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Fusion with Political Leaders Predicts Willingness to Persecute Immigrants and Political Opponents

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From the 2016 U.S. presidential election and into 2019, we demonstrate that a visceral feeling of oneness (i.e., psychological fusion) with a political leader can fuel partisans' willingness to actively participate in political violence. In Studies 1 and 2, fusion with Donald Trump predicted Republicans' willingness to violently persecute Muslims (over and above other established predictors). In Study 3, relative deprivation increased fusion with Trump and, subsequently, willingness to violently challenge election results. In Study 4, fusion with Trump increased after his election and predicted immigrant persecution over time. Further revealing its independent effects, fusion with Trump predicted willingness to persecute Iranians (independent of identification with him, Study 5); and willingness to persecute immigrants (Study 6) and personally protect the U.S. border from an immigrant caravan (Study 7), even over and above fusion with the group of Trump's followers. These findings echo past political movements and suggest critical future research.

Introduction

One important way that people define themselves is through their affiliation with political groups[1,2]. Political identification predicts a range of behaviors, including involvement in individual and organized protests[3]. However, beyond people's social identification with political groups, "identity fusion" uniquely and often more powerfully predicts extreme group behavior and non-normative forms of political action, such as violence against out-groups[4-7]. The present research extends previous work on identity fusion and political action by investigating another form of fusion − fusion with a political leader – over the course of Donald Trump's 2016 U.S. presidential campaign into 2019.

Fusion with an individual, such as a leader, is conceptually different from, albeit related to, the constructs of social identification, leader identification, and identity fusion with groups. Social identification in its classic sense involves the extent to which individuals feel a sense of belonging and attachment to a social group that forms and defines the social part of their self-concept[8,9]. Similarly, personal identification captures the extent to which one defines oneself through another individual such as one's leader, whose values and perspectives are perceived as aligned with one's own[10,11]. Whereas both types of identifications involve a sense of belonging and attachment, identity fusion refers to a visceral feeling of "oneness" between a group and one's personal self[12]. Hence, while the boundaries between individuals' personal and social/relational selves remain intact when they identify with another group or individual, these psychological boundaries become overlapping when individuals experience fusion with a group[13].

Fusion with an individual involves similar processes as group-based identity fusion but with an individual rather than a group as target. According to the self-expansion model[14,15],

which was developed primarily to explain interpersonal relations, people have a fundamental motive to expand the self in an attempt to increase their sense of efficacy. This motive does not necessarily reflect a conscious process (i.e., represent a conscious plan to gain benefits from others)[16]. One way to expand oneself is to perceive oneness with another individual, thereby including the other's perspectives and resources into the personal self[15] (also see [17]). Considerable research has demonstrated the antecedents (e.g., limited life opportunities that provide insufficient opportunities to expand the self) and consequences (e.g., strong reliance and commitment on another person) of such self-expansion that encompasses a close other, particularly a romantic partner (see [16] for a review).

Applied to follower-leader relations, group members may attempt to expand their selves via fusion with their leader, who typically has the most power and resources[18]. By doing so, followers' own perceived efficacy and resources increase and they may gain or perceive that they gain access to some of their leader's rewards (see [16]). Although this motivation has not been established in terms of fusion with an individual, recent research shows that self-expansion and, consequently, an increased sense of efficacy and agency, play important roles in the effects of identity fusion on collective action[19,20]. Hence, because fusing with other individuals can help people expand their self and thereby obtain new perspectives and capabilities (for instance, increased self-confidence, perceived competence and other traits as demonstrated by Besta, et al. [19]), fusion can indeed have a self-enhancing function. It is therefore possible that fusing with a political leader represents an attractive way of coping with feelings of uncertainty and powerlessness. If so, leader fusion should be especially pronounced when followers experience deprivation and threats to their socio-economic life conditions – that is, when they and their

group are losing ground so that increasing one's resources and prospects becomes particularly vital.

Thus far, most research based on identity fusion and self-expansion frameworks has investigated fusion with other individuals in terms of interpersonal closeness between partners and family members. For instance, fusion with siblings predicted greater willingness to make personal sacrifices[21], and fusion (assessed in terms of "self-other overlap") with a partner positively related to relationship commitment and cooperation[15,22]. Similarly, in an organizational context, employees who perceived an overlap between the self and their supervisor showed greater commitment to protect the organization and colleagues[23]. Within the broader political domain, however, we propose that fusion with leaders may also be a powerful predictor of intergroup violence.

