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THREAT, TIGHTNESS, AND THE EVOLUTIONARY APPEAL OF POPULIST LEADERS

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Threat, Tightness, and the Evolutionary Appeal of Populist Leaders

For decades after the Cold War ended, many believed that the world would become more united. Political scientist Francis Fukuyama (2006) predicted that the historic triumph of free market capitalism over communism would soon mean all nations would adopt liberal democratic governments. Following this universal adoption, a globalized marketplace would promote connectivity and result in fewer wars, bringing about "the end of history." Others, like journalist Thomas Friedman (2005), argued that the surge in global markets and online networks was producing a world that had become "flat," wherein people were on a level playing field worldwide. And with the tidal wave of globalization, people around the globe—many of whom are wearing Levi jeans, drinking Starbucks coffee, and listening to the same music—would become more similar. Indeed, before it became a common mantra of Silicon Valley, internet pioneers like Marc Andreessen predicted the digital frontier would provide a platform for humanity to come together and put to rest its many age-old divisions.

Despite the promise that the world is flattening—that globalization and technology will unite us—the state of global affairs couldn't be further from this optimistic prediction. While we have more contact, we find ourselves feeling more divided (Vinnakota, 2017), democracy has been eroding worldwide (Puddington & Roylance, 2017), and autocrats have gained increasing support (see also Bar-Tal & Magal; Huddy & Del Ponte; and Marcus, this volume). Russian President Vladimir Putin remains immensely popular even though he stands accused of brazenly jailing his political opponents and killing journalists (Druzhinin, 2017). In the Philippines, President Rodrigo Duterte—who once bragged about

personally gunning down drug dealers from his motorcycle—has received support from many Filipino citizens (Aquino, 2017). In Europe, support for populist parties rose to a 30-year high (Tartar, 2017), resulting in the election of nationalist leaders in Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic and contributing to the United Kingdom's decision to leave the European Union (see also Forgas & Lantos, this volume). Meanwhile, as of 2018, Donald Trump maintained more party support than any president since World War II except George W. Bush after 9/11, according to Axios's Mike Allen (2018; see also Feldman, this volume).

Many theorists had argued that democratic governments would be more the norm than the exception in the 21st century, which begs the question: Why the sudden global appetite for power-hungry leaders with a penchant for breaking laws and ethical codes? Indeed, all of these autocrats are popular not in spite of their authoritarian tendencies, but because of them. Perhaps a better question, then, is: If people around the world see these leaders as the solution, what do they regard as the problem?

Many explanations have been offered for the rise of populist leaders with autocratic leanings, including such divisions as red versus blue, urban versus rural, religious versus secular, populist versus elite, among others (Gelfand, 2018). All of these divides exist, and there are many important factors that drive support for autocrats, as noted in this volume. In this chapter, we argue that we are also witnessing the reemergence of a deeper *cultural* fault line driving these dynamics, namely the desire for tight cultures and the leaders who can deliver them. Tight cultures are defined by strict rules and social order, tradition, and predictability. Loose groups eschew rules, welcome new ideas, and embrace tolerance (Gelfand et al., 2011). As elaborated upon later in this chapter, research shows that threat lies at the heart of variation in tightness–looseness. Throughout history, when groups experience ecological or human-made threat, they desire a strict social order and strong leaders who can create it (Gelfand, 2018; Jackson, van Egmond et al., 2019). Leaders also take advantage of this psychology and exaggerate threat to gain support. The strategy is enormously successful because it taps into a deep evolutionary principle that has helped human groups survive for millennia. Together, these dynamics provide a perfect storm that allows autocratic leaders to gain wide-spread popularity.

In what follows, we first discuss research on threat and the evolution of tight and loose cultures. We then discuss the implications of this research for recent election dynamics. With recently developed computational dictionaries, we can also track the use of threatening language of autocratic leaders that tightens communities. Based on our theory and findings, we then discuss some specific recommendations. While specific leaders will come and go, as long as people feel threatened—whether of terrorism, disasters, immigrants, or otherwise—they are more likely to vote for the tightness that autocrats promise to deliver. Accordingly, we need move beyond weeding out these particular personalities and address the deeper cultural roots of the desire for tightness.

How Threat Tightens Cultures

To understand the rise of autocrats, we need to step away from current political dynamics and consider the history of human culture, particularly its relationship with warfare, famine, and other collective threats. Tight–loose theory—which has been supported by computer models, international surveys, and archival data—suggests communities require strong rules and punishments in order to coordinate to survive collective threats (Gelfand et al., 2011; Gelfand, Harrington, & Jackson, 2017).

