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**Social Instability and Self-Uncertainty:  
Fertile Ground for Political Polarization, Ideological Schism, and Directive Leadership**

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## Abstract

Social instability and societal change can undermine people's sense of who they are in society; creating a yearning for clear direction and for an unambiguous and distinctive sense of self against a background of unpredictability. In this chapter I draw on uncertainty-identity theory (Hogg, 2007a, 2012) to argue that instability and rapid change can make people uncertain about their social identity, and thus their place in society and how they relate to others. This is subjectively uncomfortable and maladaptive, and it motivates people to seek out clearly defined and distinctive social identities to identify strongly with. This process is manifested in the political landscape. For example political groupings reconstruct themselves around more extreme ideologies or schism into extreme or orthodox forms, and minority groups who espouse unambiguous identities are empowered and gain ground. An atmosphere of zealotry prevails, and people seek out strong directive leadership that delivers an unambiguous message about "who we are". Together, strong political leadership, ideological extremism and radical empowerment are precisely what people experiencing self-uncertainty seek in times of instability. In this chapter I focus primarily on recent work drawing on uncertainty-identity theory that focuses on political polarization (e.g., Gaffney, Rast, Hackett, & Hogg, in press), ideological schisms (e.g., Wagoner & Hogg, 2014), directive leadership (e.g., Hogg, van Knippenberg, & Rast, 2012), and radical groups in general (e.g., Hogg & Adelman, 2013).

“Politics” has many meanings, but a commonplace definition, from the *Oxford English Dictionary*, is “the activities associated with the governance of a country or other area, especially the debate or conflict among individuals or parties having or hoping to achieve power”. Politics have a very significant influence on our lives, so it is not surprising that politics is the focus of systematic research in both the social and the behavioral sciences, and an enduring topic in literature, film and TV.

One aspect of politics that intrigues and often appalls us is the machinations and hypocrisy of those individuals involved in politics – powerfully captured by Niccolò Machiavelli’s classic 1532 book “*The Prince*”. More recently, many of us have been transfixed by the 2013 Netflix series “*House of Cards*”, starring Kevin Spacey and Robin Wright. In a lighter vein we have laughed out loud to the satirical 2012 HBO mini-series “*Veep*”, starring Julia Louis-Dreyfus. This personality and interpersonal aspect of politics is not the focus of this chapter.

Rather, this chapter focuses on politics as an intergroup phenomenon in which groups provide people with an identity and associated ideology, norms and behavioral prescriptions, which are grounded in and impact intergroup relations. The groups and ideologies typically pivot on people’s beliefs about what a society should value and on how a society should act to achieve its goals. In this respect politics can be entirely secular, but can also be religious –modern western politics are or strive to be secular, but Catholicism and Islam also have a long history of being political organizations.

Politics as identity-grounded intergroup relations is a process in which “political” or politically-oriented groups construct and promulgate an ideology, value system, and set of beliefs

and behaviors, and compete with other groups – democratically, peacefully or aggressively. It is a process that involves large scale intergroup relations but also the psychology of party politics, factions and schisms, minority influence, and leadership and influence. For many people, political affiliation can be a master identity that dominates and configures other aspects of self, and pervades interpersonal relations, social interaction and life choices.

The question addressed in this chapter is why do people identify with one political grouping and ideology not another, but more specifically what drives people to identify with political groups, factions and structures that are more or less extreme in terms of their ideology, behavioral prescriptions and internal structure. What are the conditions and psychological processes that lead people to strongly endorse and identify with radical, fundamentalist or extremist political groups? How does political extremism arise?

There are many ways to approach this question. One is to focus on people's predispositions, personality or cognitive styles – for example, authoritarianism (Altemeyer, 1998), preference for social dominance (Pratto, Sidanius, & Levin, 2006) or need for cognitive closure (Kruglanski & Webster, 1996) may encourage people to join, support or identify with political groups that have a more extreme agenda. Another is to focus on feelings of threat or sense of intergroup relative deprivation (Walker & Smith, 2002) and the pursuit of strategies to contest or justify the social order (Jost & van der Toorn, 2012; Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

In this chapter I explore a slightly different idea - that conditions in society and in people's lives can make people feel uncertain about who they are (their self and identity), and thus about how to behave and how others will treat them; and that identification with groups, particularly more "extreme" groups provides a powerful resolution of such uncertainty. I describe uncertainty-identity theory and its implications for societal extremism, briefly noting

empirical support in passing. Then I draw out the implications of this analysis for political phenomena, with a specific focus on political polarization, political schisms, and political leadership.

