The Influence of Existential Threat and Tolerance Salience on Anti-Islamic Attitudes in American Politics

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Fierce public discussion has centered on anti-Islamic attitudes and tolerance in America and the West more broadly. The present research explored whether the awareness of mortality (a common theme in politics, e.g., war/terrorism, health care, abortion, and so on) and tolerance salience might influence (1) the endorsement of anti-Islamic attitudes in American politics and (2) political orientation. Study 1 (n = 79) was conducted in lab and Study 2 (preregistered, n = 396) replicated it online; both obtained the same results. In a neutral-value-prime condition, American participants reminded of mortality (vs. control topic) more strongly endorsed a Congressman's anti-Islamic statements about Rep. Ellison. However, in a tolerance-value-prime condition, participants reminded of mortality maintained their acceptance of Rep. Ellison's beliefs and practices. Political orientation was not impacted. Implications for terror management theory (TMT), other theories of existential dynamics and motivated conservative political ideology, and both recent and contemporary American politics are discussed.

KEY WORDS: anti-Islamic prejudice, mortality salience, politics, terror management, tolerance

In 2017, America experienced widespread political divisions over anti-Islamic/anti-Muslim attitudes. During his campaign for President, Donald Trump called for "a total and complete shutdown of Muslims entering the United States" (Kertscher, 2017). And, on just the seventh day of his Presidency, amid an American political atmosphere focused on the usual issues of life and death (terrorism, health care, abortion, and so on), newly elected U.S. President Trump issued an executive order to ban immigration from seven Muslim-majority nations. Polls showed the ban was supported by over 50% of Americans and opposed by roughly 40% (Kirk & Scott, 2017); it ignited massive international protests and counterprotests (Gambino, Siddiqui, Owen, & Helmore, 2017; Grinberg & McLaughlin, 2017), triggered an extended legal battle that went to the Supreme Court (Epps, 2017; Williams, 2018), and has fueled public discussions about whether the United States should adopt such anti-Islamic immigration policy or continue to welcome people from all walks of life.

To better understand these two very different attitudes in contemporary American politics, the present research draws upon similar widespread political divisions over anti-Islamic/anti-Muslim attitudes following the 2006 election of Keith Ellison to Minnesota's 5th congressional district. Ellison made history as the first Muslim elected to serve in the U.S. House of Representatives. But before taking office, amid ever-present life and death policy issues—war, mass shootings and gun control, capital punishment, and so on—Ellison stirred strong reactions across the nation by announcing he would swear his oath of office on the Quran, instead of the Bible as his Christian counterparts traditionally have done (Frommer, 2007; Sacirbey, 2006).

Critics ranged from talk radio hosts to sitting congressmen. Most notably, Rep. Virgil H. Goode Jr., a five-term congressman from Virginia, mailed letters to his constituents explaining that he "does not subscribe to using the Koran in any way," adding that "if American citizens don't wake up… on immigration there will likely be many more Muslims elected to office and demanding the use of the Koran. We need to stop illegal immigration totally, and reduce legal immigration, and end the Diversity Visas policy that allows many persons from the Middle East to come to this country" (cited in Goldfarb, 2006, pars. 2–6).[1] Supporters, on the other hand, cautioned against anti-Islamic prejudices. For example, Florida Rep. Debbie Wasserman-Schultz, who took her oath of office on the *Tanakh* (i.e., Jewish Hebrew Bible) the previous year, publicly responded to Rep. Goode's letter, saying "Each of us has every right to lay our hand on the bible that we were raised with; that's what America is all about—diversity, understanding, and tolerance" (Sacirbey, 2006, par. 6).

Such political differences exemplify broad and ongoing tensions between anti-Islamic prejudice and tolerance, amid broader existential dynamics, in the context of American politics. The present research therefore sought to explore these dynamics by manipulating the salience of tolerant values and awareness of mortality and measuring participants' endorsement of Rep. Goode's anti-Islamic letter. In so doing, the present research helps to provide novel conceptual insight into different theoretical perspectives that elucidate the role of existential dynamics in social and political judgement.

Theoretical Perspectives on Existential Dynamics in Political Judgment

The present work built primarily upon terror management theory (TMT; Greenberg, Pyszczynski, & Solomon, 1986), and other existentially oriented theories of political judgment including the compensatory conviction (I. McGregor, Zanna, Holmes, & Spencer, 2001), uncertainty-management model (van den Bos, 2009), uncertainty-threat model (Jost, Glaser, Kruglanski, & Sulloway, 2003), and system justification theory (Jost & van der Toorn, 2012).

Terror management theory and research. Building on the work of Ernest Becker (e.g., 1971, 1973), TMT (Greenberg et al., 1986) notes that awareness of death is a potent existential threat that humans minimize by investing in a cultural worldview that offers a literal or symbolic sense of permanence to those who are a valued part of those cultures. Cultural worldviews are socially constructed and validated belief systems that might offer a sense of permanence, for example, via the impression that one's activity will leave a lasting mark on the world even after one is physically gone (e.g., through family, business, service, education, health care, government, art, science, or any number of other available domains). Self-esteem, then, functions as an evaluation of how well, or poorly, one is living up to those cultural standards and values and qualifying for that sense of symbolic permanence. Thus, TMT posits that people can manage the awareness of mortality by actively maintaining their cultural beliefs and striving to uphold the standards and values prescribed by those cultures.

One common hypothesis guiding TMT research has been the mortality salience (MS) hypothesis (Rosenblatt, Greenberg, Solomon, Pyszczynski, & Lyon, 1989), which holds that if believing

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[1]This despite the fact that Rep. Ellison is not an immigrant, from a Middle Eastern country, or even from a Muslim family; he was born in Detroit, MI, raised Catholic, and converted to Islam while attending Wayne State University in Detroit (Lohn, 2006).

in one's cultural worldviews and striving for self-esteem buffer against death awareness, then increasing MS should motivate people to affirm, protect, and follow those worldviews and uphold their beliefs and values. This hypothesis has been tested and supported in hundreds of empirical studies, in over 20 countries, on at least five continents around the globe (Routledge & Vess, 2019 for comprehensive review; Burke, Martens, & Faucher, 2010 for meta-analysis). Indeed, compared to control topics (e.g., dental pain, uncertainty, failure, public speaking), priming MS (e.g., prompts to write about death, in situ inductions such as passing a funeral home, death-related imagery, or word primes) can motivate a variety of efforts to bolster one's cultural worldview, protect it from threat, and strive for a sense of self-esteem within that cultural system.