Herodotus, who is generally considered the "father of history," was one of the first to document tight–loose differences in the *Histories*. Writing about the Persians, Herodotus noted their looseness and openness to foreign ideas: "There is no nation which so readily adopts foreign customs as the Persians. Thus, they have taken the dress of the Medes, considering it superior to their own; and in war they wear the Egyptian breastplate" (Herodotus, 1998, I.135). By contrast, he described the Egyptians as having very strong norms, especially for cleanliness, religion, and authority relations (Herodotus, 1998, II.37). Centuries later, Pelto (1968) documented differences in the strength of norms across traditional societies, observing that the Hutterites, Hanno, and Lubara were "tight" in that they had strong norms, were very formal, and had severe punishments for norm violations. By contrast, the Kung Bushmen, Cubeo, and Skolt Lapps were "loose," with weaker norms and more tolerance for deviance. Pelto speculated that these differences might arise from ecological conditions which forced communities to coordinate and cooperate.

Building on this, Gelfand and colleagues (2011) argued that norm strength is adaptive to features of ecological environments, which in turn affords a suite of adaptive social and psychological processes. They tested a multilevel theory of tightness–looseness (TL) in a study of 6,823 individuals across 33 nations (see Figure 15.1). At the most macro level, they theorized that societies with threat develop stronger norms and punishments of violators in order to coordinate to
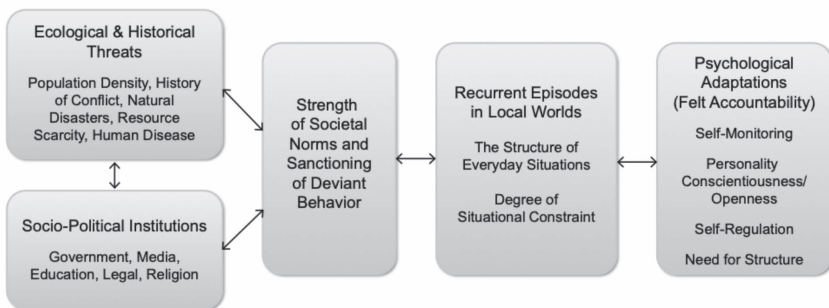

FIGURE 15.1   A multilevel theory of cultural tightness-looseness.

survive. By contrast, societies that lack exposure to chronic ecological threats can afford to have weaker norms and tolerance for deviance given that they have less need for coordinated social action. In support of this notion, tightness correlated with an extensive array of historical and ecological threats. Tight societies have a greater historical prevalence of natural disasters, food scarcity, population density, and territorial threats compared to loose societies. They also showed the strength of societal norms is reflected and promoted through *societal institutions* (e.g., the media, government, criminal justice) that foster narrow versus strong socialization (Arnett, 1995) and *everyday situations* that restrict the range of behavior (Mischel, 1977). In particular, tight cultures have more autocratic governing bodies, more police per capita, less media openness, fewer political rights and civil liberties, and greater religiosity than loose societies. Everyday situations were stronger—restricting the range of acceptable behavior—in tight cultures compared to loose cultures. Finally, at the individual level, people exposed to chronically higher situational strength have *greater felt accountability* (Frink & Klimoski, 1998)—that is, have a greater likelihood of being monitored, evaluated, and punished or rewarded based on their behavior. Greater felt accountability in turn implicates a broad suite of psychological processes that are recruited in the service of avoiding sanctions in tight cultures. For example, individuals from tighter nations were found to score higher on measures of cautiousness, dutifulness, self-regulation and impulse-control, self-monitoring, and need for structure. A multilevel structural equation model provided support for the system of TL—the interplay between ecological and historical factors, socio-political institutions, everyday situations, and individual differences.

Notably, research has shown that as groups tighten to deal with coordination needs, they also experience a number of trade-offs associated with *order* versus *openness*. Tight groups have more monitoring, order, and self-control, which is critical for coordinating in the face of threat (Gelfand, 2018). For example, tight countries generally have less crime, more security people per capita, more uniformity, and less debt, alcoholism, and obesity (Gelfand, 2018). While loose groups struggle with order, they are much more open. For example, loose cultures are less ethnocentric and more tolerant of people from stigmatized groups (Jackson, van Egmond et al., 2019), more creative (Chua, Roth, & Lemoine, 2015; Harrington & Gelfand, 2014), and more open to change (De, Nau, & Gelfand, 2017). This trade-off can also be seen longitudinally: Jackson, Gelfand, De, and Fox showed that the U.S. has been gradually loosening over 200 years while also showing associated increases in creativity as well as debt.

