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Threat perceptions, blame attribution, and political trust

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ABSTRACT


Under what conditions do threat perceptions lead to an increasing distrust in government? This article argues that the answer is the degree of ease with which a perceived threat can be linked to governmental actors. First, I argue that threats directed toward society should be more easily linked by citizens to the domestic government compared to perceived threats to the individual (general linkage). Second, a threat linked to a citizen's general political stance more strongly affects their attitude toward governmental actors in negative ways (heuristic linkage). Third, I expect threat perceptions to further increase governmental distrust if the latter's actors are blamed for a perceived threat that is salient to citizens' ideological worldviews (blame attribution). Empirical tests using self-administered survey- and experimental data corroborate the argument. In closing I discuss the implications of the theoretical and empirical setup, emphasizing the need for future studies on blame attribution, heuristic linkages, and political trust.

KEYWORDS Threat perceptions; political trust; communication of threats; blame attribution; heuristic linkage

Introduction

The effects of citizens' threat perceptions have become an increasingly relevant topic to scientific and public discourse. This has been not only due to but surely in part also stimulated by research on the communication strategies of the oppositional and populist actors seemingly successful in recent years (see, e.g. Rooduijn, et al. 2017). Most of the latter are known to have used rhetorical strategies that aim at making citizens perceive threats more intensely. Making citizens feel threatened has been shown to make them more conservative, rigorous, and even authoritarian (e.g. Huddy, et al. 2005; Brader, Valentino, and Suhay 2008; Hetherington, and Suhay 2011).

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This aligns well with the aim of oppositional actors to make larger shares of the population vote for them instead of the incumbent or other rivals. When it comes to political trust, however, feeling threatened has been shown to correlate either with an *increase* or a *decrease* of trust in governmental actors and the political regime in general (see for contrasting evidence, e.g. McLaren, 2012; Dinesen, and Jaeger, 2013; Albertson, and Gadarian 2015). Hence, we do not know much about the mechanisms and conditions that lead citizens who feel threatened to demonstrate higher or lower levels of trust in government respectively.

As such, this article aims to answer the following question: *Under what conditions do threat perceptions lead to increasing distrust in government?* The argument presented here is threefold. In general, I posit first that a perceived threat for which the *linkage to the domestic government is cognitively accessible to citizens* results in negative effects on their governmental trust. So-called societal threats should be more easily linked by citizens to the domestic government compared to perceived threats that come from the outside or which only focus on the individual level (*general linkage*).

Second, a threat that is *linked to citizens' general political stance* also negatively affects their levels of political trust. The kind of threat faced substantially influences the effects of perceptions thereof on distrust in government, with those regarding the state of the economy carrying more weight for leftist citizens and contrariwise cultural threats being more influential on right-wing citizens (*heuristic linkage*).

Third, the negative effect of threat perceptions becomes stronger if that linkage is made explicitly accessible, for example if the actor to be trusted is externally blamed for the perceived threat. The effect of the latter becomes stronger if the threat, its origins, or the failure to prevent it is *linked to the government by a third actor (blame attribution)*. The impact of threat perceptions on distrust of governing actors should be strongest if the government is *saliently* blamed for the threat: if the linkage between the perceived threat and governmental actors is made *accessible* to citizens, the former increasingly negatively influences trust in the latter.

I test this three-part argument using an advanced methodological design. First, I use partly self-administered data from a German representative panel survey to analyze the general- and heuristic-linkage mechanism in multivariate models. Second, I employ a self-administered survey experiment to dissect the effects of blame attribution. Finally, to examine the external validity of the experimental findings, I exploit the longitudinal structure of the German data set in combination with quantitative content analysis data.

The findings provide support for all three parts of my argument. First, societal threats yield a stronger negative effect on governmental trust compared to individual threats. Second, the kind of perceived threat influences trust in government to varying degrees dependent on citizens' political

predispositions. If a perceived threat is linked to a salient issue regarding a citizen's political worldview – that is, an economic threat for a left-wing citizen or a cultural threat for a right-wing one – the threat has a substantial and significant negative impact on the degree of governmental trust. In addition, and third, if governmental actors are actively blamed for the perceived threat, this significantly increases the negative effect on trust in governing actors if the perceived threat is in line with a citizen's own ideological stance. In the conclusion I discuss the relationship between heuristic linkage and blame attribution based on the empirical findings, and outline how future research in political psychology and political communication may further corroborate the findings of this article.