### UNCERTAINTY-IDENTITY THEORY

Uncertainty-identity theory (Hogg, 2000, 2007a, 2012, in press) describes the motivational role of uncertainty in causing people to identify with social groups, ranging from small interactive task-oriented groups such as teams and organizations to large social categories such as ethnic, religious, national and political groups. The core tenets of the theory are: (a) feelings of uncertainty, particularly about or relating to who one is and how one should behave, motivate behaviors aimed at reducing self-uncertainty; (b) the process of categorizing oneself and others as group members very effectively reduces self-uncertainty because it provides a consensually validated social identity and associated group prototype that describes and prescribes who one is and how one should behave; and (c) highly entitative groups with distinctive, unambiguous and consensual prototypes are better equipped to reduce identity related self-uncertainty.

#### **Self-Uncertainty Motivates Behavior**

Feeling uncertain about one's world and in particular about what one should think feel and do, and about how others will behave can be disconcerting. Uncertainty makes it difficult to predict and plan behavior in such a way as to act efficaciously in achieving desired outcomes and avoiding undesirable outcomes. Not surprisingly people try to reduce uncertainty about their perceptions, attitudes, feelings, and behaviors. The pragmatist philosopher John Dewey captures

the motivational prominence of uncertainty-reduction rather nicely: "... in the absence of actual certainty in the midst of a precarious and hazardous world, men cultivate all sorts of things that would give them the *feeling* of certainty" (Dewey, 1929/2005, p.33).

The experience of uncertainty can vary – it can feel like a challenge, or it can feel like a threat (cf. Blascovich & Tomaka, 1996). If one feels one has the resources to resolve the uncertainty, it can be an exhilarating challenge to be confronted – it is exciting and makes us feel edgy and alive, and delivers us a sense of satisfaction and mastery when we resolve it. If one feels one does not have the resources to resolve the uncertainty, it can be anxiety provoking and threatening, making us feel helpless and unable to predict or control our world and what will happen to us.

Furthermore, because resolving uncertainty can be cognitively demanding we only expend cognitive energy on those uncertainties that are important or matter to us in a particular context (cf. cognitive miser or motivated tactician models of social cognition - Fiske & Taylor, 1991). Even then we typically work to reduce uncertainty until we are only 'sufficiently' certain (Pollock, 2003) to provide some sense of closure, which allows us to move on to dedicate cognitive energy to other things.

A major determinant of whether an uncertainty matters is the extent to which self is involved. We are particularly motivated to reduce uncertainty if we feel uncertain about things that reflect on or are relevant to self, or if we are uncertain about self per se; about our identity, who we are, how we relate to others, and how we are socially located. Ultimately, people need to know who they are and how to behave and what to think, and who others are and how they might behave and what they might think.

## **Group Identification Reduces Self-Uncertainty**

That uncertainty motivates behavior is not a new idea (e.g., Festinger, 1954; Fromm, 1947; Kahneman, Slovic, & Tversky, 1982). What *is* new is the uncertainty-identity theory proposal that a specific form of uncertainty, self- or identity-related uncertainty, is very effectively reduced and managed by identifying with a group. This proposal rests on social identity theory's account of how social categorization of oneself and others underpins group identification and generates group and intergroup behaviors (Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987; also see Abrams & Hogg, 2010).

People cognitively represent a social category as a fuzzy set of attributes (attitudes, behaviors and so forth) that defines the category and differentiates it from other categories. Such category *prototypes* identify and accentuate similarities among people within a category and differences between categories, and prescribe how one should behave as a category member. Category prototypes tend to be shared by members of the same group – we agree that we are like this and they are like that.

The process of categorizing someone as a category member transforms how we view them, bringing our perceptions and expectations in line with our prototype of the category. This process when applied to oneself (self-categorization) has the same effect; but now of course our own identity is transformed so that we identify with our group and our feelings and behaviors conform to our ingroup prototype. Because group prototypes are largely shared, this process attracts consensual validation of who we are and of our attitudes, feelings and behaviors from fellow ingroup members as well as relevant outgroup members. In this way group identification reduces uncertainty about who we are and how we should act and about how others view us and will act towards us.

Uncertainty-identity theory's most basic prediction that the more uncertain people are the more strongly they identify with a self-inclusive social category has been confirmed across numerous studies of relatively minimally defined ad hoc laboratory groups (e.g., Grieve & Hogg, 1999; Mullin & Hogg, 1998). In these studies people identified with and discriminated in favor of their own group only when they were categorized under uncertainty. Uncertainty was manipulated in a variety of ways. For example, participants described what they thought was happening in ambiguous or unambiguous pictures, or they estimated the number of objects displayed in pictures in which there were very few objects or so many objects that they could only make a wild guess.