TL has also been shown to have similar patterns within nations. Harrington and Gelfand (2014) examined how TL varies across states in the U.S. As with the national level, state-level tightness—as assessed by numerous archival measures reflecting latitude versus constraint—was positively related to ecological and historical threat. Compared to looser states, tight states had higher death rates due to natural disasters, greater food insecurity, and more disease prevalence. The

order versus openness trade-off found at the national level also applied to the state level. Tighter states had higher trait conscientiousness (John, Naumann, & Soto, 2008), greater social organization (e.g., lower mobility, less divorce), and greater self-control (e.g., less drug and alcohol abuse and debt) (Gelfand, 2018). Looser states, in contrast, had higher trait openness (John et al., 2008), less discrimination (e.g., lower rates of EEOC claims and more women- and minority-owned businesses), and higher creativity (e.g., more utility patents and artists per capita). While looser states were more disorganized and had more self-control failures, they were also more creative and tolerant as compared to tighter states.

Variation in TL can also be seen in other large countries, such as China. In a study of over 11,000 individuals across 31 provinces, Chua, Huang, and Jin (2019) found some notable similarities in patterns of TL variation. Tightness at the province level was associated with measures of threat, including the extent to which a province was destroyed and occupied by the Japanese during World War II, whether a province is located on a national border, number of environmental emergencies, communicable diseases, and amount of pollution. As in Figure 15.1, socio–political variables predicted provincial tightness, including stronger governmental controls (government employees per capita) and religious presence—both of which restrict the range of behavior. Tightness was related to behavioral constraints in everyday situations and personality differences, including self-monitoring, conscientiousness, and openness.

Differences in tightness–looseness extend beyond the modern era. Indeed, human groups have long faced ecological threats such as resource stress and warfare and have needed to overcome strains on coordination imposed by growing social complexity. Jackson, Gelfand, and Ember (2020) expanded research on TL in industrialized countries to a global sample of non-industrialized societies from the ethnographic record. The strength of norms and punishments were measured across six domains of life that are universally important for human groups—law and ethics, gender, socialization, marriage, sexuality, and funerals and mourning—all of which were interrelated and comprised a single latent factor. And, as with modern nations and states, tight pre-industrial societies tended to have more threats, including greater pathogen prevalence, warfare, food scarcity, and population pressure. Tightness was correlated with social complexity across cultures, perhaps because social complexity engenders a heightened need for the large-scale cooperation and coordination tightness can provide.

In sum, research on TL in modern nations, states, and pre-industrial societies supports the notion that when there is threat, tightness tends to evolve. While these findings are correlational, recent evolutionary game theoretic models (EGT) illustrate how threat causes the evolution of tightness at the population level. For example, Roos, Gelfand, Nau, and Lun (2015) created an EGT model wherein agents played a public goods game, in which they either cooperated or defected. There was also a punishment phase in which an agent could pay a cost to reduce another player's payoff by a certain amount. Agents had different

punishment strategies, including (R)esponsible punishers who punished defectors, (A)ntisocial punishers who punished cooperators, (S)piteful punishers who punished indiscriminately, and (N)on-punishers who didn't punish anyone. Levels of threat were manipulated by subtracting a certain amount τ from everyone's payoff. They found that different degrees of norm strength were evolutionarily adaptive to societal threat: In a society with higher threat, tighter cooperation norms and responsible punishment evolved as evolutionary stable strategies in both public goods games and coordination games. Put differently, as societal threats increased, agents who abided by cooperative norms and punished others for deviating thrived had an evolutionary advantage over agents that did not adhere to and enforce norms. These EGT models suggest that that differences in tightness arise as a cultural adaptation to threat.

Leaders, Tight and Loose

Research has also shown that threats do not just lead to the desire for stronger rules; they also catalyze support for independent leaders. In a study of over 6,900 managers spanning 400 organizations and 29 countries, Aktas, Gelfand, and Hanges (2016) showed that beliefs about what makes a leader effective vary considerably across cultures. People in loose cultures preferred visionary leaders who are collaborative, while people in tight cultures viewed effective leaders as those who were independent and largely autonomous. In other surveys, people in tight cultures were more likely to prefer political systems that have a strong leader or are ruled by the army and to believe the most important responsibility of the government is to maintain order in society (Gelfand et al., 2011)

