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Editorial: Contemporary threats, surveillance, and the balancing of security and liberty

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Editorial on the Research Topic

[Contemporary threats, surveillance, and the balancing of security and liberty](#)

Introduction

Several recent developments, such as the Russian war against Ukraine, ongoing terrorist attacks, and the COVID-19 pandemic, have challenged established structures and changed the lives of many people. They also have fuelled scholarly and public debate about how democracies might deal with different kinds of threats. Reflections on the political consequences of threats are particularly important in times where several political leaders or parties seem to offer simple solutions to fears that they themselves fuel (Trüdingen, 2019, p. 6). In this Research Topic, we address the question of how citizens politically react to threatening situations and counteracting government actions—such as surveillance policies.

Political science research on these issues has a long tradition in certain areas, and the present topic builds on some of these: Studies on political tolerance emphasized early the importance of perceived threats for intolerant attitudes toward specific groups (e.g., Sullivan et al., 1981). In studies on civil liberties, perceived threats, especially from terrorism, are reported as central motives for public acceptance of different types of civil liberties restrictions (e.g., Davis and Silver, 2004), but questions remain about the political effects of different kinds of (perceived) threat. A prominent line of research examines how individual dispositions condition the ways in which perceived threats influence political views and behaviors of citizens: Altemeyer (1988) and many others emphasize that people with authoritarian dispositions are highly sensitive to threat. Moreover, research on individual information processing has become more important since the COVID-19 pandemic: Perceptions of the world as threatening and uncertain are reported to have consequences for how individuals cope with (mis)information (e.g., Heiss et al., 2021).

New perspectives

Our Research Topic ties in with these research areas. By leveraging experimental designs, the articles add current perspectives on how citizens react to contemporary threats and government responses to these threats: First, all papers discuss the

contemporary relevance of ideology and partisanship for dealing with threats to security, liberty, and independent democratic discourse. Such a discussion is of particular importance in times where strongly opposing parties and political agendas influence political debates, and polarization between ideological camps has intensified in many Western democracies (e.g., Wagner, 2021).

Second, the studies conducted by Jäger and Trüdinger and Ziller address aspects of the particular challenge to the balance between security and liberty posed by new (technological) developments in surveillance and the Internet. A third focus of the Research Topic is to examine the ways in which individuals cope with uncertainty and extremism when exposed to different types of political information (e.g., framing of specific groups, misinformation, crisis-related information). Finally, the contributions provide insights into public opinion in three different countries (United States, Spain, Germany), and all of them shed light on situational and dispositional factors that may protect democracies against anti-democratic threats.

Short summary of the Research Topic

The contribution of Hirsch sheds light on a less-studied facet of authoritarianism, with an experimental design in which people are confronted with serious societal threats in the context of COVID-19 and climate change. In her study of crisis-related authoritarianism in Spain and Germany, she takes up the argument of a context-dependent activation of authoritarian dispositions. Individuals are found to be more supportive of authoritarian solutions when the latter are put forward in the context of collective problems. The study shows how the framing of collective challenges can shift the dynamics of public opinion.

The article by Trüdinger and Ziller examines determinants of political tolerance of three political groups (right-wing, left-wing, and religious) using a factorial experiment. Specifically, the experiment randomly varied whether groups appear as being extremist or violent, and whether they occur in an offline or online setting. The results of the study reveal that citizens indeed set limits to tolerance if groups appear to have violent intentions. Respondents are also more likely to tolerate online (compared to offline) behavior. While citizens are more tolerant toward ideologically congruent groups, such an ideological bias is disrupted if groups are portrayed as being violent. The findings by Trüdinger and Ziller thus highlight the relevance of contextual factors for citizens' tolerance judgments.

The article by Jäger examines the role of political party preferences for citizen views on state surveillance. Using a

factorial survey experiment in Germany, the author isolates the circumstances under which citizens are ready to support a surveillance policy proposal. While the dimensions of threat and terrorist motivation (religious, right-wing, or climate-radical) are not systematically related to policy support, the policy scope (targeted vs. dragnet) matters, as well as which party proposed the policy (Greens vs. the right-wing populist AfD). Similarly to Trüdinger and Ziller, Jäger finds an ideological gradient: People who oppose a party are more reluctant in supporting a policy that this party proposes. The study thus highlights that partisanship matters for far more than typical issues along the socio-cultural left-right continuum such as immigration and integration.

As political antecedents of conspiracy endorsement, Jiang examines the role of political ideology, knowledge, and political participation in the highly polarized society of the United States. While political conspiracies are often viewed as a response to threats of electoral loss, widespread beliefs in misinformation can themselves become a danger to the democratic rules of the game. Focussing on selected conservative and liberal conspiracy theories, the author not only shows that people tend to endorse ideologically aligned misinformation and that political knowledge positively relates to conspiratorial thinking. The study also highlights that participation increases the endorsement of liberal but not conservative conspiracies.

Author contributions

E-MT: Writing—original draft, Writing—review and editing. CZ: Writing—original draft, Writing—review and editing. JN: Writing—review and editing.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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