Other perspectives on existential dynamics. Other perspectives, such as compensatory conviction (I. McGregor et al., 2001), uncertainty-management model (van den Bos, 2009), and uncertainty-threat model (Jost et al., 2003) also offer relevant perspectives, but posit that the core motive is—more broadly—to manage uncertainty and fear, which emerge regularly in situations that involve, for example, ambiguity, cognitive complexity, death awareness, social threats, anger, risks to self-interest, injustice, inequality, social dominance issues, and so on. From these perspectives, mortality awareness is a form of uncertainty/fear threat that motivates efforts to seek existential security, often through various ideological means. For example, the uncertainty-management model (van den Bos, 2009) holds that MS can motivate ideological/worldview defenses because people's various worldview belief systems help make sense of the world. The compensatory conviction model (I. McGregor et al., 2001) suggests MS motivates worldview defenses because self-integrity (consistency between actions and values) is bolstered by more extreme commitment to the defense of one's worldview beliefs.[2] Whereas these perspectives predict affirmation of extant beliefs, the uncertainty-threat model (Jost et al., 2003; Jost & Napier, 2012) and the related system justification theory (Jost & van der Toorn, 2012) predict that MS motivates a shift toward conservative ideology and authoritarianism because authoritarian conservativism is typically oriented toward security, certainty, and stability through preservation of the status quo.

Existential Threat and Anti-Islamic Prejudice

Because cultural worldviews are conceptual inventions, confidence in those concepts is often dependent on consensual/social epistemological validation (Berger & Luckmann, 1967). When other people share one's worldviews, the consensus helps affirm them as valid and worthwhile sets of beliefs; but when others reject one's worldviews and/or hold alternative or competing sets of beliefs, they raise the possibility that one's own beliefs might be wrong. Thus, existential threat may motivate an authoritarian preference for those sharing one's own beliefs and prejudice against those with competing beliefs.

However, although derogating followers of competing worldviews can trivialize challenges to the perceived legitimacy of one's beliefs, such strategies do not eliminate such challenges. The ultimate ideological protection requires the creation of "safe spaces"—allowing one's own preferred beliefs while eliminating competing or challenging ideas. Such can be achieved in a number of ways: from intolerance via censorship, prejudice, and discrimination to physical aggression or even simply annihilating the people holding those competing beliefs. Thus, Westerners in regions traditionally

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[2]Another perspective to consider is symbolic politics theory (Sears, 1993), which suggests that preexisting symbolic predispositions (e.g. ideology, prejudices, etc.) can guide emotional responses to stimuli, influencing support for certain symbolic political causes. In some ways, this perspective offers a similar account. However, as described in the opening section of this article, it is not clear that Americans have a predominantly anti-Islamic symbolic predisposition; they instead appear to have a complex relationship with open-minded tolerance and preference for tradition. Further, symbolic politics theory does not endeavor to explain differences due to various types of negative emotional stimuli (e.g., death vs. paralysis), as is explored in the present studies.

dominated by Christian beliefs and Western customs, such as North America and Europe, may sometimes view Muslims and Middle-Eastern customs as a threat to their extant worldview (and vice versa). If so, this may help explain the culture clash between the West and the Middle East, reflected in the West via public rejections of Islam (Nam & Jost, 2014), anti-Islamic and anti-Arab prejudice (Kalkan, Layman, & Uslaner, 2009; Sniderman & Hagendoorn, 2007), aggression, and sometimes violence (Pyszczynski, Solomon, & Greenberg, 2003).

Research is consistent with these ideas (Jonas & Fritsche, 2013); existential threat can fuel Westerners' derogation toward, aggression toward, and support for the annihilation of those who harbor different political beliefs and values (e.g., H. A. McGregor et al., 1998; Pyszczynski et al., 2006). Regarding anti-Islamic prejudice, specifically, MS has been found to increase Americans' implicit anti-Arab prejudice and explicit negative attitudes toward immigrants (Motyl et al., 2011) and Canadians' desire to restrict the civil rights of people with anti-Western/pro-Islamic beliefs (Norenzayan, Dar-Nimrod, Hansen, & Proulx, 2009), and Westerners found existential comfort in news that a plane-full of Muslims had been killed (Hayes, Schimel, & Williams, 2008).

Together, these findings suggest that death awareness can motivate people to fervently defend their worldview on the whole, including leading Americans to support anti-Islamic violence and/ or intolerant political reactions. Such findings help explain why congressional Rep. Goode publicly expressed such strong anti-Islamic prejudices in reaction to the election of Muslim Rep. Ellison (Goldfarb, 2006). However, these existential dynamics may not inevitably lead to such anti-Islamic prejudices.

Existential Threat and Tolerance

Although worldview defense may sometimes involve prejudicial, discriminatory, or aggressive defense of one cultural system, many belief systems also value helping, empathy, equality, compassion, and tolerance (Vail et al., 2012 for review). For example, Americans may simultaneously believe in upholding traditional American ways of life (e.g., for swearing in to political office by placing one's hand on the Christian Bible), as well as the idea of America as the "melting pot" of diversity; and this is where some theoretical perspectives on existential dynamics begin to diverge.

Specifically, the uncertainty-threat model and system justification theory suggest that when managing existential threat, people are typically motivated to uphold and abide by salient or dominant *conservative* (not liberal) beliefs, values, and social norms because authoritarian conservativism tends to emphasize security and stability of the status quo. Indeed, MS can motivate people to defend the status quo by more strongly endorsing conservative politicians and issues (Landau et al., 2004), supporting traditional social mores (Nail, McGregor, Drinkwater, Steele, & Thompson, 2009), and showing strong ingroup biases (Castano, Yzerbyt, Paladino, & Sacchi, 2002). And similar work has found that compared to Westerners surveyed prior to the 2004 Islamic terrorist attacks in Madrid, those surveyed afterward displayed increased anti-Arab prejudice, increased authoritarianism, and a shift toward conservative political orientation (Echebarria-Echabe & Fernández-Guede, 2006). Thus, when social situations make cultural divisions particularly salient (e.g., reading a congressional letter warning about the first Muslim congressman rejecting traditional American political customs), MS may motivate people to defend the status quo and endorse such anti-Islamic prejudices.