Following Weber's notion of charismatic authority[24], group members' relationship to their superior is often characterized by "adoration, idolization and unquestioned obedience"[25] (p. 107). As Haslam, et al. [26] state, under some circumstances, "the definition of the leader has precedence, where individuals have acquired an iconic status for the group" (p. 152). This can have drastic consequences. While leaders typically exemplify valued qualities of a group, they sometimes also display extremist agendas that deviate from the group's current position[26]. As such, leader fusion may facilitate extreme actions to achieve the objectives and ambitions associated with the leader's agenda (such as violent persecution of out-groups that have been identified as threats) over and above, and potentially in conflict with, the perceived goals and orientations of their group more generally. That is, because followers may hope to benefit from the leader's current resources and future outcomes, they may become psychologically dependent on the leader and may therefore be more willing to go to extreme means to achieve and defend

the leader's goals and agenda[27]. Moreover, because fusion with a political leader implies adopting the leader's ideological perspectives, as self-expansion theory suggests, followers likely may become more receptive to the influence of the leader[17], and engage in behavior that is aligned with the leader's values, even if doing so is unethical[28]. Consequently, leader fusion may exert influences over and above fusion or social identification with a political group or identification with the leader in predicting whether individuals will actively support extreme intergroup behaviors such as hostility and violence against out-groups.

Real-life incidents support the critical role a leader may play in motivating political violence: A nation-wide review conducted by ABC news found 17 criminal cases where police records had court proceedings directly name Donald Trump in connection with violent acts and threats of assault (https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/blame-abc-news-finds-17-cases-invoking-trump/story?id=58912889). In sixteen of these, the suspect seemed motivated by and supportive of Donald Trump. No such cases invoking former presidents Barack Obama or George. W. Bush were found.

Although central scholars in the field[29] have highlighted "an almost complete neglect of issues of leadership [as] one of the more alarming features" (p. 1324) of research on intergroup relations and hatred, perspectives offered by social identity research highlight how followers' identification with their leaders can motivate interpersonal and intergroup violence[29]. For instance, a thorough re-analyses of data from the Milgram's obedience experiment showed that identification with the experimenter (i.e., the research leader), as coded by external raters, consistently predicted participants' willingness to administer the maximum shock to the confederate[30]. Similar processes have been identified in re-analyses of the Stanford Prison Experiment[31] (also see[32]). Hence, this work demonstrates that a willingness to engage in violence

against out-groups may be explained by followers' identification with the leader and his or her agenda, and a resulting "engaged followership," rather than simply by "blind" obedience and conformity[33]. Yet, while this previous research offers important insights into the role of follower-leader relationships, much of that work has relied on indirect assessments of identification with the leader using archival data. Particularly relevant to the present paper, the prior research did not investigate the distinctive effects of participants' fusion with their leader compared to the process of social identification.

The current research extended and integrated work from social, organizational, and political psychology by investigating the effects of leader fusion on partisans' willingness to engage in extreme violence against out-groups. We tested these processes over the course and aftermath of the highly contested and divisive 2016 U.S. presidential elections and into 2019. Our focus was on fusion with Donald Trump, a nontraditional Republican Party presidential candidate who is "at least partially at odds with the [Republican] party" (http://www.latimes.com/politics/la-na-pol-trump-gop-positions-20160720-snap-htmlstory.html) on various core conservative issues such as trade, military commitments, and immigration.

All studies were conducted with White American or majority-White American samples of participants with a Republican affiliation. Although Trump has supporters also among racial minority groups, White Americans by far constitute his main group of supporters[34]. Moreover, White Americans account for about half of all hate crimes annually conducted in the U.S.[35] – a type of behavior that comes close to the one we aimed to understand in the present research.

Results

Study 1. We tested whether fusion with Trump would predict active and violent support for a law banning Muslim cultural organizations, over and above social identification and fusion with the Republicans, and controlling for right-wing authoritarianism[36] (RWA) and social dominance orientation[37] (SDO), which independently predicted politically-directed persecution of out-groups in previous research[38-40]. The results supported our predictions. In a regression model, $F(6, 198) = 22.04$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .40$, 90% CI [.32, .48], people scoring higher on RWA, $\beta = .37$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [.25, .48], and people who showed more fusion with Trump, $\beta = .34$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [.18, .50], were more willing to enforce the law, while no evidence of other effects was observed (*p*s > .388).

