



SCHOOL OF POLITICS & ECONOMICS

DEMOCRACY UNDER STRESS: CRISES, POLITICAL EVALUATIONS & BEHAVIOR

Professor Jennifer L. Merolla
Claremont Graduate University
jennifer.merolla@cgu.edu

Professor Elizabeth J. Zechmeister
University of California, Davis
ejzech@ucdavis.edu

From 9/11 in the U.S. to the bombing of transportation systems and buildings elsewhere to the persistent threat of such attacks, politics often happens under conditions of national security crisis. In 2004, voters in Spain went to the polls just days after devastating train bombings in Madrid. In the U.S., the threat of another terrorist attack continues to loom large in the minds of citizens, particularly during election years. While it appears that individuals are increasingly making political assessments under conditions of crisis, we know little about how such crises affect citizens' attitudes, evaluations, and behavior.

Our project investigates how national security crises – specifically, the threat of terrorist attacks – affect individuals' decision-making processes, across numerous domains ranging from authoritarian attitudes to evaluations of leaders to voting behavior. Using data collected from both surveys and experiments, we compare citizens experiencing conditions of national security crisis to those experiencing one or more of several other conditions: times of relative calm, times of well-being and prosperity, and times of economic crisis. Our principal argument and findings can be simply stated: conditions of national security crisis result in attitudinal and behavioral shifts that can potentially endanger democracy.

We draw from research in political science, psychology, economics, business organization, and neuroscience in the development of our argument. During times of national crisis, citizens experience heightened distress, anxiety, hopelessness, loss of control, worry, and frequently fear of their own mortality, none of which can be resolved by their own decisions or actions. Consequently, citizens adopt one or more of three coping mechanisms, which affect how they perceive and treat other citizens, political leaders, and other nations. One coping strategy is designed to impose order on the world nearest an individual, especially with respect to one's relations to other citizens. A second strategy is to find and turn over control to an external actor, such as a political figure whom one deems capable of solving, or handling the crisis. A third strategy is to focus energy within the nation state on security, and at the same time engage other countries to help with the crisis.

We have presented results related to each coping mechanism at various conferences and will start to present our work to some government agencies. An article related to the second strategy recently appeared in the February issue of the *Journal of Politics*, one of the leading journals in Political Science. We have involved graduate students at both universities in various papers related to the project. This summer we are working on a draft of a book manuscript that ties together results related to the three coping mechanisms and will present the draft at Duke University.