Other studies find that identification is stronger if participants are uncertain about something important and self-relevant, and if the prototypical properties of the social category are relevant to the focus of uncertainty. Uncertainty also motivates people to overcome their natural inclination to dis-identify from low status groups – people placed in relatively low status groups were found to identify strongly under uncertainty (Reid & Hogg, 2005).

### **Entitative Groups with Clear Prototypes**

However, not all groups and identities are equally effective at reducing self-uncertainty. Some have generic qualities that make them more effective than others. Groups that are most effective are associated with distinctive, unambiguous, clearly defined and tightly shared prototypes. These prototypes are provided by highly *entitative* groups that are well-structured with clear boundaries, and where members interact and share group attributes and goals and have a common fate (Campbell, 1958; Hamilton & Sherman, 1996). Because highly entitative groups are most effective at reducing self-uncertainty through self-categorization, under uncertainty



people strive to identify with such groups or strive to accentuate the entitativity of groups they already identify with. Entitativity moderates the relationship between self-uncertainty and group identification.

Studies that manipulate or measure self- and self-related uncertainty directly and focus on entitativity confirm that people identify significantly more strongly with a group when they are experiencing self-uncertainty and their group is (a) highly entitative (e.g., Hogg, Sherman, Dierselhuis, Maitner, & Moffitt, 2007), or (b) psychologically prominent relative to other groups because of its distinctiveness or the fact that they have few other social identities (Grant & Hogg, 2012). Furthermore, self-uncertainty has been found to lead group members to accentuate the entitativity of their group by polarizing its prototype away from that of a relevant outgroup (e.g., Sherman, Hogg, & Maitner, 2009).

### **Beyond Entitativity**

Entitativity is a perceptual property of categories – but if the category is a human group then entitativity is associated with prototypes that prescribe a much wider set of feelings and behaviors. Under uncertainty people identify more strongly with entitative groups because such groups provide a more clearly defined and directive sense of self.

Uncertainty-identity theory takes this argument further. It proposes that this process lays the groundwork for extremism – strong, possibly zealous, identification with and attachment to highly distinctive groups that are intolerant of dissent, rigidly structured with strong directive leadership, have all-encompassing exclusionary ideologies that are ethnocentric, and promote radical and extreme intergroup behaviors. Such groups are not merely group-centric (Kruglanski,

Pierro, Mannetti, & De Grada, 2006) but perhaps more accurately characterized as “totalist” (Baron, Crawley, & Paulina, 2003).

The uncertainty-identity theory analysis of extremism is part of a wider interest among social psychologists in the relationship between uncertainty and societal extremism (Hogg & Blaylock, 2012; Hogg, Kruglanski, & Van den Bos, 2013); an interest that often focuses on religious, national, political, and other ideological groups.

### UNCERTAINTY-IDENTITY DYNAMICS IN POLITICAL CONTEXTS

To the extent that politics is a group process in which social identity dynamics operate, uncertainty-identity theory is well suited to help explain the role played by uncertainty in political processes, particularly those that involve group and identity defining ideologies. In this section I focus mainly on political polarization, ideological schisms, and directive leadership.

Self- and identity-uncertainty enhance the appeal of identity-defining attitude systems that are distinctive, unambiguous, all-encompassing, explanatory and behaviorally prescriptive. This form of uncertainty can be prompted by many different circumstances – ranging from personal life circumstances such as unemployment, divorce and bereavement, through developmental identity transformation among adolescents, to large-scale societal changes and crises. At the developmental level, this idea has been used to help explain why some adolescents for whom identity change is particularly problematic may engage in “at-risk” behaviors (Hogg, Siegel, & Hohman, 2011) or be drawn to gang membership (Goldman, Giles, & Hogg, in press). At the other extreme the underlying logic can be used to help explain why mass violence in the form of genocide may arise when societies are in chaos (e.g., Staub, 1989).

Regarding political extremism, history teaches us how societal turmoil is often associated with polarized politics, zealous partisanship, and extreme political ideologies and actions. For example, the Great Depression of the 1930s fueled communism and fascism that faced each other in the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939) and World War II (1939-1945). The threat of cultural annihilation posed by the Cold War (1945-1990) entrenched extreme forms of capitalism and communism and an atmosphere of hysterical suspicion. The second half of the 20th century also witnessed the cultural hegemony of postmodernism and post-structuralism, which challenged notions of absolute morality and described a world of flexible moral principles that left many people yearning for the moral absolutes provided by religious and political fundamentalism (cf. Hogg, Adelman, & Blagg, 2010).