Beyond national leaders, research has also found that tightness is associated with more moralizing and authoritarian conceptions of God for many of the same reasons it leads to more support for authoritarian leaders. The belief that God is punitive generally increases rule following (Norenzayan et al., 2016; Purzycki et al., 2016; Shariff & Norenzayan, 2011), and accordingly, such beliefs would presumably be particularly adaptive during times of threat. Recent research has indeed found evidence linking threat, tightness, and belief in a punitive God. Caluori, Jackson, Gray, and Gelfand (2020) found that people's concern about conflict correlates with belief in a punitive God—one who is punishing, wrathful, stern, and strict—as compared to a belief in a loving God—one that is compassionate, caring, generous, and forgiving. Experimentally increasing the salience of conflict also increased people's perceptions of the importance of a punitive God, as mediated by people's desire for a tightly regulated society. And in a longitudinal study, Caluori et al. (2020) also found that fluctuations in conflict over 200 years, as measured from the Conflict Catalog (Brecke, 2001), predicted and preceded higher frequencies of bible passages in which God was depicted as punitive and punishing wrongdoers. More generally, when there is threat, punishing gods are psychologically attractive given that they provide order in the face of

chaos (Jackson et al., under review), just as autocratic governmental leaders are desired in tight societies that experience a chronic history of threat. Indeed, in their analyses of over 80 non-industrial societies, tight societies were found to emphasize moralizing high gods and had autocratic leaders who had fewer checks on their power (Jackson et al., 2020).

Temporary Tightening of Groups

While the preceding research was mainly focused on chronic threat and the evolution of tight norms and independent leaders, it's important to note that when threats—real or imagined—are made accessible, they can temporarily tighten individuals as well. In a series of ecological priming studies, Gelfand and Lun (2013) showed that whether it was terrorism threats, high density, or pathogens, people began to desire stricter rules when reminded of collective threat. In one study, participants were randomly assigned to read a school newspaper article about a terrorist threat warning system that was being implemented either at one's own university or at another university in a different country. Consistent with field research on territorial threats (Gelfand et al., 2011), they found that individuals who were primed with threats to their own territory had a stronger desire to punish social norm violators and showed more ethnocentric attitudes.

Another study tested whether making population density accessible would make people less tolerant of socially deviant behavior. Participants were randomly assigned to read one of two versions of an article describing that the campus of the participants' university is one of the highest (or lowest) in population density compared to other similar universities. The message was supported by statistical graphs and quotes about student life throughout the article. As with the field data linking population density with tightness (Gelfand et al., 2011), those who were primed to think that their university campus had high population density were more likely to consider socially deviant behavior to be less justifiable and reported more agreement with such statements as "We should restrict and control entry of people into our country more than we do now"; "When jobs are scarce, employers should give priority to American people over immigrants"; "Our people are not perfect, but our culture is superior to others"; and "Our way of life needs to be protected against foreign influence" than those primed with low population density. Beyond the lab, a quasi-experimental ecological priming paradigm was used to examine how the activation of pathogens affected tightening in the field. Research assistants approached individuals who were either about to see the movie *Contagion* (a movie about the spread of pathogens) or who had just seen the movie outside of movie theaters. As predicted, people who had just seen the movie *Contagion* were much tighter; they had more negative reactions to social deviance. In all, these examples show that even when threats are primed, they can temporarily tighten individuals.

Tight–Loose and Election Dynamics

We have seen that during times of threat, groups tighten because strict norms encourage the coordination necessary to maintain order (Gelfand et al., 2011). From an evolutionary perspective, having strict rules and punishments can provide the cohesion that helps groups to survive real threat. We reasoned that this same cultural principle can be extended to election dynamics. More specifically, during elections, when people feel threatened—whether it is real or imagined—we predicted that they would show a greater desire for tight rules, begin to show suspicion of outsiders, and desire strong leaders who can return them to a tight social order. Leaders who have strong autocratic tendencies satiate this need. Moreover, as we discuss next, autocrats reinforce these psychological tendencies by fostering a culture of threat and targeting those who are most vulnerable.

In a set of studies, Jackson, van Egmond et al. (2019) examined the connection of threat, desired tightness, prejudice toward outgroups, and voting intentions for candidates who used autocratic appeals to garner voter support. The first study, conducted in the U.S. during the 2016 primary election, surveyed a sample of 562 Americans that was nationally representative in terms of race, political affiliation, and region. Respondents indicated their concern for ten socio-ecological threats (e.g., natural disasters, terrorism, pathogens, debt, immigration, an attack from North Korea or Iran, among others), as well as their desire for cultural tightness, dislike of outgroups, and the candidate they intended to vote for. Controlling for participants' state of residence and prior political orientation, they found a significant relationship between intentions to vote for Donald Trump and perceived socio-ecological threat, desired cultural tightness, and prejudice toward outgroups. Additionally, a serial mediation path model examining the effect of perceived threat on intention to vote for Trump via support for tightness and prejudice revealed a significant indirect effect (see Figure 15.2). This indicates that threatened voters' intentions to vote for Trump could be fully explained by their desire for tighter norms and prejudice. Put simply, the strongest Trump supporters were those who felt that America was under grave threat and believed that the country needed tighter rules and less tolerance toward anyone who seemed different or "un-American."