However, the TMT, compensatory conviction, and uncertainty-management model perspectives each suggest that when managing death awareness, people may become likely to uphold and abide by *salient* or *dominant* worldview-relevant beliefs, values, or social norms, whether conservative or liberal in character. Indeed, MS can increase hope for moral progress (as opposed to conservatism; Rutjens, van der Pligt, & van Harreveld, 2009); MS motivated preference for attitude-congruent information among high, but not low, authoritarians (Lavine, Lodge, & Freitas, 2005); and MS motivates liberals to reject right-wing authoritarianism, reject conservative policies and support

liberal policies, and become more aggressive defenders of liberal ideals (Castano et al., 2011; H. A. McGregor et al., 1998). And other work has found that death awareness can foster efforts to adhere to salient cultural values, including those that make salient the norms of helping (Gailliot, Stillman, Schmeichel, Maner, & Plant, 2008), pacifism (Jonas et al., 2008), tolerance (Greenberg, Simon, Pyszczynski, Solomon, & Chatel, 1992), empathy (Schimel, Wohl, & Williams, 2006), and compassion (Vail, Arndt, Motyl, & Pyszczynski, 2009).

A recent meta-analysis on the topic (Burke, Kosloff, & Landau, 2013) confirmed that MS sometimes produces a conservative shift (regardless of preexisting ideology) and sometimes fuels affirmations of particular worldview beliefs that may be either conservative or liberal. Based on their meta-analysis, Burke et al. (2013) suggested that existential threat may lead to conservative defense of the status quo when such policies or politicians offer comfort in promises of political, psychological, or physical security, but that such responses are likely overridden when particularly liberal components of a person's worldview are especially salient or dominant. Yet, no prior research has directly tested this idea.

Moreover, that research which has assessed the malleability of terror management processes has largely focused on nonpolitical norms or values (e.g., Gailliot et al., 2008), and different value domains can often operate differently. It is thus unclear the extent to which people's explicitly politically relevant judgment can be swayed by rendering salient the value of tolerance when people are confronted with existential threat. Therefore, the present research directly addressed this gap, testing whether MS would always lead to conservative political ideology and defense of the status quo, or whether salient tolerance values might lead people reminded of mortality to uphold that value by abstaining from endorsing anti-Islamic prejudice.

In the absence of the salient value of tolerance, when one encounters ideological diversity—differences in politics, religion, and lifestyle—MS may fuel intolerant worldview defenses, potentially leading to anti-Islamic prejudice and discriminatory civil rights restrictions. However, when the liberal ideals of tolerance and egalitarianism are salient, MS may motivate those same folks to abstain from such prejudice in tolerance of Muslims' beliefs and practices. Together, these hypotheses might help explain why congressional Rep. Goode publicly expressed anti-Islamic prejudices about Muslim Rep. Ellison (Goldfarb, 2006), whereas congressional Rep. Wasserman-Schultz (Sacirbey, 2006) cited the value of tolerance and egalitarianism in welcoming the newly elected Muslim Rep. Ellison.

The Present Research

The present research is built on prior methods and findings to explore: (1) the impact of death awareness on Americans' expressions of worldview-defensive anti-Islamic prejudices and (2) whether making salient the value of tolerance would eliminate this effect. In two studies, participants were first randomly assigned to be reminded of either the value of tolerance or a neutral topic, and then they were randomly assigned to be reminded of either death or an aversive control topic of paralysis. Then they were given a copy of Rep. Virgil Goode's letter, in which he discussed Rep. Keith Ellison's intention to swear in on the Quran and expressed strong anti-Islamic prejudice: The letter rejected the Quran, warned against Rep. Ellison ("the Muslim Representative from Minnesota") and others like him, and expressed a general fear and intolerance toward Muslim immigrants from the Middle East. Participants were then given an opportunity to indicate whether or not they endorsed Rep. Goode's anti-Islamic attitudes. Lastly, participants completed a brief demographics survey, including a measure of political orientation. This research design was therefore a 2 (MS vs. paralysis) × 2 (prime: tolerance vs. neutral) between-subjects design, with endorsement of anti-Islamic attitudes as the primary dependent variable and political orientation as a secondary/exploratory dependent variable.

TMT, compensatory conviction, and the uncertainty-management model hypothesize an interaction such that:

H1: In the neutral-value condition: MS (vs. paralysis) should increase Americans' endorsement of Rep. Goode's anti-Islamic attitudes; and

H2: In the tolerance-value condition: MS (vs. paralysis) should not increase Americans' endorsement of Rep. Goode's anti-Islamic attitudes.

The uncertainty-threat model and system justification theory view MS as an uncertainty-threat that motivates conservative defense of the status quo. If one assumes that MS is a more potent uncertainty threat than paralysis salience (though see General Discussion), we hypothesize a main effect (no interaction) such that:

H3: MS (vs. paralysis) should increase Americans' endorsement of Rep. Goode's anti-Islamic attitudes (regardless of neutral or tolerance-value-prime condition).

Additionally, the present study allowed for some exploratory hypotheses[3] about the effects of the manipulations on political orientation. The uncertainty-threat model and system justification theory view MS as an uncertainty-threat that motivates conservative defense of the status quo and thus hypothesize a main effect (no interaction) such that:

H4: MS (vs. paralysis) should increase conservative political orientation (regardless of neutral or tolerance-value-prime condition).

In contrast, TMT, compensatory conviction, and the uncertainty-management model predict that existential threat causes individuals to uphold their extant beliefs rather than alter the content of their beliefs (e.g., more conservative) and thus hypothesize:

H5: No MS effects or interaction on political orientation.

The present work also tested whether MS produces effects simply because it is an aversive/threatening topic. Research has been giving ongoing attention to this issue (Martens, Burke, Schimel, & Faucher, 2011), and the present research will contribute to this literature by comparing the MS prime against a paralysis prime. Such a comparison condition helps to inform whether MS exerts different effects compared to other aversive/threatening (but not death-related) comparison conditions.

STUDY 1

A 2 (MS vs. paralysis) × 2 (prime: tolerance vs. neutral) between-subjects design was used, with endorsement of anti-Islamic attitudes as the dependent variable. Study 1 was conducted in 2009, and the target sample size was based on a general heuristic of about 20 participants per each of the four conditions, for an overall sample size of roughly 80 participants. We return to the sample-size issue in the discussion.

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[3]We mention this as an "exploratory" hypothesis for two reasons: (1) We did not design the study to focus on political orientation, nor did we make (or preregister) a priori hypotheses about it; and (2) the measure of political orientation comes at the end of the survey in each study, which (although just one page later) raises the possibility that any impact of existential threat may have either dissipated, been disrupted, or effectively buffered by the target anti-Islamic dependent measure.

Participants

Seventy-nine "Introduction to Psychology" students participated in exchange for partial course credit. At the end of the survey, participants completed a brief demographic questionnaire recording age, sex, religious affiliation, and political orientation (descriptives in Table 1).