The concepts of political trust and threat perception

There is abundant research on the causes and effects of Political Trust (PT) on the one hand (see, for a concise summary, Citrin, and Stoker 2018) and correlates and outcomes of Threat Perception (TP) on the other (among many others, Lupia, and Menning 2009; Huddy, et al. 2005; Feldman, and Stenner 1997). Still, combining both phenomena into one research design is something that has seldom been done so far (but see McLaren, 2012; Albertson, and Gadarian 2015). In the following I thus only briefly outline the previous literature that focuses on PT or TP alone. Instead I put more emphasis on the approach combining both angles that is to be developed within this article, and examine how this combination is affected by the *general linkage*, *heuristic linkage*, and *blame attribution* of a (perceived) threat.

Trust in political actors is considered one of the strongest factors keeping a political system stable. Furthermore, enjoying the trust of the public supports the effective governance of a political institution (among many others, see Almond, and Verba 1963; Easton, 1975; Putnam, 1993; Seligson, 2002). If an individual trusts the political elites, s/he will accept their decisions and policies even if these may eventually have negative consequences for the individual's own life (Hooghe, and Zmerli 2011; Rudolph, and Evans 2005). Researchers interested in the survival of democracy and the stability of political systems more generally have therefore studied the micro- and macro-level factors inducing trust in political institutions and actors.

Three main sets of explanatory factors can be distinguished in this context (for a more fine-grained distinction, see Citrin, and Stoker 2018): First, and maybe most intuitively, researchers have argued that the institutional (or actor's) performance should influence the level of public trust in that institution. The better the performance, the higher the levels of trust, and vice versa (Mishler, and Rose 2001; Armingeon, and Guthmann 2014; Foster, and Frieden 2017). Others have posited, second, that political trust might arise from shared community values – that is, from the cultural context in

which a given group of individuals are embedded (Almond, and Verba 1963; Rose, 1994; Inglehart, 1997; Newton, 1997). Recent research, however, indicates that most authors would consider institutional factors to carry stronger explanatory power than cultural variables do (Catterberg, and Moreno 2006; Keele, 2007; Mishler, and Rose 2001). Finally, a third line of thought has attributed different (individual) levels of political trust to personality traits (Gamson 1968; more recently, see McLaren, 2012, and especially the discussion of recent findings in Citrin, and Stoker 2018).

TP as a factor influencing citizens' attitudes but also as a dependent variable has found great resonance, too, both in Social Psychology and Political Science (e.g. Huddy, et al. 2005; Brader, Valentino, and Suhay 2008; Hetherington, and Suhay 2011). TP is a state in which an individual feels (or perceives themselves to be) threatened. This may or may not correlate with the actual condition of being threatened. Searching for predictors of TP, the literature has identified individual predispositions – such as an authoritarian predisposition or a general trait in anxiety – as well as actual situations of threat – such as an increased likelihood of being vulnerable to terrorism – to influence the prevalence of perceptions among the general public (Feldman, and Stenner 1997; Stenner, 2005; Suthammanont, et al. 2010; Longo, and Baker 2014; Wagner, 2014). Research indicates that TP might make individuals more authoritarian, conservative, judgmental, and closed-minded (Huddy, et al. 2005; Brader, Valentino, and Suhay 2008; Hetherington, and Suhay 2011; Miller, 2017).

As a result, threatening citizens might then also influence the latter's degree of trust in governing actors. Yet, findings so far point in a number of different directions. On the one side, research on perceptions of immigration-related threats demonstrates that the existence hereof leads citizens to have lower trust in domestic and European actors (McLaren, 2002, 2012; see also on threat effects on Euroscepticism, Lubbers, and Jaspers 2011). Studies on populist and radical political actors have argued that these actors also attempt to use threats to further increase distrust in governing elites whom they present to be corrupt and in betrayal of the true will of the people (Rooduijn, 2014).

While this scholarship hence indicates that feeling threatened may result in increasing levels of governmental distrust, a second, thematically connected literature on the rally-round-the-flag effect suggests that governments may explicitly use the communication of threat to garner domestic support (see, e.g. Mueller, 1970; Hetherington, and Nelson 2003; Hetherington, and Rudolph 2008; Dinesen, and Jaeger, 2013). Especially when it comes to the perception of threats emerging in relation to terrorism or pandemics, research has indicated that citizens' trust in domestic political institutions – and especially governmental actors – actually increases the more acute the perceived threat is.

The question therefore remains: *Under what conditions do threat perceptions lead to increasing distrust in government?* In the following, I outline my theoretical argument and its empirical testing to give an initial answer to this question.