The link between threat, tightness, and support for autocratic leaders was also replicated in France prior to the 2017 election. Three days before the first round of the election, a sample of 320 French participants completed the same measures of perceived socio-ecological threat, desired cultural tightness, and prejudice as their American counterparts had the year prior. They also reported the candidate they intended to vote for in the election. Consistent with the results of the American study, intention to vote for Marine Le Pen was significantly related to socio-perceived ecological threat, desired cultural tightness, and prejudice toward outgroups. The serial mediation path model examining the effect of perceived threat on intention to vote for Le Pen via support for tightness and prejudice
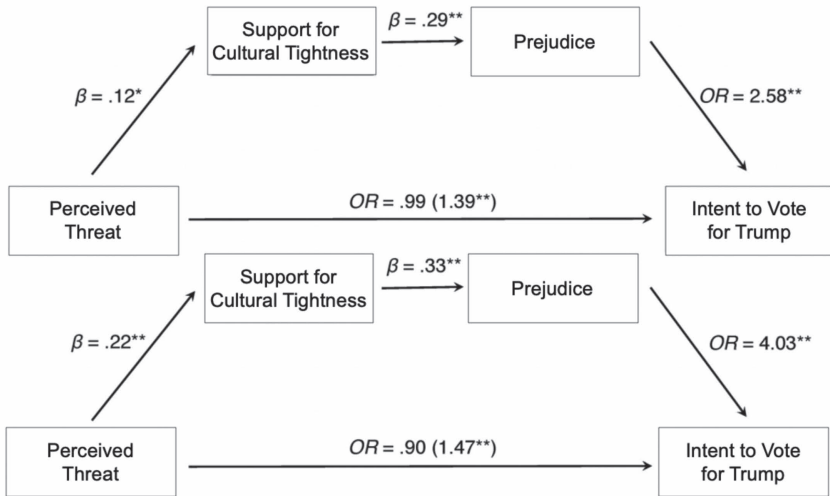
FIGURE 15.2 A serial mediation path model showing the effects of threat on intention to vote for Donald Trump (top) and Marine Le Pen (bottom) via support for cultural tightness and prejudice.

Note: All effects have been standardized so they can be interpreted as effect sizes. Single-starred associations are significant at the $p < .05$ level; double-starred associations are significant at the $p < .005$ level. The X–Y path inside the parentheses is the total effect, whereas the effect outside the parentheses is the direct effect. Adapted from Jackson, van Egmond et al. (2019).

indicated that threatened respondents' voting preferences could be fully explained through desired tightness and prejudice. While these studies are correlational, they support a general pattern: Perceptions of threat are linked to a desire for higher tightness, which is in turn reflected in support for autocratic leaders who promise to provide that order.

Similar patterns have been found in other studies. For example, Sprong et al. (2019) examined how another threat—economic inequality—related to support for strong political leaders. In their theory, economic threats are related to feelings of *anomie*, or the feeling that ones' society was breaking down—what we would refer to as extreme looseness—which in turn drives support for strong leaders. In surveys of over 7,000 individuals in 28 countries, they examined objective and subjective inequality, perceptions of anomie, and participants' feelings about having a strong political leader. Mediational models showed that the belief that economic inequality existed increased feelings of anomie, which increased feelings of wanting a stronger political leader. Similar to Jackson et al. (2019), this suggests that people who are experiencing economic inequality are more likely to believe that their country is too loose and want leaders who promise to return them to a tight social order (see also Zhao & Cao, 2010 for an analysis of rising anomie as a function of rapid social change, and Nowak, Gelfand, Borkowski, & Kruglanski,

2017, for a discussion of autocratic recidivism—a desire for autocrats to cope with the normlessness that can occur after former autocrats are ousted).