Religious fundamentalism played a central role in the 9/11 and ensuing global atrocities – Western values and lifestyles seemed under threat and people reacted by lurching towards anti-Islamic, nationalistic and conservative political ideologies. Most recently, globalization, economic recession, climate change, and turmoil in the Muslim World and North Africa are a potent mix that fuels mass migration and immigration – this has threatened many Western nations' cultural identity and has empowered extremist nationalist political movements including neo-Fascist and Anarchism-related political ideologies (Gaffney, Rast, Hackett, & Hogg, in press; Haller & Hogg, 2014).

Many factors played a role in all these developments. However, uncertainty identity theory argues that one important psychological factor is self-uncertainty that mediates the relationship between societal turmoil and political extremism. This general hypothesis has now been explicitly tested and empirically supported by a number of studies. For example, one study was conducted with university students confronted by changes that would impact campus life

and their academic studies (Hogg, Meehan, & Farquharson, 2010). In this context, students who were primed to feel elevated self-uncertainty identified more strongly with an extremist student political action group and supported more radical and extreme protest actions by that group. Other research was conducted in the highly volatile context of the Middle East – specifically Israel and Palestine (Hogg & Adelman, 2013). A pair of studies in which self-uncertainty was either primed or measured found that self-uncertainty among Palestinian Muslims and Israeli Jews was more strongly associated with support for suicide bombing (Palestinians) or aggressive military action (Israelis) when political-national identity was central to self-definition. Another, more obliquely relevant, study found that people who were focused on their own death and were uncertain about the afterlife, what would happen to them after they died, identified more strongly with their nation (Hohman & Hogg, 2011).

### **Political Polarization**

One observation many of us have probably made is that when there is social turmoil political organizations seem to become polarized. For four months over the winter of 2003/2004 70,000 supermarket workers in Southern California were on strike. This political action that placed workers and management in conflict raised potentially enormous employment and identity uncertainty among the striking workers. Against this background Sherman and his colleagues measured feelings of self-uncertainty to discover that those who felt most uncertain accentuated the entitativity of their group of strikers and accentuated attitude differences between them and management (Sherman, Hogg, & Maitner, 2009). In the same article Sherman and colleagues reported a follow-up study focusing on Democrats and Republicans. They primed Democrat and Republican partisans to experience either high or low self-uncertainty and found

that it was those who felt uncertain who associated their perceptions of their party's entitativity with accentuated attitude polarization of the two parties.

Contemporary American politics is highly polarized – not least due to the post 2009 emergence of the American Tea Party, which is generally considered an ultra-socially conservative wing of the Republican Party that promotes minimal governance and has a partly Libertarian agenda. Gaffney and her associates primed feelings of self-uncertainty among conservatives who then evaluated a Tea Party message that had allegedly been delivered to a group of Republicans (ingroup) or a group of Democrats (outgroup) (Gaffney, Rast, Hackett, & Hogg, in press). Participants who believed the message had been delivered to Democrats and who had been primed to feel uncertain supported the extreme Tea Party position most strongly. Gaffney and associates interpreted this as uncertainty-mediated attitude polarization away from the democratic outgroup's position.

### **Ideological Schism**

Political polarization can sometimes be associated with a schism in which an ideological faction separates itself entirely from the larger body of which it is a part. The American Tea Party may actually be an example of this – an ultra-conservative faction within the Republican Party that often appears to act like an independent entity.

Social psychological research on schisms shows that a schism is most likely when a subgroup feels that the overarching group's ideology has changed in unwarranted and undesirable ways, and that the subgroup has no effective voice in rectifying the problem (Sani, 2005). From an uncertainty-identity perspective, it can be argued that when a group's norms change the associated social identity changes and this can raise uncertainty about what the group

and its identity stand for. Perceived normative change can threaten entitativity and be a powerful source of self-uncertainty. One reaction is for individuals or an organized faction to attempt to reassert normative attributes or maybe steer the group in a new and more desirable normative direction. If the faction feels it has no voice in the matter and recognizes that in reality it is a relatively distinctive and entitative group then a schism may occur – subgroup factional identification and schism resolves the uncertainty created by normative change at the superordinate group level.

This idea (see Hogg & Wagoner, in press) has been explored in a pair of preliminary studies of the California and Texas secessionist movements in which these states each advocate a political schism from the United States (Wagoner & Hogg, 2014). Both Californians and Texans indicated greatest support for their state to separate from the US when they perceived low ideological consensus across the United States (a proxy for national identity uncertainty) in conjunction with recognition that their state is highly entitative but has little voice at the national level.