Materials and Procedure

The study was advertised using a neutral title and description (e.g., "Social attitudes survey") to conceal its true purpose and associated hypotheses. Participants attended research lab sessions in groups of up to six; upon obtaining informed consent, participants completed a brief set of filler items (e.g., a personality measure), and then the target materials were presented in the following order. Full materials for Studies 1 and 2 are available in Appendix S1 in the online supporting information.

Tolerance-value-prime manipulation. Following previous value-priming studies (Greenberg et al., 1992; Vail et al., 2009), participants were randomly assigned to complete one of two conditions of a values-prime manipulation. In each condition, participants were asked to rate their agreement

Table 1. Participant Descriptive and Frequency Statistics for Basic Demographics Items

Demographic	Study 1	Study 2
Age	18.63 (2.38)	34.25 (10.57)
Did not report	14	3
Sex		
Male	30	205
Female	35	190
Did not report	14	1
Religious affiliation		
Christian	46	163
Muslim	0	5
Jewish	1	2
Buddhist	2	2
Hindu	1	1
Not affiliated	9	N/A
Spiritual but not religious	N/A	42
Agnostic	N/A	103
Atheist	N/A	66
Other	6	11
Did not report	14	1
Ethnicity		
Hispanic or Latino	N/A	35
Non-Hispanic or Latino	N/A	357
Did not report	N/A	4
Race		
Caucasian	N/A	321
African American	N/A	32
Native American/Native Alaskan	N/A	5
Asian/Pacific Islander	N/A	27
Other	N/A	7
Years of education	N/A	14.98 (2.29)
Did not report	N/A	1
Political orientation	5.11 (2.27)	2.63 (1.12)
Did not report	14	1

Note. Study 1 was a college "Introduction to Psychology" research pool sample. N/A = Not asked.

with each of a set of four quotations on a 10-point scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 10 = *strongly agree*). The tolerance-value-prime condition presented four quotes designed to increase the salience of the cultural value of tolerance:

1. "We should try to be tolerant of others and respect opinions that are different than ours."
2. "If we can't accept others opinions, then why should we expect others to accept ours?"
3. "We should treat people just like we would want to be treated ourselves."
4. "The value of tolerance has certainly become one of the great hallmarks of American virtue"

The neutral-value-prime condition presented quotes that did not refer to the value of tolerance:

1. "The more I want to get something done, the less I call it work."
2. "A single conversation with a wise man is worth a month's study of books."
3. "Never regret yesterday. Life is in you today, and you make your tomorrow."
4. "A committee is a thing that takes a week to do something one person can do in an hour."

Mortality salience. Next, following previous research (see Greenberg, Vail, & Pyszczynski, 2014), participants were randomly assigned to either MS or another aversive/threatening topic (paralysis) condition. In the MS condition, two prompts asked participants to "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 happens to you as you physically die." The comparison aversive/threatening topic prompt asked participants to "Please briefly describe the emotions that the thought of being paralyzed arouses in you," and "Jot down, as specifically as you can, what you think happens to you as you physically experience paralysis."

Delay and distraction. Next, participants completed the 60-item positive and negative affect schedule (PANAS-X, Watson & Clark, 1992; see Appendix S1 in the online supporting information for exploratory supplemental analyses on affect) as well as a brief three- to five-minute reading task (an excerpt taken from Albert Camus' *The Growing Stone)*. These provided the delay and task-switching distraction that facilitate distal terror management effects (Goldenberg & Arndt, 2008; Pyszczynski, Greenberg, & Solomon, 1999), based on research showing that when made consciously aware of death, people first initiate efforts to remove death thoughts from consciousness by suppressing them or directly managing mortality awareness (e.g., wearing seatbelts, quitting smoking); but then, when outside of focal awareness (e.g., subliminal primes, or an explicit MS prime followed by delay/distracter tasks), death awareness motivates reliance on worldview defense and self-esteem anxiety buffers (e.g., defense of national values/beliefs; Arndt, Greenberg, Pyszczynski, & Solomon, 1997; Greenberg, Pyszczynski, Solomon, Simon, & Breus, 1994).

Endorsement of anti-Islamic attitudes. Lastly, the present research used methods similar to previous research on prejudicial attitudes (e.g., Norenzayan et al., 2009). First, a cover sheet introduced the dependent variable materials as follows: "On the next page is the transcript of a letter Virginia House Representative Virgil Goode sent to citizens in his district. His letter is in regard to the election of Minnesota Representative Keith Ellison—the first Muslim to be elected to Congress—who was sworn-in using a Koran. Please read through the letter and answer the questions on the following page." Participants then turned the page to Rep. Goode's letter. Finally, participants completed a nine-item measure of endorsement of Rep. Goode's anti-Islamic attitudes and behaviors (1 = *strongly disagree*, 10 = *strongly agree*; α = .83). Items included statements like: "Our nation would be better off if we elected more people like Virgil Goode"; "I see no problem with allowing our national representatives to openly practice Islam in the Chambers of Congress" (reverse scored); and "Minnesota voters probably should not have elected a Muslim politician."

Upon completion, all participants were thanked and debriefed.

Results

Preliminary Analyses: Value-Prime Agreement Scores

The value-prime agreement scores were analyzed to determine whether the tolerance prime was indeed associated with endorsement of tolerance values. An independent-samples *t*-test revealed that participants more strongly endorsed the tolerance-value-prime statements than the neutral-value-prime statements ($t[77] = 4.06$, $d = .91$, 95%CI [.44, 1.36], $p < .001$). Additionally, descriptive statistics (see Table 2) revealed that participants quite strongly endorsed the tolerance-value-prime statements across conditions; and indeed the lowest mean tolerance prime-statement endorsement score was 5.25 (out of 10) indicating that all participants in the tolerance-prime condition generally endorsed the tolerance value.

Target Analyses: Endorsement of Anti-Islamic Attitudes

A 2 (MS vs. paralysis) × 2 (prime: tolerance vs. neutral) ANOVA was conducted on endorsement of anti-Islamic attitudes. There was no main effect of MS ($F[1, 75] = .72$, $\eta_p^2 < .01$, $p = .40$) and a trend such that participants were less likely to endorse anti-Islamic attitudes in the tolerance ($M = 3.72$, $SD = 1.49$) than in the neutral ($M = 4.34$, $SD = 1.92$) prime condition ($F[1, 75] = 2.59$, $\eta_p^2 = .03$, $p = .11$). However, the MS × value-prime interaction also emerged, $F(1, 75) = 3.97$, $\eta_p^2 = .05$, $p = .05$ (Figure 1), explored below using pairwise comparisons (see Table 2 for descriptive statistics by condition).