These dynamics have also been observed across Europe (Gelfand, 2018). For example, the strongest supporters of the U.K.'s desire to leave the European Union were working-class and rural voters—demographic groups that have been experiencing increased threat. Fearful working-class voters also drove the candidacies of far-right politicians in Poland, the Netherlands, and Austria. Likewise, the desire for a safer and more secure Turkey was among the primary drivers of Erdogan's successful referendum that granted him unprecedented power. All of these patterns suggest that one important driver of support for autocratic leaders is feelings of threat that catalyze the desire for tightness and leaders who promise to provide it. Summarizing these trends in their book *Cultural Backlash: Trump, Brexit, and Authoritarian Populism*, Norris and Inglehart (2019) concluded that a prime driver of support for populist leaders in Europe is cultural backlash—a strong desire for security, rules, and traditions amid the perception that immigrants were threatening their countries' social order (see also Forgas & Lantos; and Krekó, this volume).

Notably, threats need not be real to drive electoral dynamics. Manufactured or highly exaggerated threats also can produce the same psychological tightening and desire for autocratic leaders. For example, in a study of more than 1,000 U.S.-born citizens, Gelfand and Denison (2019) found that respondents tend to overestimate the percentage of people living in the U.S. who immigrated illegally and these estimations vary across party lines. Republicans estimated that 18% of the U.S. population was made up of people who were living there illegally, while the Democrats estimated that statistic to be less than 13% on average. (The actual figure, according to a 2017 Pew Research study, is closer to 3%; Radford, 2019). Importantly, these misperceptions have important psychological consequences. People who overestimated the number of people illegally living in the U.S. were much more likely to perceive immigrants as a threat, and these perceptions, in turn, were related to the desire for tighter rules and intentions to vote for Trump in 2020. One prime source of this fake threat is from autocratic leaders themselves, as we will show.

How Leaders Activate Threat and Desired Tightness

Autocrats around the world have expertly capitalized on the tight–loose fault line. As noted, when we perceive threats (whether real, imagined, or manipulated), we crave social order—and strong leaders who can enforce it. Many autocrats capitalize on this psychology. They deliberately foster a culture of threat and fear and, in doing so, can capitalize on the tightening impulse that naturally follows. Indeed, anecdotal evidence suggests that autocrats around the world are conducting these "threat experiments" on their nations' citizens. For example, Matteo Salvani, as if reading from a tight–loose text book declared that "We are under attack. Our

culture, society, traditions and way of life are at risk." Viktor Orban claimed that Hungarians have to get rid of "Muslim invaders." Le Pen's rhetoric is equally alarming: Globalization and Islam will "bring France to its knees." Threat constitutes the foundation of their narratives, with the goal of inspiring fear and being perceived as the only person who can deliver safety. "I alone can fix it," claims Trump. This strategy is enormously successful because it taps into a deep evolutionary principle that helped groups deal with threat (also see Crano & Gaffney; Vallacher & Fennell, this volume). People who feel their nations are "on the brink of disaster" will want tighter rules and strong-arm rulers to survive.

To illustrate the use of threatening rhetoric among autocratic leaders, we created a new threat dictionary using computational linguistic techniques (Choi, Shrestha, Pan, & Gelfand, 2020). Text analysis has become an important tool for researchers interested in using written content to detect markers of social and psychological processes (Bauer, 2000; Holtgraves, 2013; Pennebaker, Francis, & Booth, 2001). For example, studies have utilized the occurrence of specific words in texts to identify linguistic traces of aggression (Pennebaker, 2011), deceit (Burgoon, Blair, Qin, & Nunamaker, 2003), moral judgment (Graham, Haidt, & Nosek, 2009), positive emotions (Abe, 2011), suicidal ideation (Wiltsey Stirman & Pennebaker, 2001), and more.

Among the many breakthroughs in the analysis of language is the development of computational "word embedding" models that can convert a database of texts into a quantifiable network of words mapped along a multi-dimensional vector space (Mikolov, Chen, Corrado, & Dean, 2013; Mikolov, Sutskever, Chen, Corrado, & Dean, 2013; Mikolov, Yih, & Zweig, 2013). Individual words that often co-occur within the main database are assigned coordinates nearby one another in the vector space, which indicates they share more semantic similarity. For the purposes of creating an index of threat-related words, we leveraged several pre-trained models that utilize this word embedding method. We avoided determining our own set of words linked to the concept of threat, a process laden with researcher bias. Instead, we located hundreds of words near "threat" across three different pre-trained models based on a repository of Wikipedia, Twitter, and randomized online content (Mikolov, Chen et al., 2013). A sample of these words are provided in Table 15.1.

