants were more likely to vote for a bigger party than for a smaller party. When mortality was not salient this effect was the other way around and participants preferred smaller over bigger parties. Moreover, the results show that participants identify more with big parties when mortality is salient compared to when mortality is not salient. At the same time they identify less with smaller parties.

We successfully ruled out the most plausible alternative explanations that could account for the observed effects. Previous research on the effects of mortality salience has shown that people make a shift to a more conservative (right-wing) political orientation (Feldman & Stenner, 1997; Jost et al, 2003; Lavine et al., 1999) if they are reminded of their own mortality. However, the results of Study 3.2 show that ideology had no effect on voting preferences. Another possible alternative explanation is that power (opposition vs. government) could explain the results. Previous research (e.g., Landau et al., 2004) showed that the incumbent president of the US received more support when mortality is salient. Translated to our research this would mean that
mortality salience should lead to an increased preference for political parties that form the government, and a decrease in preference for opposition parties. However, no such effect was observed in Study 3.2.

The findings of the present studies extend the findings of previous work on the terror managing function of group affiliation by showing that group size matters. We show that mortality salience indeed increases the need to affiliate with the group. We also show that this effect mainly occurs for bigger groups, and groups that form a majority. So, it is not just affiliation with a group per se that helps people to deal with a death threat, but affiliation with the mainstream, and bigger parties. We have shown that when confronted with their own mortality, people are especially likely to affiliate with bigger groups, and that this buffers the potential existential threat that might otherwise arise. The studies presented here can aid in understanding and explaining voting behavior and political preferences in times of terror and threat. Moreover, it stresses the importance of group size and shows that people are more likely to turn to mainstream groups, since these often aid in validating the cultural worldview.

It must be noted that the concept “big party” can differ depending on the context. For example, political preferences are often different at the university level, and the city level, than on the national level. Some of the “smaller” parties nationally are actually among the larger parties on a local level. Therefore it is important to stress the context that these parties should be judged in. In the present experiments we made it quite clear to our participants that the parties were to be evaluated and judged at the national level.

Why do people like big groups, especially in times of terror? In the present article we argue that these groups aid in validating the socially shared reality. Turning to the majority gives people a sense that they confirm the norms and standards prescribed by this cultural worldview. The present findings clearly suggest that mortality salience influences people’s evaluations of big groups, such as big political parties. In situations where mortality is salient, size matters and
bigger groups will be seen as more attractive than smaller groups. Thus, in times of terror and threat, people will be more eager to identify with, and vote for bigger political parties more than in safer times, when there is less need to validate norms and standards prescribed by culture.