When in the neutral-prime condition, participants were more likely to endorse Virgil Goode's anti-Islamic attitudes in the MS than in the paralysis salience condition ($t[37] = 2.00$, $d = .58$, 95%CI [−.07, 1.21], $p = .049$). In the tolerance-prime condition, there was no difference in the amount of endorsement of Goode's anti-Islamic attitudes in the MS and paralysis condition ($t[38] = −0.81$, $d = −.30$, 95%CI [−.91, .33], $p = .42$). Analyzed another way, after MS participants were more likely to endorse Virgil Goode's anti-Islamic attitudes in the neutral than in the tolerance-prime condition ($t[37] = 2.53$, $d = .77$, 95%CI [.10, 1.40], $p = .01$). In the paralysis-prime condition, however, there was no difference between the neutral and tolerance-prime condition ($t[38] = 0.27$, $d = .09$, 95%CI [−.71, .53], $p = .79$).

Exploratory Analyses: Political Orientation

Sixty-five participants rated their political orientation (1 = *liberal*, 10 = *conservative*). A 2 (MS vs. paralysis) × 2 (prime: tolerance vs. neutral) ANOVA was conducted on political orientation. There was no main effect of MS ($F[1, 61] = .19$, $\eta_p^2 < .01$, $p = .66$), nor a main effect of value prime ($F[1, 61] = .11$, $\eta_p^2 < .01$, $p = .74$), nor interaction, $F(1, 61) = 1.00$, $\eta_p^2 = .02$, $p = .32$, indicating that political orientation was not associated with the tolerance or MS manipulations. However, political orientation was associated with anti-Islamic prejudice, $r(64) = .50$, $p < .001$. Therefore, we conducted a 2 (MS vs. paralysis) × 2 (prime: tolerance vs. neutral) ANCOVA on anti-Islamic prejudice, with political orientation as a covariate, to test whether the target interaction would hold even when controlling for political orientation; the target data patterns remained as reported above (see Appendix S1 in the online supporting information for full details).

STUDY 2

Study 1 offered an initial, in-lab exploration of whether death awareness would motivate Americans to endorse anti-Islamic prejudice and whether salient tolerance values would counteract

Table 2. Values-Prime Endorsement and Anti-Islamic Prejudice Descriptive Statistics, by Condition

	Study 1						Study 2					
	Neutral Values			Tolerance			Neutral Values			Tolerance		
	M	*SD*	*n*	*M*	*SD*	*n*	*M*	*SD*	*n*	*M*	*SD*	*n*
1. Values-prime endorsement	7.18	1.18	39	8.26	1.20	40	4.22	.86	191	4.75	.76	205
2. Anti-Islamic prejudice												
Mortality salience	4.86	2.02	20	3.49	1.51	19	3.49	1.12	90	3.05	1.15	100
Paralysis salience	3.78	1.69	19	3.93	1.47	21	3.04	1.41	101	3.13	1.10	105

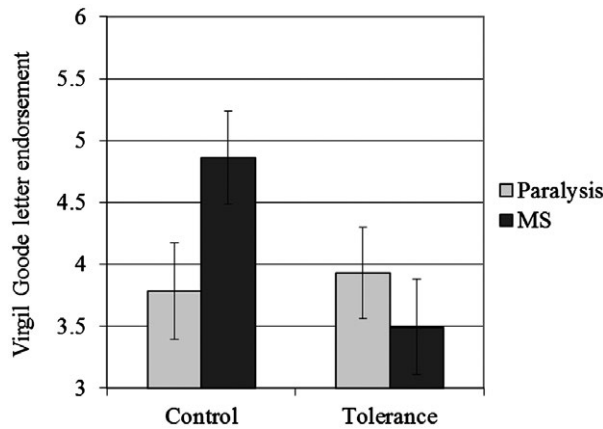*Note.* Study 1 used a 1–10 rating scale; Study 2 used a 1–6 rating scale.

Figure 1. The effect of MS and value prime on endorsement of anti-Islamic attitudes in Study 1. Response scale was 1–10.

that effect by leading those reminded of death to abstain from endorsing anti-Islamic prejudice. Results were consistent with Hypotheses 1, 2, and 5 but not Hypotheses 3 or 4 (considered in detail in General Discussion). There are, however, two notable concerns with Study 1. First, the sample size for Study 1 was small in light of more contemporary attention to this issue and thus invites skepticism about the stability of the effect. Second, data collected in 2009 may not necessarily reflect whether current attitudes about Muslims are susceptible to the motivational processes under present scrutiny; public political attitudes and policies on display recently (described at the outset) suggested these psychological processes were still occurring, with important implications, but this is ultimately an empirical question. Study 2 sought to address both of these issues.

Preregistration

The study design, hypotheses, and planned analyses were preregistered with AsPredicted.org on October 10, 2017, with documentation available.[4]

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[4]See https://aspredicted.org/y8f2m.pdf.

General Design, Sample Size, and Recruitment

A 2 (MS vs. paralysis) × 2 (prime: tolerance vs. neutral) between-subjects design was used, with endorsement of anti-Islamic attitudes as the dependent variable.

Meta-analyses of mortality-salience effect sizes were consulted to anticipate the sample sizes necessary to achieve a sufficient level of power (.80) to detect MS effects within each values priming category, should such effects be present. Burke et al. (2010) found an overall MS effect size of $r = .35$ (or $d = .75$, $\eta_p^2 = .12$, $f = .37$; a "large" effect) derived over a broad variety of outcomes (e.g., defense of national identity, attitudes toward animals, physical aggression). However, the most relevant data come from Study 1, which found an MS effect size observed in the neutral-values-prime condition of $d = .58$.

Assuming this effect size, an a priori power analysis (G*Power; Faul, Erdfelder, Buchner, & Lang, 2009) prescribed a minimum of 48 participants per each of the four conditions. However, (1) given the low sample sizes in the prior data, and (2) given that the prior data mainly involved data collected in tightly controlled lab environments whereas Study 2 used online data-collection methods (described below), we wanted to allow for both a lower "true" effect size and "noisier" less controlled environments. Thus, we based our sample-size planning on the strategy of selecting a "minimally important effect size" threshold (effects below which would be disregarded as trivial). Using an a priori power analysis for F-family tests for ANOVA (fixed effects, special, main effects, and interactions) (G*Power; Faul et al., 2009), we selected a minimum effect-size threshold of $f = .15$ (a small effect size), and set power to .80 for detecting effects at $p = .05$, with one numerator df and four groups. This analysis recommended a minimum target sample size of 351 participants.