Choi et al. (2020) used this index to analyze the speeches of 2016 U.S. presidential candidates Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton. In politics, the content and style of a politician's rhetoric can be indicative of their underlying strategy for engaging constituents. We hypothesized that Trump would invoke more threat words on the campaign trail as a method of appealing to conservative voters who have been shown historically to be more sensitive to threat (Jost, Glaser, Kruglanski, & Sulloway, 2003; Jost, 2017). They collected speeches from their public appearances as nominees for their respective political party. The results of our comparison revealed a significant difference in the usage of threat words by Trump. Importantly, threatening language also has distinct consequences. Choi

TABLE 15.1 Sample words from the threat dictionary.

Threat	Caution	Looming
Danger	Inflicted	Horrific
Turmoil	Tensions	Scary
Warned	Attack	Tragic
Precautions	Problematic	Nightmare
Catastrophe	Anguish	Damage
Trouble	Chaos	Toxic

et al. (2020) analyzed newspaper articles that spanned over 150 years and found threatening language was associated with tightening. Specifically, threatening language predicted words reflecting tightness (e.g., restrain, comply, adhere, enforce, constrain, forbid, prohibit) over looseness (e.g., allow, freedom, flexibility, openness, encourage, leeway) (Jackson, Gelfand, De, & Fox, 2019) as well as language reflecting greater tribalism. Applying the threat dictionary to an analysis of 200,000 tweets, Choi et al. (2020) found that tweets with threatening language were much more contagious (i.e., more likely to be retweeted) than tweets without such language. In all, with tools like the threat dictionary, we can begin to examine when threatening language is being propagated through social media and identify its consequences.

Implications

In this chapter, we've described how the rise of autocrats may be understood through cultural dynamics that have a long history in human groups. Research on modern nations, states, and pre-industrial groups has shown that strict social norms evolve as a response to collective threat. Tightness serves a function during such periods, as it makes it easier to discourage defectors and increase coordination. Threats need not be real or chronic to cause tightening; they can be fake or exaggerated and produce the same effects.

Building on this research, we suggest the rise of autocrats may be due, in part, to two interrelated processes: At the individual level, people who feel threatened desire greater tightness and more prejudice toward outgroups, which predicts their desire for leaders who promise to return them to a tight social order. Yet leaders also capitalize on this psychology and use threatening language to reinforce their appeal. To be sure, these are not the only factors that contribute to the appeal of autocrats, as this volume attests. Yet they illustrate that one factor underlying the rise of autocrats reflects feelings of threat and associated tightening.

This analysis suggests that the recent trends in populism are not necessarily due to some particular personalities or a historical accident. These leaders will come and go, but as long as people feel they are facing threats, they may be

attracted to autocrats who satiate the need for a tight social order. Accordingly, rather than focusing on weeding out particular personalities, to deal with the rise of autocrats we need to address the deeper cultural roots of the desire for tightness: perceptions of threat. Some of this threat is real, particularly for the working class in many countries. As technological advances jeopardize working-class jobs, the threat of permanent poverty is a real fear in these communities. Indeed, the World Economic Forum predicts that by 2020, 5 million jobs will be lost worldwide due to Artificial Intelligence (AI), and jobs filled by the working class are at the highest risk for discontinuation (Gray, 2016). For example, estimates suggest that over 75% of predictable physical work, such as packaging and assembly line welding, could be automated by rapidly spreading technology. On the other hand, jobs that require managing others and making decisions and plans—more characteristic of upper-class jobs—are projected to be less affected by AI (Chui, Manyika, & Miremadi, 2016). Quite clearly, globalization presents a looming threat for the working class, whereas it manifests as an opportunity for those in the upper class. More generally, as globalization increases, a new tight–loose axis is increasingly dividing groups around the world, with relatively well-off loose cultures that embrace innovation, change, and diversity on one side, and lower-class tight cultures that are financially threatened and seek stability, tradition, and rules on the other. From this perspective, it perhaps is not surprising that autocratic leaders are attractive because they promise to dismantle the social structures that have left them behind and return them to a familiar traditional order.

To counter these trends, policy-makers need to develop new structures that help reduce the objective threat experienced by many working-class communities across the world. Given that the nature of jobs is changing rapidly, the United States and other nations need to develop employment-training mechanisms and partnerships to assist people to be prepared for new jobs. For example, Partners for a Competitive Workforce, a tristate partnership centered in Ohio, Kentucky, and Indiana, includes more than 150 organizations, ranging from employers and workforce boards to education and training institutions and community groups. Together, they identify the skills needed in sectors such as healthcare, advanced manufacturing, construction, and IT, and help develop training programs to fill these needs. The results of this partnership have been very promising. According to a 2014 report, of the 7,800 individuals who have been trained, 80% obtained employment, and 73% remained employed for a year. Furthermore, turnover and recruitment costs have been reduced for more than 750 businesses (The White House, 2014). We need to empathize with people who have been displaced due to the rise of AI and develop formal structures that can help retrain them to cope with these threats.