Connecting political trust and threat perception: the general and heuristic linkages

Most generally, citizens who perceive a threat will distrust political and social actors if they *link* these actors directly to the (enduring) existence of that threat (see for a related argument, Albertson, and Gadarian 2015). That is, the *effect of TP on trust in political actors is dependent on the degree to which the perceived threat can be linked to those actors*. I propose here to differentiate between two mechanisms by which such a linkage takes place: an internal and an external mechanism, with the latter bolstering the former. In the remainder, I first focus on the *internal mechanism* and its two main underlying arguments, highlighting that higher levels of TP lead to decreasing levels of governmental trust if the kind of threat can be easily linked cognitively to the government (*general linkage*), and if the kind of threat is linked to an individual's own political worldview (*heuristic linkage*). Second, in the next section, I argue that the *external mechanism* – the government being blamed for the threat in question by an external actor (*blame attribution*) – increases the effect of the internal mechanism.

The general-linkage argument

Most generally, I argue that the effect of TP on governmental distrust is a function of whether the (perceived) threat and the political actor(s) held responsible for it are *cognitively easily accessible* to citizens. Whether this is the case or not should vary with the *kind of perceived threat* (see Albertson, and Gadarian 2015). Perceived threats that are located on the level of domestic politics / society should be more easily being linked to the government than those that seemingly come from the outside (*external threats*) or those that only focus on the individual level (*individual threats*).

Regarding external threats, this argument may explain the variance in the previous literature. The aforementioned research on the rally-round-the-flag effect has concentrated on how (perceived) threats of terrorism and/or external actors aiming to attack the country affect trust in domestic political actors (again, see Mueller, 1970; Hetherington, and Suhay 2011; Dinesen, and Jaeger, 2013). As the government can only indirectly be blamed for these external threats, citizens turn favourably toward domestic actors as preventers of terrorism or attack. This should also be true for health-related or ecological catastrophes (such as pandemics, floods, earthquakes, and similar),

with an increase of trust in government detected in many countries after the COVID-19 pandemic hit.

In contrast, a TP originating from (higher levels of) immigration or a worsening of the economy – developments that have been demonstrated to negatively correlate with levels of political trust (McLaren, 2002, 2012) – seems to be more easily linked cognitively to government failure. Still, for these kinds of threats, the effects on political trust should vary with the level they are directed at: *societal* or *individual*. Previous research in Social Psychology has indicated that perceived threats directed at society (*societal threats*) might result in stronger effects on political attitudes than those directed at the level of the individual do (*individual* or *personal threat*; Onraet, et al. 2013; Asbrock, and Fritsche 2013; Shaffer, and Duckitt 2013).

This aligns well with the extensive research on sociotropic versus pocket-book (or: egotropic) voting (Gomez and Wilson 2006).¹ This differentiation seems to be especially important to *economic threats* (or in sociopsychological terms: realistic threats), while *cultural threats* (in sociopsychological terms: symbolic threats) – that is, somebody/something endangering a nation's or society's way of life – are always situated on the societal level. Unsurprisingly, therefore, the previous literature has indicated cultural threats to evoke strong emotional responses (McLaren, 2002, 2012; Margalit, 2012; Craig, and Richeson 2014; but see Dinesen, Klemmensen, and Nørgaard 2016). Both perceived economic threats on the societal level and perceived cultural ones should hence be linked to the government in negative ways, resulting in citizens affected by these circumstances having lower levels of trust in government.

H1: Distrust in government increases:

- if citizens perceive higher levels of societal economic threat (H1a).
- if citizens perceive higher levels of cultural threat (H1b).

The heuristic-linkage argument

The second link explaining the effect of TP on governmental trust is the linkage between the *kind* of threat faced and a citizen's own *political predisposition*. The effect at work here should be moderated by the *salience* of the perceived threat within the political framework – the ideology or worldview – of an individual. That is, for some citizens threats concerning the economy might be more important in their thinking about politics, and hence in their evaluation of governmental actors, than for others. In consequence, an economic TP might then be a more *salient heuristic* to them when asked to indicate their trust in political actors than it is for peers.

Focusing on the main differentiation in the literature between economic and cultural threats, I hence expect them to both lead to increasing distrust in governing actors – but *to different degrees for different groups*. Introducing the mechanism of the *heuristic linkage*, I argue here that left-wing citizens should more strongly negatively react to perceptions of (societal) economic threat while right-wing ones should do so to perceptions of cultural threat when asked to indicate their trust in the national government (for the correlation between ideology and kinds of threats, see Brandt et al. 2021).

The linkage outlined earlier – connecting the perception of the country being under economic stress to government failure – should be more salient to left-wing citizens than to right-wing ones, as the former ascribe the state (and hence the government) a much more active, involved, and regulating role in the economy than the latter do. As a result, on perceiving the economy to be in a poor condition, left-wing citizens should be more eager to make the government responsible for these problems and hence are likely to lose trust in it.