A research panel company was hired to reach participants throughout the United States. Prior research has found that this panel company, and their primary source of recruitment, obtain high-quality data (Litman, Robinson, & Rosenzweig, 2015) and samples that are more representative of the general U.S. population than local convenience samples (Berinsky, Huber, & Lenz, 2012). On October 10—11, 2017, the company's recruitment service was used to administer the study materials, and participants who completed the study were compensated with US$1.00.

Participant Characteristics

A total of 450 people were initially recruited and began the study; 396 completed it. At the end of the survey, participants indicated age, sex, race, ethnicity, religious affiliation, years of education, and political orientation (see descriptives in Table 1).

Materials and Procedure

The study was advertised using a neutral title and description (e.g., "Social attitudes survey") to conceal its true purpose and associated hypotheses. All materials/procedures were the same as in Study 1, with two exceptions aimed at scaling the study for online presentation: (1) 10-point Likert-type response options did not scale well on mobile devices, with formatting errors and/or response options failing to fit the screen, so we scaled down to 6-point response options instead (1 = *Strongly disagree*, 6 = *Strongly agree*); and (2) whereas the expanded PANAS form used in Study 1 (PANAS-X) could be presented in the lab on one page with the 60 items in four columns of 15, the measure became tediously long when presented in a single-column list online, and given that it was not important to any of the key hypotheses, we replaced it with the shorter (original) 20-item PANAS form version (Watson & Clark, 1992; see Appendix S1 in the online supporting information for exploratory supplemental analyses on affect). Full materials are available online in Appendix S1.

Results

Preliminary Analyses: Value-Prime Agreement Scores

The value-prime agreement scores were analyzed to determine whether the tolerance prime was indeed associated with endorsement of tolerance values. An independent-samples *t*-test revealed that participants more strongly endorsed the tolerance-values-prime statements than the neutral-values-prime statements ($t[394] = 6.46$, $d = .65$, 95%CI [.45, .86], $p < .001$). Additionally, descriptive statistics (see Table 2) revealed that participants quite strongly endorsed the tolerance-value-prime statements; further, only three participants had weak mean tolerance-prime-statement endorsements (less than 3.00 out of 6) whereas the remaining 202 participants in the tolerance-prime condition made strong endorsements of the tolerance value.

Target Analyses: Endorsement of Anti-Islamic Attitudes

A 2 (MS vs. paralysis) × 2 (prime: tolerance vs. neutral) ANOVA was conducted on endorsement of anti-Islamic attitudes ($\alpha = .90$). There was no main effect of MS ($F[1, 392] = 2.33$, $\eta_p^2 < .01$, $p = .13$) nor the tolerance-prime condition ($F[1, 392] = 2.08$, $\eta_p^2 < .01$, $p = .15$). However, the MS ×Tolerance interaction emerged, $F(1, 392) = 4.74$, $\eta_p^2 = .01$, $p = .03$ (Figure 2), explored below using pairwise comparisons (see Table 2 for descriptive statistics by condition).

When in the neutral-prime condition, participants were more likely to endorse Virgil Goode's anti-Islamic attitudes in the MS than in the paralysis salience condition ($t[189] = 2.57$, $d = .35$, 95%CI [.06, .63], $p = .01$). In the tolerance-prime condition, there was no difference in the amount of endorsement of Goode's anti-Islamic attitudes in the MS and paralysis condition ($t[203] = -0.47$, $d = -.07$, 95% CI [−.34, .20], $p = .64$). Analyzed another way, after MS participants were more likely to endorse Virgil Goode's anti-Islamic attitudes in the neutral- than in the tolerance-prime condition ($t[188] = 2.51$, $d = .39$, 95%CI [.10, .67], $p = .01$). In the paralysis-prime condition, however, there was no difference between the neutral- and tolerance-prime condition ($t[204] = -.53$, $d = -.07$, 95%CI [−.34, .20], $p = .60$).
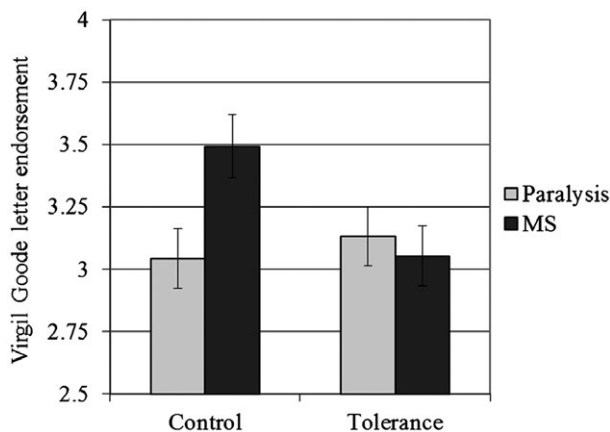

Figure 2. The effect of MS and value prime on endorsement of anti-Islamic attitudes in Study 2. Response scale was 1–6.

Exploratory Analyses: Political Orientation

A total of 395 participants reported political orientation (1 = *liberal*, 5 = *conservative*). A 2 (MS vs. paralysis) × 2 (prime: tolerance vs. neutral) ANOVA was conducted on political orientation. There was no main effect of MS ($F[1, 391] = .02$, $\eta_p^2 < .01$, $p = .90$), nor a main effect of value prime ($F[1, 391] = 1.24$, $\eta_p^2 < .01$, $p = .27$), nor interaction, $F(1, 391) = .80$, $\eta_p^2 < .01$, $p = .37$, indicating that political orientation was not associated with the Tolerance or MS manipulations. However, political orientation was associated with anti-Islamic prejudice, $r(394) = .60$, $p < .001$. Therefore, we conducted a 2 (MS vs. paralysis) × 2 (prime: tolerance vs. neutral) ANCOVA on anti-Islamic prejudice, with political orientation as a covariate, to test whether the target interaction would hold even when controlling for political orientation; the target data patterns remained as reported above (see Appendix S1 in the online supporting information for full details).