### **Directive Leadership**

Leadership plays a central role in politics. Whether they are dictators or democratically elected officials, political leaders have substantial power and influence and public discourse often seems to be more about our political leaders than about the parties, ideologies and policies they represent. Leadership is the focus of an enormous amount of research, particularly in the organizational and management sciences (e.g., Yukl, 2010), and has recently become a renewed focus of attention in social psychology (Hogg, 2010).

Of particular relevance is the social identity theory of leadership (Hogg & van Knippenberg, 2003; Hogg, van Knippenberg, & Rast, 2012), which argues that when social identity is an important and central part of identity people pay particularly close attention to prototypicality and are influenced more by leaders who are prototypical than non-prototypical – in salient groups group prototypical leaders are most effective, and are preferred and evaluated favorably by group members. One implication for political leadership at the national level is that there can be a tendency for the electorate to vote into office leaders who are effectively “one of us” rather than leaders who have the requisite education, knowledge and skill to lead a nation.

How does self-uncertainty impact the prototypicality-leadership relationship? For a group and its identity to reduce self-uncertainty people need to know what the group’s defining attributes are. The most reliable source of this information is the behavior of and direction given by group members who are highly prototypical and strongly identified with the group themselves. These individuals are highly influential and typically occupy a leadership role in the group, and formal leaders who are prototypical are more influential than those who are less prototypical. Under uncertainty people should be particularly attentive to and compliant with their leaders, and quite possibly welcome directive even powerful autocratic leadership (Haller & Hogg, 2014; Hogg, 2005, 2007b; Rast, Gaffney, & Hogg, 2013).

Research provides some support for this analysis. A study of student advocacy groups found as expected that students supported a prototypical student leader more than a less prototypical leader, but where self-uncertainty was elevated this preference was weaker or disappeared, entirely due to enhanced support for a non-prototypical leader – uncertainty created a general desire for leadership per se (Rast, Gaffney, Hogg, & Crisp, 2012). In another study, organizational employees were found to ordinarily prefer a less autocratic leader over an

autocratic leader, but this flipped around under uncertainty – self-uncertain employees were more supportive of an autocratic than non-autocratic leader (Rast, Hogg, & Giessner, 2013).

Given that uncertainty can both strengthen group identification and enhance the attractiveness of leadership it is perhaps not surprising that leaders often engage in rhetoric that elevates followers' uncertainty at the same time as they position themselves in the eyes of followers to resolve the uncertainty. Political leaders seem particularly adept at this – while painting an image of an economic and cultural future that threatens the very essence of national identity, they clearly outline the nation's identity and map out a concrete agenda for reducing uncertainty.

Hohman and his associates explored this general idea in the context of George W. Bush's Republican presidency (Hohman, Hogg, & Bligh, 2010). Republican and Democrat students read a speech by President Bush and were instructed to either focus on aspects of the speech that made them feel uncertain or aspects that made them feel certain. They then indicated how strongly they identified with their political party (Republican or Democratic) and how strongly they identified with the nation (America). Uncertainty strengthened party identification. Among Republicans, for whom party and nation were fused through the Republican presidency, national identification remained strong; among Democrats, for whom party and nation were separated by the presidency, national identification weakened.

## FINAL WORDS

Politics is the vehicle of governance. It profoundly affects our lives and is a pervasive feature of human discourse and social interaction. Not surprisingly politics is a key focus of both



scholarly research and the media. In this chapter I focus specifically on how uncertainty may affect political processes.

Social instability and societal change can undermine people's sense of who they are in society; creating a sense of self-uncertainty and a yearning for clear direction and an unambiguous and distinctive sense of self against a background of unpredictability. I describe uncertainty-identity theory (Hogg, 2007a, 2012) to argue that instability and rapid change can make people uncertain about their social identity, and thus their place in society and how they relate to others. This is subjectively uncomfortable and maladaptive, and it motivates people to seek out clearly defined and distinctive social identities to identify strongly with.

This process is manifested in the political landscape. For example political groupings reconstruct themselves around more extreme ideologies or schism into extreme or orthodox forms, and minority groups who espouse unambiguous identities are empowered and gain ground. An atmosphere of zealotry prevails, and people seek out strong directive leadership that delivers an unambiguous message about "who we are". Together, strong political leadership, ideological extremism and radical empowerment are precisely what people experiencing self-uncertainty seek in times of instability.

In this chapter I describe recent research backing up this general claim but also focusing more directly on political polarization, ideological schism and leadership under uncertainty. One significant take-away message is that basic psychological processes associated with people's need to address self-uncertainty make societal and cultural instability and change a fertile ground for the emergence of political extremism.

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