For right-wing citizens, there need not necessarily be a connection between the state (and its ruling actors, the government) and the economy (and its condition).² In contrast, these individuals – per their greater need for order and security – should ascribe the state / the government a much more prominent role in protecting traditional values and the nation's way of life, two dimensions of a perceived cultural threat. Again, right-wing citizens perceiving one's way of life to be under threat should therewith become more distrusting of government, as these individuals make the government responsible for the failure to prevent the threat's manifestation and consequently lose trust.

H2: Distrust in government increases more strongly:

- *among left-wing citizens perceiving higher levels of societal economic threat (H2a).*
- *among right-wing citizens perceiving higher levels of cultural threat (H2b).*

Connecting Political Trust and Threat Perception: the blame attribution

The third link explaining the effect of TP on political trust is (political) *blame attribution* (on the latter concept, see, e.g. Carlin, Love, and Martinez-Gallardo 2015; Vasilopolou et al., 2014; Fernández-Albertos, Kuo, and Balcells 2013; Boin, Hart, and McConnell 2009). While the general- and heuristic-linkage arguments focus on *internal* processes that lead from threat perceptions to political distrust, the blame-attribution argument proposes the key relevance of an *external-linkage mechanism* that brings political context – in this case,

political communication – back into play. Doing so is not only in line with the increasing scholarly interest in the role of blame games in citizens' attitudes toward political actors and institutions (e.g. Schlipphak, and Treib 2017; Heinkelmann-Wild, and Zangl 2020), but also with research on the potential effects of the political communication of populist actors (Rooduijn, 2014).

In a nutshell, blame attribution increases the strength of TP's effects on citizens' political (dis)trust by further increasing the *accessibility* of the *heuristic linkage*. The underlying mechanism of this moderation or interaction effect is as follows: whether citizens make the heuristic linkage between a perceived threat that is in line with their own ideological predisposition and governmental actors can be stimulated or increased by attributing blame for the threat in question to those actors. Put differently, blame attribution makes the connection between the (perceived) threat and the political actor(s) held responsible for it *even more accessible* to citizens. The more the external link is available in public discourse (which then makes it accessible to citizens), the more should we expect the heuristic linkage to be at work. Hence, I expect that:

H3: The effects predicted in H2a, b are contingent on the accessibility of blame attributions for the threat at hand in the public discourse.

Research design and empirical findings: two studies

To test the derived hypotheses, I use a two-step design. First, I use cross-sectional data from a longitudinal and representative German panel survey to test H1 and H2. Second, I administer a survey experiment that explicitly puts H3 to the test. Furthermore, I add evidence drawn from real-world events – in this case, the main programmatic convention of the German populist party AfD (Alternative für Deutschland, Alternative for Germany) – in positing that the findings from the survey experiment may also be of external validity.

Study 1 – Research design

For the first study I use a wave of the GESIS Panel that was fielded in mid-2016 (GESIS Panel 2018). Wave DC of the GESIS Panel consists of 3,329 respondents, of which 2,255 participated online and 1,074 offline (via post). Given the high standards of recruiting and sustaining the sample undertaken by GESIS,³ generalizing from the findings on German citizens is a reliable endeavor. Using the opportunity arising from submitting modules to the GESIS Panels, I was able to add four modules on TP and political trust to the wave. These modules measure standardized scales of perception of societal economic threat (module 1), individual economic threat (module 2), cultural threat (module 3), and political trust (module 4).⁴ More information on these

modules and the operationalization of variables can be found in the online Appendix (Part A).⁵

Study 1 – Empirical findings

H1 expects cultural and economic threats to decrease trust in governing actors, with cultural and societal economic threats both to have greater effects compared to individual economic threats. H2 expects these effects to vary dependent on the political predispositions of citizens, anticipating stronger effects of economic threats for left-wing and of cultural threats for right-wing respondents. Tables 1 and 2 below demonstrate that these expectations are in large parts corroborated by the empirical findings.

Perceptions of societal economic and cultural threat lead to more distrust in political actors (= H1a, b). Table 1 yields two surprising findings. First, societal economic threats seem to be more relevant for citizens than cultural ones are. As the previous literature has found contrasting results for citizens in the US and various European countries, this points to the relevance of political context when it comes to the effects of TP on political trust. Second, perceived individual economic threats also seem to matter. Hence, citizens appear to also use their personal situation as a *heuristic* when asked for their degree of trust in government.⁶

Regarding H2 and the expected differences in TP effects due to the varying relevance of heuristics, Table 2 furthermore demonstrates that there are indeed empirical differences – confirming the theoretical expectations. For left-wing citizens, only a perceived societal economic threat has a substantial and significant effect on their trust in government. For right-wing citizens, both a perceived societal economic and a cultural threat matter, but the effect of the latter is stronger compared to that of the former.