General Discussion

The present research explored whether death awareness would motivate Americans to endorse anti-Islamic prejudice and whether salient tolerance values would counteract that effect by leading those reminded of death to abstain from endorsing anti-Islamic prejudice. Results were consistent with TMT, compensatory conviction model, and the uncertainty-management model, which predicted an interaction such that MS would increase Americans' anti-Islamic attitudes in the neutral condition (Hypothesis 1), but not if they were first oriented toward the value of tolerance (Hypothesis 2). In the neutral-value-prime condition, mortality (vs. control topic) reminders motivated participants to more strongly endorse Rep. Virgil Goode's anti-Islamic attitudes, attacking the Quran, warning against Muslims entering American political offices (e.g., Rep. Keith Ellison), and expressing general fear and intolerance of Muslim immigrants. However, in the tolerance-value-prime condition, mortality reminders did not increase endorsement of anti-Islamic prejudice, and participants instead maintained a general disagreement with Rep. Goode's anti-Islamic attitudes (endorsement scores remained well below the midpoints of the scales, in the "disagree" territory). Thus, the present findings suggest that reminders of mortality can lead Americans to endorse anti-Islamic prejudice. However, salient prosocial values, like tolerance, can counteract this effect—presumably by leading Americans managing death awareness to uphold those values by abstaining from endorsing Rep. Goode's anti-Islamic sentiment, maintaining their acceptance of Islam and equal treatment of Muslims in America on the political stage.

The present research also converges with a growing body of research demonstrating that the awareness of death can motivate hostile worldview defenses (Hayes, Schimel, Arndt, & Faucher, 2010; Routledge & Vess, 2019). Previous research has found that MS motivates expressions of positive support for fellow believers of one's worldview and negative attitudes toward those that adhere to alternative/challenging worldviews (Greenberg et al., 1990; Iqbal, O'Brien, Bliuc, & Vergani, 2016), even fueling hostilities—including aggression and support for violence—against people who hold different beliefs and values (H. A. McGregor et al., 1998). The terror-managing effects of such worldview defense has been observed among Canadian Christians reading about the killing of Muslims in a plane crash (Hayes et al., 2008), Americans expressing anti-Arab and anti-immigrant prejudice (Motyl et al., 2011), and Canadians increasing their desire to restrict the civil rights of people with anti-West/pro-Islamic beliefs (Norenzayan et al., 2009). The present studies converge with these findings, in the neutral-values-prime condition that MS led Americans to more strongly endorse anti-Islamic prejudice in the political sphere.

However, the present research also noted that cultural worldviews are often complex. And in addition to lauding traditional American beliefs, values, and practices, American culture also strongly values ideals of tolerance and diversity, which often entail challenges to the status quo. In that light,

the present work also contributes to a growing body of research suggesting that when what are often construed as liberal cultural values are particularly salient or dominant, then death awareness may motivate people to uphold those values. Indeed, prior work has found that MS can lead to forgiveness when empathy is dominant (Schimel et al., 2006); helping when helping norms are salient (Gailliot et al., 2008; Jonas et al., 2008); support for peace when pacifistic norms are salient (Jonas et al., 2008); and racial tolerance when egalitarianism norms are salient (Gailliot et al., 2008). However, this prior research has not yet examined the malleability of responses in expressly political contexts. The present study therefore adds to this literature, finding in the tolerance-prime condition that Americans in the MS condition maintained their disagreement with expressly political anti-Islamic prejudices just as much as participants in the paralysis condition.

Threat and ideology. The present research also contributes to understanding the impact of existential threat on political leanings. The uncertainty-threat model (Jost et al., 2003; Jost & Napier, 2012) and related system justification theory (Jost & van der Toorn, 2012) holds that mortality awareness is a form of uncertainty threat that motivates efforts to conserve the status quo, producing a shift toward political conservativism. In the present research, these perspectives predicted a main effect (no interaction) such that MS would motivate defense of the status quo via endorsement of Rep. Goode's anti-Islamic letter (Hypothesis 3) and a shift toward conservative political orientation (Hypothesis 4), regardless of values-prime condition. The present work did find that MS increased anti-Islamic prejudice in the neutral-value-prime condition, which—if it were the only condition—could be taken as consistent with these perspectives. However, there was an interaction in which MS did not increase anti-Islamic prejudice in the tolerance-values condition. And there were null effects such that MS did not motivate shifts toward conservative political orientation. These data patterns failed to support Hypotheses 3 and 4 and were instead consistent with Hypotheses 1, 2, and 5.

Indeed, critics of these models (e.g., Greenberg & Jonas, 2003) have pointed out that the motivated social cognitive foundations (e.g., certainty, dogmatism) of political orientation are not limited to conservative views but are also found across all shades of political orientation. In that light, the present findings are more consistent with Burke et al.'s (2013) suggestion that—regardless of extant political orientation—existential threat may motivate support for the status quo when it offers comfort in promises of political, psychological, or strategic security, but that such inclinations are overridden when more liberal cultural-worldview components are salient or dominant. The present research is consistent with that assessment; in the neutral-values-prime condition, MS led participants to increase endorsement of a status quo in which American politicians have traditionally been white Christians who take their oath of office on a Bible. However, in the tolerance-value-prime condition, participants reminded of mortality remained accepting of Rep. Ellison's Islamic beliefs and practices, maintaining disagreement with Rep. Goode's anti-Islamic letter; and these effects emerged regardless of political orientation.

On a related note, future researchers might build on this work to consider whether the existential motivation to uphold the value of tolerance might lead people to become more tolerant of intolerance, or more intolerant of intolerance (a sort of *liberal* closed-mindedness about tolerance). As it currently stands, although the present data do not directly inform the issue, they are relevant to the concept of censorship and "safe spaces" and raise questions about whether people motivated to uphold the value of tolerance would censor/restrict the rights of others to express unpopular, inflammatory, and intolerant attitudes (Rose, 2017). Some emerging research (White & Crandall, 2017) indeed suggests that people tend to defend (tolerate) freedom of intolerant speech when it reflects their own prejudices, but not when they disagree with the intolerant speech. Thus, future research might investigate the possibility that MS and tolerance salience would lead to more tolerance of intolerance (desire to defend the freedom to express anti-Islamic speech) among individuals with high levels of anti-Islamic prejudice and more intolerance of intolerance (desire to censor/restrict anti-Islamic speech, e.g., "safe spaces") among people with low levels of anti-Islamic prejudice.

Specificity to death. The present research found support for Hypotheses 1 and 2, derived from TMT, the compensatory-conviction model, and the uncertainty-management model. However, although each of these models converge on a common prediction, they differ in their view of the key motivational ingredient of MS, and we suggest that those views also differ in their ability to adequately explain the present MS effects. First, TMT holds that MS effects emerge because MS—compared to any other nondeath-related stimuli, such as the paralysis condition used here—primes the unique existential threat of death which motivates efforts to uphold/defend one's permanence-promising cultural worldview. In contrast, the compensatory-conviction model suggests that MS represents a threat to self-integrity that motivates zealous compensatory ideological convictions; and the uncertainty-management model suggests that MS represents a form of uncertainty threat that motivates ideological/worldview defenses because worldview beliefs offer certainty in meaning. These latter two views may, at least to some extent, accurately apply to MS, but they likely also apply to paralysis salience. Death awareness may threaten self-integrity, but presumably so does being paralyzed; and thinking about death might arouse uncertainties—e.g., about when, where, how it will happen, what happens after, what happens to social connections, and so on—but thinking about paralysis is likely to evoke many of the same uncertainties.