In addition to objective threat, we also need to develop mechanisms to deal with *fake* or *exaggerated* threat. In the 21st century, many threats have actually declined (Pinker, 2012). As for those that persist, such as cultural disruptions caused by migration, peoples' characterizations of them can be highly exaggerated. For

example, the Pew Research Center (2018) published data showing that 35% of Americans believe most immigrants are in the country illegally, whereas in actuality, 76% immigrated to the U.S. legally (B. Jones, 2019). Likewise, perceptions of immigrants as dangerous are unfounded. A Gallup poll in 2019 reported that 42% said that immigration in the United States was making crime worse (J. Jones, 2019). However, Landgrave and Nowrasteh (2018) found that legal immigrants were 78% less likely to be incarcerated than native-born Americans. The notion that immigrants are a threat to the economy has also been grossly exaggerated. In 2019, 25% of respondents in a Gallup poll said that immigrants are worsening job opportunities in the U.S. (J. Jones, 2019). Yet research has found that immigration has had no significant effect on wages for native-born Americans (Preston, 2016) and, indeed, can be beneficial to the U.S. economy (Frazee, 2018) and boost innovation (Pethkokoukis, 2018). The notion that immigrants pose a symbolic threat—namely that they don't want to speak the language and don't want to acculturate—are also exaggerated. Studies show that immigrants do value learning English in the U.S. (Dowling, Ellison, & Leal, 2012) and that the vast majority desire to integrate aspects of American culture into their own identities (Lyons-Padilla, Gelfand, Mirahmadi, Farooq, & Egmond, 2015).

Tackling exaggerated and unfounded threats is no doubt difficult, but research on the factors that promote positive intergroup attitudes can be useful. When groups exist in their own "echo-chambers," they have little opportunity to have their biased beliefs and extreme stereotyping challenged. The more policy-makers and community leaders can help develop spaces for immigrant and native populations to have positive interactions—and to allow them to see their similarities (Pettigrew, 1998)—the more we will be able to counteract exaggerated threats that are tightening up communities and enabling autocrats to satiate the need for order.

Examples of such initiatives can be seen around the globe. In the Netherlands, for example, cities and municipalities around the country organize a yearly "Week of Dialogue." Each day during that week, groups of residents from diverse backgrounds are brought together in small groups to discuss specific themes, such as identity or feeling at home, which allow them to showcase their experiences, dreams, and shared humanity (Together in the EU, 2017). Germany also has several programs designed to celebrate cultural diversity and create bridges between migrant and native populations. Every year, over 500 cities around the country organize an Intercultural Week with events that promote solidarity and intercultural dialogue and celebrate diversity (Together in the EU, 2017). Finland has a similar program, called HELMO (Helsinki Multicultural Education Services), aimed at increasing dialogue and cultural understanding in the general public, as well as in specific target groups, such as social workers, daycare workers, and new immigrants entering the workforce (Together in the EU, 2017). Likewise, the global educational network CEDAR (Communities Engaging with Differences and Religion) has launched a variety of programs around the

world aimed at enabling people to acknowledge and accept their differences in order to work together on creating a civil society. CEDAR programs seek to create a shared sense of belonging among participants, as well as to teach the skills necessary for creating a shared life among people with disparate ideologies and backgrounds.

Another way to help people to understand "the other" is to use the newly developed Diary Contact Technique (DCT; Jackson, Gelfand, Ayub, & Wheeler, 2019). In the DCT, individuals read real diary entries written by either a member of their own culture or another culture over a week or longer period. In a randomized controlled study with Americans and Pakistanis, Jackson, Gelfand, Ayub et al. (2019) found that individuals who received outgroup diaries perceived less cultural distance between the two groups after the intervention, as compared to the group who received ingroup diaries, who showed no change in perceived cultural distance. Moreover, reductions in cultural distance were associated with decreases in negative stereotyping of outgroups. The DCT could fruitfully be used to help reduce exaggerated threats of immigrants among other contexts where there are strong cultural divides.

Conclusion

The 21st century has witnessed the eroding of democracy and the rise of autocrats worldwide. In this chapter, we examined how cultural fault lines that have defined groups throughout history are in part driving these dynamics—namely the desire for tight cultures in contexts where there is rising threat. By helping to reduce threat—whether real or perceived—we may be able to strengthen democracies and diminish the appeal of autocrats worldwide.

Note

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