Yet, when running the model with interaction terms instead of splitting the sample, several important observations appear. First, the interaction term between right-wing ideological positions and cultural threat exerts a

Table 1. General linkage and governmental trust.

	Trust in Government
Societal Economic Threat	-.56 (.05)***
Personal Economic Threat	-.11 (.03)**
Cultural Threat	-.14 (.03)***
Age	.01 (.00)***
Female	.28 (.05)***
Higher Education	.18 (.06)**
Lower Education	.08 (.07)
Constant	5.26 (.17)
NoC / Adjusted R2	3087 / 16.2%

Source: (Self-administered modules included in) GESIS Panel (Wave DC, mid-2016). OLS Regression with robust standard errors.

*** $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$.

Table 2. Heuristic linkage and governmental trust.

	Trust in Government (Rightwing)	Trust in Government (Leftwing)	Trust in Government (Interaction Terms)
Societal Economic Threat	-.39 (.18)*	-.51 (.12)***	-.55 (.11)***
Personal Economic Threat	-.03 (.12)	-.12 (.09)	-.11 (.03)**
Cultural Threat	-.61 (.16)***	-.03 (.08)	-.14 (.03)***
Leftwing Ideological Position			-.63 (.30)*
Rightwing Ideological Position			1.26 (.45)**
Societal Economic Threat*Leftwing			.07 (.10)
Cultural Threat*Rightwing			-.33 (.11)**
Age	.03 (.01)***	.00 (.01)	.01 (.00)***
Female	.38 (.22)	.54 (.15)***	.28 (.05)***
Higher Education	.44 (.27)	-.08 (.18)	.16 (.06)*
Lower Education	-.44 (.25)	-.15 (.25)	.08 (.08)
Constant	5.58 (.83)***	5.07 (.44)***	5.29 (.17)***
NoC / Adjusted R ²	219 / 27.2%	409 / 13.1%	3016 / 17.9%

Source: (Self-administered modules included in) GESIS Panel (Wave DC, mid-2016). OLS with robust standard errors.

*** $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$.

significant and substantive effect on governmental trust, once again indicating that it decreases (or: governmental distrust increases) among right-wing respondents the more they perceive cultural threats to exist (see [Figure 1](#) below too). In contrast, the interaction term connecting left-wing ideological

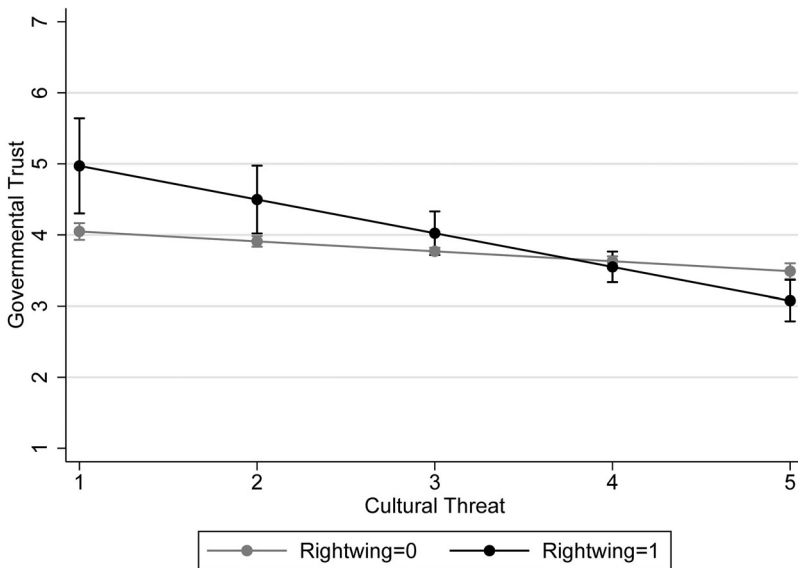


Figure 1. Heuristic Linkage and Governmental Trust.

positions and societal economic threat does not have a significant impact on governmental trust.

Second, this lack of effect may be due to the fact that a societal economic threat makes *all* citizens more distrusting of governmental actors, leaving less variance to be explained by a left-wing ideological position. As an additional observation from [Table 2](#), left-wing respondents – in contrast to their right-wing peers – generally seem to show more distrust in the government, even in the absence of ideologically salient threats. With no perceived cultural threats, right-wing respondents strongly trust the government meanwhile – which may be explained by a general tendency to accept authority among these individuals. For left-wing respondents, the absence of a perceived economic threat still leads to a relatively higher level of governmental distrust. As a result, only H2b can be fully confirmed by the findings presented in [Table 2](#) and [Figure 1](#).⁷

Study 2 – Research design

For the second study I administered a short survey experiment among 2,000 respondents in Germany. The online survey was fielded by Respondi in February 2021, using quotas regarding age, education, and gender.⁸ The vignette experiment asked respondents to agree or disagree with a statement on a scale from 1 = fully disagree to 7 = fully agree. The statement read as follows (author's own translation): "X criticizes the German government for the fact that Y happened," with the experiment consisting in varying the source X and the reason Y for which the government is criticized.