Study 2. We replicated the findings from the first study with a nationally-representative sample of White Republicans while also controlling for an alternative measure of authoritarianism[41]. In a regression model, $F(7, 377) = 31.49$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .37$, 90% CI [.31, .43], both RWA, $\beta = .19$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [.11, .28], and SDO, $\beta = .19$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [.10, .27], had weak positive effects, whereas fusion with Trump had a medium-sized positive effect, $\beta = .41$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [.28, .54], on willingness to enforce the law (all other *p*s > .105).

Study 3. Feelings of being socio-economically disadvantaged or that one's group is being victimized and threatened can be a driving force of (often leader-focused) political movements and attitudes[42,43], as well as of violent out-group persecution and aggression[44-47]. Indeed, in terms of the 2016 election, threats to economic interests and group status both seemed to explain voting for Trump[48,49]. These findings are consistent with a self-expansion perspective[14,16]. To the extent

that one central motivation to fuse with another person is to expand one's resources and efficacy[19,50], such a motivation would be expected to be particularly pronounced when followers feel relatively deprived. This reasoning is also supported by theorizing in organizational psychology[27] and recent research showing that identity fusion indeed predicts increased self-expansion and self-efficacy across different contexts[19], and increases in response to shared negative experiences[51-53] (but see [54]). Hence, Study 3 tested whether recall of relative deprivation would increase Republican partisans' fusion with Trump and thereby lead to out-group hostility.

An analysis of variance showed that participants in the relative deprivation condition indeed reported greater willingness to violently challenge the election outcome, $F(1, 297) = 10.35$, $p = .001$, $\eta^2 = .03$, 90% CI [.01, .07], and greater fusion with Trump, $F(1, 297) = 7.89$, $p = .005$, $\eta^2 = .03$, 90% CI [.004, .06], than did those in the control condition (see Figure 1). The size of both effects was small. No significant effect on fusion with Republicans was observed, $F(1, 297) = 2.48$, $p = .116$, $\eta^2 = .01$, 90% CI [.00, .03].

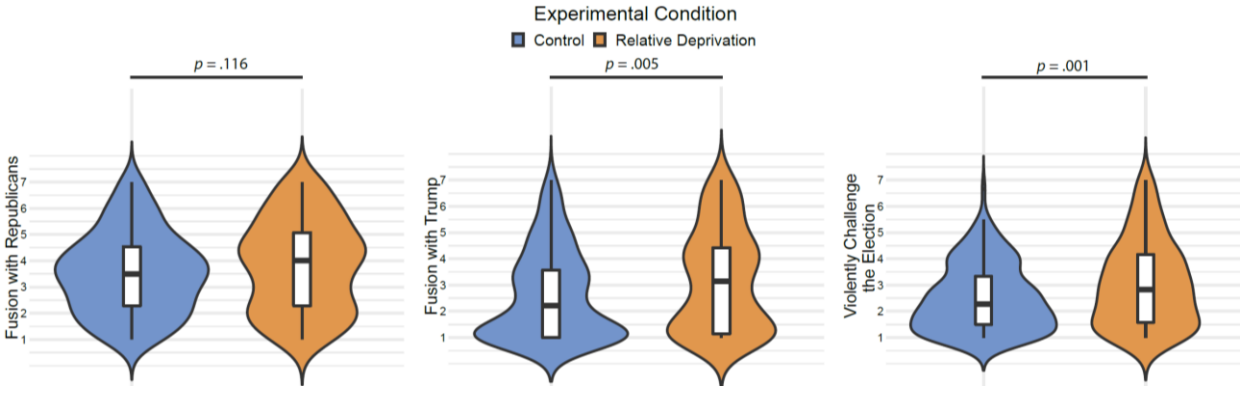

Figure 1. Response distributions and boxplots for the effects of the experimental condition on the dependent variables in Study 3 ($N = 301$). The upper and lower horizontal lines represent the interquartile range (75th to 25th percentile), whereas the horizontal line in between represents the median. The upper and lower vertical lines represent the largest value within 1.5 times of the interquartile range above the 75th and below the 25th percentile respectively. Participants assigned to the relative deprivation condition reported greater willingness to violently challenge the election outcome, $F(1, 297) = 10.35$, $p = .001$, $\eta^2 = .03$, 90% CI [.01, .07], and greater fusion with

Trump, $F(1, 297) = 7.89$, $p = .005$, $\eta^2 = .03$, 90% CI [.004, .06], than those assigned to the control condition. No significant effect was observed on fusion with Republicans, $F(1, 297) = 2.48$, $p = .116$, $\eta^2 = .01$, 90% CI [.00, .03].

