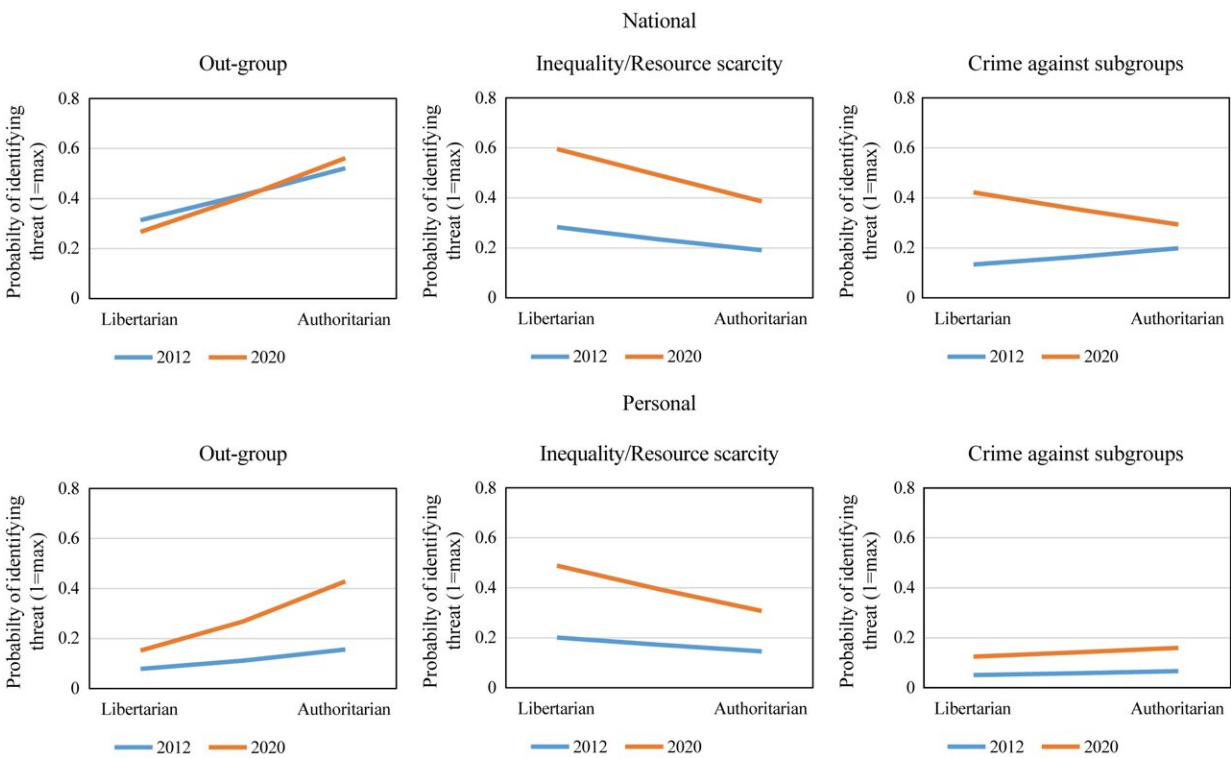# Terrorism rather than pandemics more concerning for those with authoritarian views, analysis shows

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Relationships between authoritarian predispositions, media attention, and identifying issues as threats. Credit: *Politics and the Life Sciences* (2023). DOI: 10.1017/pls.2023.12

Those with authoritarian political views are more likely to be concerned

about terrorism and border control than a future new health pandemic, new research shows.

During the pandemic, rather than a desire for a stronger government with the ability to impose measures to address the pandemic and its consequences, people with authoritarian views rejected this and embraced individual autonomy.

Researchers analyzed public perceptions of security threats in 2012 and in 2020. They believe COVID-19 belongs to a distinct category of threats of which those with authoritarian views are less concerned and may even minimize.

The study says COVID-19 did not seem to disproportionately affect authoritarian concern about social divisions in British society.

The study, by Professor Dan Stevens and Professor Susan Banducci from the University of Exeter, and Dr. Laszlo Horvath from the Birkbeck, University of London, is published in the journal *Politics and the Life Sciences*.

Professor Stevens said, "This research shows different security threats should not be treated as alike. Security threats connected with health and infectious diseases such as avian flu in 2012 and COVID-19 in 2020 didn't seem to concern those with authoritarian views in the way you would expect. This seems to be due to the nature of the threat.

"When an issue threatens social norms or damages social cohesion —which is how authoritarians tend to view immigration—they respond differently. COVID019 was not seen as this kind of threat. However, with emerging infectious diseases increasing in frequency over the past five decades such perceptions could develop with future pandemics."

The surveys were the June 2012 Perceptions of Security in an Age of Austerity online survey conducted by ICM for Stevens and Vaughan-Williams and an online survey conducted for researchers by Opinion Research Business (ORB) in July 2020.

Each survey asked about ten issues and whether respondents viewed them as national and personal threats. The ten issues were: immigration; terrorism; weak border control; health pandemics, such as avian flu (2012) or COVID-19 (2020); environmental issues, such as global warming or greenhouse gas effects; resource scarcity; economic depression, financial crisis, and unemployment; burglary; crimes against women; and racial or religious hate crimes.

Perceptions of the five issues of terrorism, the economy, immigration, weak border control, and racial or religious hate crimes as threats were stable across the two surveys, while the new issues of health pandemic, environmental issues, and racial and religious hate crimes loomed larger in the later survey. There were increases in perceptions of almost all issues as personal threats compared to 2012—only burglary showed a small decrease.

While the economy and terrorism were among the top-ranked personal threats in both years, some of the increases in perceptions of threats from other issues were large, particularly a health pandemic and environmental issues. Reasons for the increase in the personal threat from terrorism could be related to the number of relatively small-scale attacks that were not a feature of Islamic terrorism in the United Kingdom up to 2012, such as those at Westminster, the Manchester Arena, and London's Borough Market in 2017.

Researchers compared changes in perceptions of the ten threats with the amount of newspaper attention to them in the year prior to the survey, using Nexis, as a measure of increased or decreased threat for each

issue. Media coverage of terrorism with a more personal frame increased considerably in 2020 over 2012.

Immigration, for which there was increased threat in the context of the 2020 survey, was disproportionately more likely to be seen as a threat by authoritarians than in 2012. Those with authoritarian views were also more likely to identify terrorism and border control as threats in both surveys than respondents without authoritarian views.

Provided by University of Exeter