Regarding X, respondents in the different experimental groups either received the German right-wing populist party AfD (X1 = "The AfD"), the German left-wing (and sometimes also considered populist) Die Linke (X2 = "The Left"), or a none specified group (X3 = "Some people") as the source of the critique. The reason for the government being criticized (= Y) only varied between two conditions: either for the worsening of the economic situation (= Y1) or for the loss of cultural traditions (= Y2). With 3(X) * 2(Y) conditions, there are six experimental groups that vary in their respective combination of these different conditions. Respondents were randomly attributed to one of these six groups. In addition, I asked for respondents' degree of societal economic and cultural TP; the probability of them voting for several German parties, from which I distilled a dummy variable indicating a clear preference for voting the AfD (= 1) or not (= 0); and – after the experimental treatment – for their trust in a number of political actors, including the federal government. More information on these variables can be found in Appendix B.

Table 3. Blame attribution, heuristic linkage, and governmental trust.

	AfD voters	Non-AfD voters
Cultural Threat	-.20 (.14)	-.32 (.05)***
Cultural Blame (vs. Economic Blame)	1.84 (1.00)	-.01 (.19)
Interaction Threat*Blame	-.49 (.23)*	-.00 (.06)
Constant	2.91 (.63)***	5.06 (.14)***
NoC / Adjusted R ²	149 / 9.0%	1351 / 6.9

Source: Self-administered survey experiment (2021). OLS with robust standard errors.

*** $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$.

Study 2 – Findings

H3 expects a significant and negative interaction effect between cultural threat perceptions and being in the cultural blame attribution (Y2) condition, but only for AfD voters. Table 3 and Figure 2 demonstrate that H3 is actually confirmed by the experimental findings. I plot the results for AfD voters and non-AfD voters separately, as three-way interactions are more complicated to illustrate concisely and less reliable. Still, I also plot the three-way interaction model as a robustness check in the Appendix (Table F4).

While for non-AfD voters receiving the cultural blame attribution does not change respondents' governmental trust as an effect of their perceived cultural threat, the opposite is true for AfD voters. That is, for those respondents for whom cultural threat is already an important heuristic in line with their own ideological predisposition, a blame attribution including a cultural threat significantly increases the effect of such perceptions on their

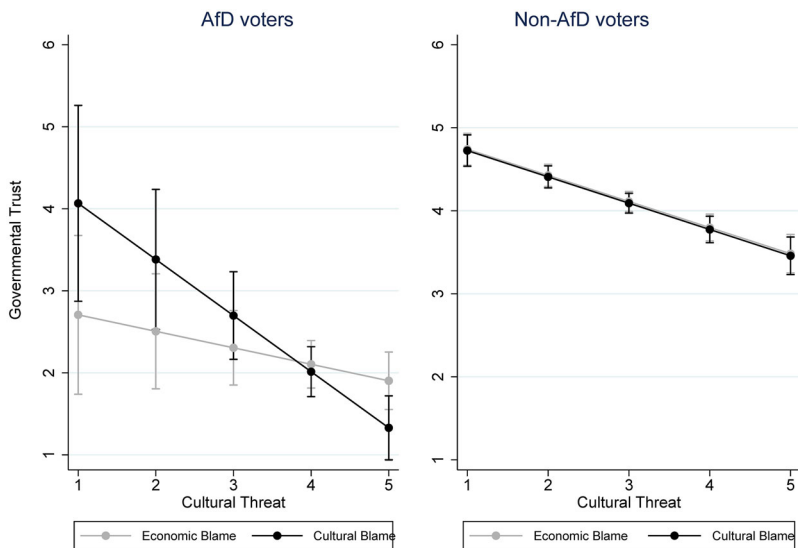


Figure 2. Blame Attribution, Heuristic Linkage, and Governmental Trust.

governmental (dis)trust. The total effect of cultural threat perceptions among AfD voters in the cultural blame condition is, again, substantively larger than the direct effect of a cultural threat among non-AfD voters. [Figure 2](#) demonstrates these findings graphically.

Study 2 – External validity

To analyze the external validity of the experimental results from Study 2, I once again use the data from Study 1 but make additional use of its panel nature – that is, multiple fieldings of surveys over time among the same respondents. Furthermore, I consider quantitative and qualitative data on the blaming of domestic actors regarding the state of economy and immigration in the context of the AfD party convention that has taken place between wave DC and the previous wave (DB).⁹ This provides us with the opportunity to look at variation over time.