Next, while the relative deprivation manipulation had a significant small to medium effect on political persecution when it was entered as the only predictor in the first regression, $F(1, 299) = 11.00$, $p = .001$, $R^2 = .04$, 90% CI [.01, .07], this effect became non-significant when fusion with Republicans and fusion with Trump were added to the model, $F(3, 297) = 75.08$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .43$, 90% CI [.36, .50]; see Figure 2 for standardized coefficients. The effect of fusion with Trump on political persecution was large. Bootstrapping with 5,000 random re-samples using model 4 in the PROCESS macro[55] v. 2.16.4 showed that the experimental manipulation had a positive indirect effect on political persecution, mediated by fusion with Trump, $b = .30$, $SE = .11$, 95% CI [.09, .54], while the indirect effect through fusion with Republicans was non-significant, $b = .001$, $SE = .02$, 95% CI [-.03, .06].

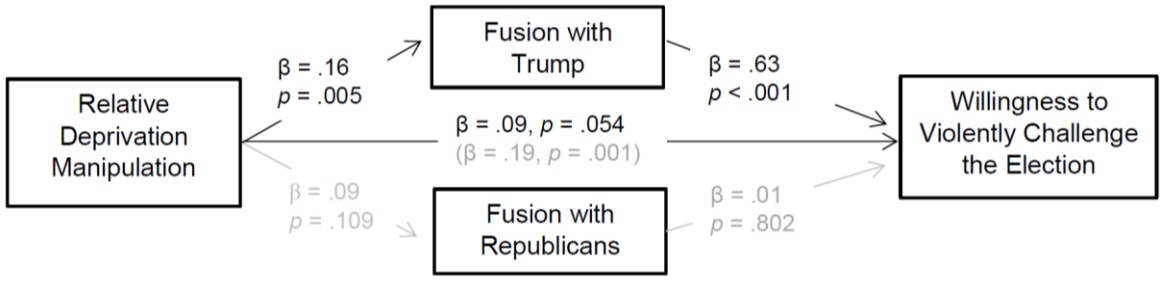

Figure 2. Mediation model in Study 3 ($N = 301$). Fusion with Trump but not fusion with Republicans mediated the experimental effects on willingness to violently challenge the allegedly rigged elections. Standardized coefficients are displayed, and non-significant paths are displayed in grey. Indirect effect mediated by fusion with Trump: $b = .30$, $SE = .11$, 95% CI [.09, .54]. Indirect effect mediated by fusion with Republicans: $b = .001$, $SE = .02$, 95% CI [-.03, .06].

Study 4. Hate crimes against immigrants spiked after Trump's election (http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/us-elections/hate-crimes-donald-trump-election-department-justice-attorney-loretta-lynch-jeff-sessions-a7425701.html). Study 4

investigated the potential role that fusion with Trump could have in facilitating immigrant persecution over time. Recent work has reported diverging results in terms of the temporal development of identity fusion in the current political context. Although one study showed no change in fusion toward one's political group or leader over time[56], another showed that Americans' fusion with the Republicans and the group of Trump supporters increased relatively linearly[57].

In this study, we assessed fusion with Republicans, fusion with Trump, and willingness to persecute immigrants, one week before Election Day 2016, the first day after Trump's successful election, and during his first week as president directly after his ban of immigrants from a series of Muslim-majority countries. In a mixed model, the time factor had a strong effect on fusion with Trump, $F(2, 301.81) = 20.25$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .12$, 90% CI [.06, .17], a medium effect on fusion with Republicans, $F(2, 305.71) = 7.44$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .05$, 90% CI [.01, .09], but no statistically significant effect on immigrant persecution, $F(2, 303.4) = .58$, $p = .562$. Results showed that fusion with Republicans, but in particular fusion with Trump, increased after the election (see Figure 3). After the controversial Muslim immigrants ban, fusion with Republicans declined to its level before election, while the degree of fusion with Trump still remained significantly higher than pre-election.