In that light, the present work contributes to research exploring whether MS produces effects simply because it is an aversive/threatening prime (perhaps arousing uncertainty or threatening self-integrity) or because there is something unique about death awareness in particular. A recent meta-analysis (Burke et al., 2010) on the topic examined this issue in 277 studies using MS manipulations and found that MS increased worldview defense when compared against neutral, positive, or no primes *and* when compared against other aversive (but nondeath-related) primes (see also Martens et al., 2011). The present research converges with this literature by similarly finding (in the neutral-values-prime condition) that MS elicited increased worldview defense even when more stringently controlling for the aversive/threatening aspect by using an aversive paralysis-prime-comparison condition—which is consistent with TMTs suggestion that MS produces unique effects due to death awareness in particular.

Limitations and future directions. The present work relied on a student sample in Study 1, with 79 "Introduction to Psychology" students, mostly white Christians. Others have long noted that university socialization has an important and potentially unique impact on student's beliefs systems (Alwin, Cohen, & Newcomb, 1991; Guimond & Palmer, 1996), and so it is appropriate to caution against overgeneralization of Study 1's findings to other groups. Additionally, although Study 2 reached beyond a university campus and included 396 older, noncollege-student participants with greater representation of other groups, the sample still had an average of three years of college education and was again typically white, non-Hispanic, and largely Christian. Given some emerging concerns about a limited focus of research on so-called "WEIRD" (white, educated, industrialized, rich, democratic) populations (e.g., Henrich, Heine, & Norenzayan, 2010), we again urge caution against overgeneralization of Study 2 findings to other groups.

Of course, the sample size of Study 2 merits comment as well. As the field renews its attention to the importance of sample size and power, there can be questions raised about previous existential threat research which often, though not always, utilized what were the smaller conventional sample sizes of the time. In that light, Study 2 offers an important contribution by testing and documenting the present effects among a larger sample size with adequate statistical power.

Further, the observed effects on the target comparisons were of moderate magnitude. For example, in the neutral-value-prime condition, the effect size of the MS versus paralysis condition comparison was $d = .58$ in Study 1 and $d = .35$ in Study 2. However, those effects should be considered in the context of basic science research and experimental methods, which often operationalize variables in a variety of ways that may or may not capture how the phenomena is always experienced in daily life (e.g., manipulating awareness of mortality with a MS induction, computerized subliminal

primes, exposure to life-insurance-company logos), and in settings that may or may not directly translate to daily experience (e.g., completing questionnaires on a computer, behavioral responses in elaborate field experiments). That is, the effect sizes themselves should be interpreted cautiously, as the goal was not to estimate ecologically valid effect sizes but rather to better understand a specific phenomenon by experimentally isolating it to test theoretical ideas and their implications for political attitudes.

Additionally, the present findings not only suggest relevance to anti-Islamic attitudes in American immigration policy, but they also raise additional questions for future research. First, can these findings be applied to attitudes about other immigrant groups, or are they specific to attitudes toward Muslims? The ostensible threat of Islamic immigrants perceived by some Americans is likely different than that of, for example, Latin American (e.g., Mexican) immigrants. Future research could explore how the type and degree of worldview threat perceptions (e.g., cultural, economic, security) influence existentially motivated changes in immigration attitudes. Second, future research could explore how these influences—existential threat, culture clash, and tolerance narratives—play out in real-world settings and in the media. For example, many media outlets report existential threat stories (e.g., local crime, mass shootings), and some (e.g., Fox News) may also tend to emphasize threat narratives about Muslims or other groups whereas others (e.g., Huffington Post) may instead tend to emphasize tolerance and inclusion narratives.

Conclusion

As mentioned at the outset, the political landscape in America and elsewhere are seemingly overflowing with issues of grave importance (e.g., war/security, health care), setting in motion the motivation to manage that awareness of death through some form of worldview defense. In that light, when Keith Ellison became the first Muslim elected to the U.S. Congress and announced his intention to take the oath of office using the Quran, in a majority-Christian nation where over 90% of Congress is Christian and sworn in using the Bible (Pew Research Center, 2017; Sandstrom, 2017), Ellison and his beliefs and practices were likely perceived by many Americans as a threat to their way of life.

In terms of theoretical implications, this research was able to test the competing predictions of several theories of existential motivational dynamics, finding broad support for TMT and the unique impact of death awareness on the social implications of existential threat motivation in terms of anti-Islamic prejudice, regardless of political orientation. Indeed, the present research found that the awareness of death (vs. paralysis) caused Americans to more strongly endorse the worldview-defensive, anti-Islamic letter Rep. Virgil Goode circulated to his constituents in Virginia following Ellison's election. And, importantly, the present research also found that when the more prosocial aspects of Americans' worldview—such as tolerance and egalitarianism—were salient, the existential motivation to uphold and defend one's worldview led participants to remain relatively tolerant of Rep. Ellison's beliefs and practices and maintain their disagreement with Rep. Goode's anti-Islamic letter. Further, these effects emerged regardless of political orientation. And lastly, this research was consistent with TMTs suggestion that MS produces unique effects due to death awareness in particular.

In terms of practical implications, the present findings obtained in the neutral-values-prime condition (when tolerance was not salient) offer a way to help understand why Rep. Virgil Goode publicly expressed anti-Islamic prejudice, why Donald Trump promised to halt Muslim immigration and then made good on that promise by issuing an anti-Muslim travel ban during the first days of his Presidency, and why over 50% of Americans polled supported that policy (Kirk & Scott, 2017). In contrast, the present findings obtained in the tolerance-values-prime condition sheds light on Rep. Wasserman-Schultz's (Sacirbey, 2006; Swarns, 2006) defense of Rep. Ellison's religious

and political freedoms in the name of diversity, and the 40% of Americans who opposed President Trump's anti-Islamic travel ban (Kirk & Scott, 2017) and engaged in large, international protests (Grinberg & McLaughlin, 2017) in favor of more tolerant, compassionate policies.

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Supporting Information

Additional supporting information may be found in the online version of this article at the publisher's web site:

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Study 2 Supplemental Analyses of Endorsement of Anti-Islamic Attitudes, With Political Orientation as a Covariate