In the Appendix, I demonstrate first that media coverage communicated the existence more of a cultural threat than an economic one in the time period surrounding the AfD party convention (Appendices C and D). Following H3, I expect right-wing citizens – for whom cultural threats are more salient – to be more likely to link their perception of cultural threat to an *increase* in political distrust *over time* compared to all other respondents. Testing the effect of respondents' TP on changes in their level of governmental trust over time reveals that the perception of a cultural threat turns out to have a significant and substantial negative impact on trust in political actors. But this effect, indeed, only appears for right-wing respondents (Tables E1–E3). Being in line with my expectations, hence the perception of a cultural threat – but not of a societal or personal economic threat – further decreases trust in government among right-wing respondents between two points in time. This indicates that the effect of the German government being blamed for causing the cultural threat found in the survey experiment underlying Study 2 is also of external validity.

Conclusion

Under what conditions do threat perceptions lead to increasing distrust in government? I argued that the specific kind of perceived threat encountered and the attribution of blame are two factors of great importance in answering this question. Whether TP significantly and substantially influences citizens' trust in the blamed political actor(s) has been identified as being dependent on two key mechanisms: the *internal-linkage mechanism*, including *general-linkage* and *heuristic-linkage arguments*, and the *external-linkage mechanism* consisting of the *blame-attribution argument*.

Regarding the first mechanism, I argued that whether threats lead citizens to distrust governmental actors is dependent on whether the specific *kind of*

threat can be easily linked to the government or not. In the *general-linkage argument*, I expected that threats directed at society – for which governments should be considered more responsible than they are for threats to the individual – wield greater influence in negatively affecting citizens' governmental trust (H1). More importantly, however, I posited that the negative effect of perceived threats becomes specifically relevant when the kind of threat is linked to the responsibilities of the government within the scope of the political worldview of a citizen: the *heuristic linkage*. Following this argument, I expected left-wing citizens to become more skeptical about the government when perceiving economic threats, while right-wing ones should become more distrusting of the government when perceiving cultural threats (H2).

Regarding the second mechanism, I expected the effect of TP on political trust to be moderated by the accessibility of an external linkage – that is, whether the government is actually publicly blamed for the threat (or for not preventing it) (H3). I called this the *blame-attribution argument*. Empirically, I tested H1 and H2 using in part self-administered data from a larger German survey project, while analyzing H3 by a fully self-administered online survey experiment. Besides H2a, for which I found only limited evidence, all three main hypotheses received empirical confirmation.

Perceiving a threat on the societal level exerts a stronger influence on governmental distrust compared to threats directed toward the individual level (= H1). More importantly, respondents from the left and right poles of the political spectrum evidently differ in the impact that divergent threats have on their attitudes toward the government. Right-wing respondents perceiving cultural threats have relatively less trust in government, compared to non-culturally threatened right-wing respondents *and* compared to all non-culturally threatened respondents (= H2b). For left-wing respondents, the effect of societal economic threat on the level of governmental trust is observable only when comparing economically threatened to non-threatened left-wing respondents. Still, these findings provide evidence for the *heuristic-linkage mechanism*.

In addition, as my analysis of H3 indicates, there may be a so far overlooked moderating effect of political communication in interaction with citizens' own predispositions. When confronting participants in a survey experiment with statements blaming the government either for economic or societal threats, right-wing citizens demonstrated greater distrust in government when a cultural threat was in play. This was not the case for mainstream and left-wing respondents. These findings are corroborated by a quasi-field experiment using data on media coverage around an AfD convention, linked to panel data on citizens' political trust. From my point of view, this demonstrates that especially *heuristic linkage* and *blame attribution* meaningfully interact. Political predispositions and political communication hence

seem to be decisive for the impact that threat perceptions may have on governmental (dis)trust.

Future research still needs to more rigorously test H3 as well as the other findings presented in this article. While my research sheds first light on the so far neglected role of blame attribution in connecting threat perceptions and levels of political trust, the empirical evidence is far from exhaustive. There are two main paths that I consider necessary for scholars to take in future research if more robust evidence on the mechanism of blame attribution is to be acquired. First, analyses need to be done for divergent country contexts. The data presented here is limited to samples of German citizens. This may also explain why societal economic threat turns out to be of stronger effect compared to cultural threat perceptions, a finding that seems to stand in contrast to previous discoveries in the literature.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that this may be due to Germans being very focused on economic matters and also more strongly believing in the steering role of the state therein, compared for example to United Kingdom or United States citizens.