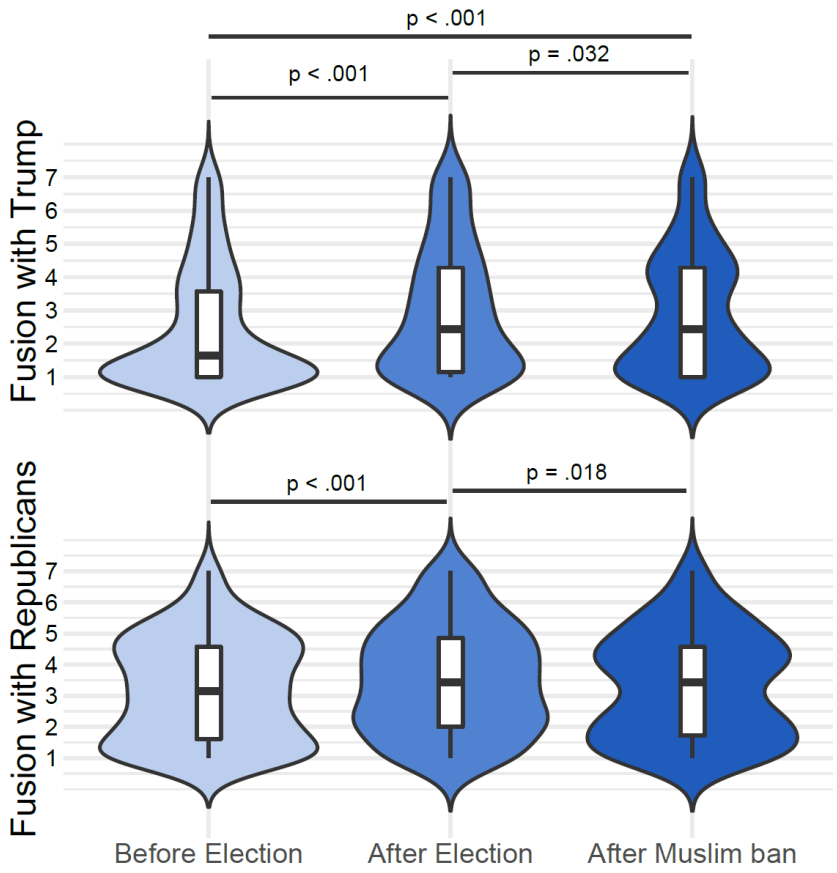

Figure 3. Response distributions and boxplots for fusion with Trump and the Republicans over time in Study 4 (*N* = 490). The upper and lower horizontal lines represent the interquartile range (75th to 25th percentile), whereas the horizontal line in between represents the median. The upper and lower vertical lines represent the largest value within 1.5 times the interquartile range above the 75th and below the 25th percentile respectively. Fusion with Republicans, $t(304) = -3.78$, $p < .001$, $d_{rm} = .28$, 95% CI [.05, .50], but in particular fusion with Trump, $t(322) = -6.62$, $p < .001$, $d_{rm} = .51$, 95% CI [.29, .74], increased after he was elected. Fusion with Trump, $t(330) = 2.17$, $p = .032$, $d_{rm} = -.24$, 95% CI [-.50, .00], but especially fusion with Republicans, $t(304) = 2.63$, $p = .018$, $d_{rm} = -.32$, 95% CI [-.57, -.07], somewhat declined after the ban of Muslim immigrants. Whereas fusion with Trump was still significantly higher after the Muslim ban than before Trump's election, $t(327) = -4.18$, $p < .001$, $d_{rm} = .29$, 95% CI [.06, .52], no statistically significant difference was observed between these time points for fusion with the Republicans, $t(306) = -.90$, $p = .369$, $d_{rm} = .09$, 95% CI [-.14, .32].

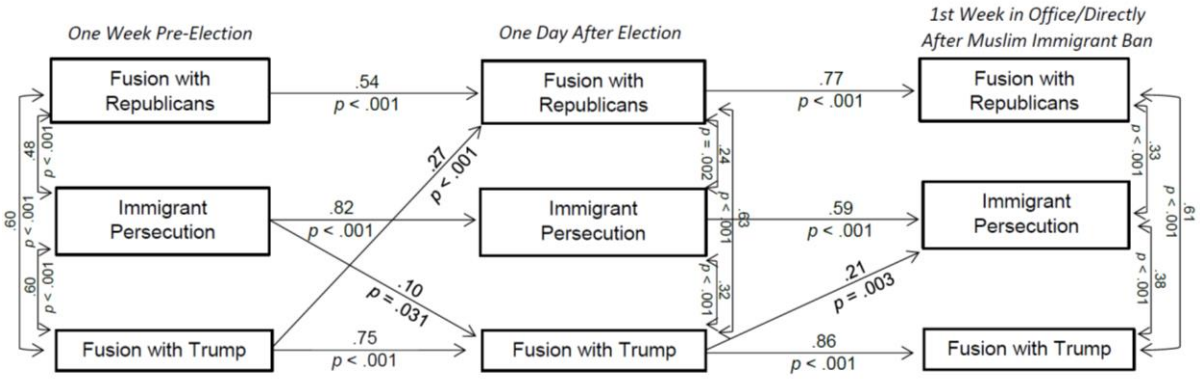

Figure 4. The fitted, autoregressive model in Study 4 (N = 194). Model fit: χ^2 (18) = 39.19, p = .003, *CFI* = .980, *RMSEA* = .078, *sRMR* = .042. Standardized coefficients are displayed. The non-fitted model can be found in the SI.