Yet, this limitation might not be that severe, as Germany – with its relatively higher levels of political trust and long-time avoidance of populist or other right-wing parties in parliament / public discourse – is rather a least-likely case to test the argument presented here. Hence, if blame attribution works in Germany then we should assume it to work even better in other countries where populist and other actors attributing blame to the government are even more salient in media coverage. Still, this assumption needs empirical confirmation.

Second, while I consider blame attribution – emanating not only from populist actors but also mainstream oppositional actors – to be an important factor influencing the effect of TP on political trust, I do not argue that oppositional actors are able to influence TP as such in the first place. To date, the assumption I have made is that these actors make reference to threats that citizens already perceive to herewith direct hostility toward governing elites. Whether oppositional threat communication can actually influence citizens' levels of TP is still an open research question – sociopsychological research indicates that while there seem to be some effects from threat-inducing communication, long-standing personality factors might play a stronger role. Future research therefore has to disentangle whether blame attribution only strengthens the effect of TP on political trust or whether it even stimulates such threat perceptions in the first place.

In sum, and despite some early research on the topic (Vasilopolou and Wagner, 2017; Wagner, 2014; Boin, Hart, and McConnell 2009), further research on the role of blame attribution in linking perceptions of threat, anger, and related such emotions to political and societal attitudes is needed to fully account for the significant role of blaming strategies. I am looking forward to participating in this research.

Notes

1. The mechanisms for both phenomena seem to be the same: One's economic hardship—be that unemployment, low income level, extensive personal debt, and the like—might be hard to solve in everyday life, but potential solutions to it are easily imaginable to any individual: apply for as many jobs as possible, pursue those offering higher wages, restrict one's expenditure, and similar. Yet economic stress on one's society or country seems harder to solve on the individual level. Hence, the government should be considered responsible for improving the economic situation of the country in the mind of the public. In consequence, the more a citizen perceives the state economy to be under stress, the less the government is doing its job evidently. As such, the perception of societal economic threat seems to lead to reduced trust in governmental actors.
2. This, however, may be dependent on time and context. Looking at the case of the United States, a large part of Donald Trump voters seems to ascribe the government a decisive role in improving the national economy, although at the same time being very reluctant to embrace the concept of state intervention—especially on the federal level.
3. For details on sample recruitment and sample quality, please check the information provided by the respective GESIS Panels. Available online at: <https://www.gesis.org/en/gesis-panel/documentation>.
4. Critics have argued that the items used to measure TP actually tackle citizens' evaluation of government performance. More specifically, a respondent's agreement to statements such as "The economic situation of Germany will worsen in the future" should be interpreted as a prospective measure of blaming the government for its failure to prevent such an outcome. For me, this interpretation is not convincing however. First, and theoretically speaking, the interpretation just assumes that citizens' agreeing to the statement means they automatically blame the government. This need not be true; I cite here the sociopsychological literature that has developed and used these perceived threat measures (see, e.g., Onraet, and van Hiel 2013; Onraet, et al. 2013). Second, and empirically speaking, I tested this argument by splitting the sample of Study 2 into two groups. One received the classic statements as formulated above, while the other group received the same statements but introduced with "I am afraid of [the economic situation in Germany worsening in the future]." This did not result in substantive differences in mean agreement on these items, indicating that the answers to the classic statements indeed measure feelings of perceived threat.
5. In Appendix F, I also plotted the descriptive statistics of Study 1 (Table F1).
6. Critics have also argued that the model in Table 1 may somewhat neglect the effect that party preferences can have on the effect of TP on political trust. Yet controlling for party preferences may play into the danger of inflating the model, as the preference for a mainstream party should positively correlate with political trust and more negatively with TP, while the favoring of a more radical party should negatively correlate with political trust and more positively with TP. Still, I ran a model that includes dummies for party preferences vis-à-vis the six major German parties: among the mainstream ones, the Christian Democrats (CDU/CSU), the Social Democrats (SPD), the Greens (B90 / Die Grünen), and the Liberal Democrats (FDP); among the more radical parties, the right-wing

AfD and the left-wing Die Linke (The Left). Findings are plotted in Table A1 in Appendix A, and demonstrate that the effects of TP unsurprisingly become somewhat weaker (with the effect of individual economic threat being no longer significant); this provides further robust support for H1. When it comes to the effects of party preference, that for a mainstream party results in positive effects on political trust, while the opposite is true vis-à-vis backing more radical parties.

7. I also ran robustness checks using different estimation strategies (Tables F2 and F3).
8. Among those having clicked the link to the survey in the invitation mail from Respondi (N = 2,706), 74 percent ultimately completed the survey (N = 2,000).
9. One should note that the time slots in fielding these two waves slightly overlapped. However, as in every fielding period, the vast majority of respondents in wave DB participated early on—and hence prior to the AfD convention in question.

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