In the next step, a cross-lagged autoregressive model with satisfactory fit, χ^2 (18) = 39.19, p = .003, *CFI* = .980, *RMSEA* = .078, *sRMR* = .042, demonstrated a reciprocal relationship between support for immigrant persecution and fusion with Trump (see Figure 4). Whereas participants' support for immigrant persecution before election had a weak and positive effect on fusion with Trump the first day after Trump was elected, this fusion with Trump in turn had a weak to medium-sized positive effect on support for immigrant persecution right after Trump had ordered the ban of Muslim immigrants. Also, pre-election fusion with Trump had a medium-sized positive effect on fusion with Republicans one day after election. Hence, although no statistically significant change in willingness to persecute immigrants was observed over time, cross-lagged analyses revealed a positive feedback loop between fusion with Trump and willingness to participate in immigrant persecution. Importantly, this result suggests a potential vicious cycle through which extreme group behavior and fusion with a leader may mutually reinforce one another over time, thus also speaking to the potential of rapid and radical shifts in (right-wing) political climate observed historically: People's pre-existing intolerant and violent behavioral intentions may incline them to fuse and consolidate their support for an extreme

leader that echoes and then further amplifies these violent tendencies, which in turn makes people fuse with the leader even further (cf. [58]).

Study 5. One may argue that the strongest demonstration of fusion with Trump's predictive validity would be to show its effects over and above personal identification with him. Also, to demonstrate the specificity and discriminant validity of the effects of fusion with Trump, it would be important to show what fusion to him does not predict and what is better predicted by fusion with Republicans. To address these two lingering issues, we conducted another study. Given Trump's ban of immigrants from Iran and his termination of the nuclear agreement with the country and restoration of sanctions on May 8, 2018, we expected fusion with Trump to predict willingness to persecute Iranians in the U.S. However, given Trumps' "America First" stance of reducing U.S. military involvement in foreign conflicts (https://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/27/us/politics/donald-trump-transcript.html), we expected support for ground troop military interventions in the Middle East to be better predicted by fusion with Republicans – a group which tends to be more supportive of U.S. foreign involvements than Trump is[59]. Indeed, whereas Trump called the Iraq war a mistake, most Republicans still believe it was the right decision[60]. Moreover, we also anticipated that support for extreme versions of classic conservative policy issues that may be seen as less central to Trump's agenda and values and for which his views have fluctuated substantially over time (http://www.ontheissues.org/Donald_Trump.htm), would be predicted primarily by fusion with Republicans.

In the first regression, $F(5, 170) = 18.97$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .36$, 90% CI [.27, .45], we replicated the findings from the previous studies. Fusion with Trump predicted a higher

willingness to persecute Iranians, β = .36, p = .007, 95% CI [.10, .61] (other ps > .122). Contrary to expectations, in a second regression model with conservative policy support as dependent variable, $F(4, 171) = 12.26$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .22$, 90% CI [.13, .31], only fusion with Trump had a statistically significant, positive and medium-sized effect, β = .34, p = .018, 95% CI [.06, .62], all other ps > .377. Finally, in a model with support for military interventions in the Middle East as dependent variable, $F(4, 171) = 5.30$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .11$, 90% CI [.04, .18], fusion with the Republicans had a large positive effect, β = .52, p = .002, 95% CI [.20, .84], whereas fusion with Trump had a medium-sized negative effect, β = -.31, p = .043, 95% CI [-.61, -.01]; all other ps > .755.

This study, hence, supported the predictive and the discriminant validity of fusion with Trump. However, contrary to our prediction, classic conservative Republican ideology was not primarily predicted by fusion with Republicans, possibly due to the extremity of these policies.

Study 6. One may argue that fusion with Trump simply functions as proxy measure of fusion with his group of supporters and that this group-based identity fusion explains why fusion with Trump predicts willingness to engage in violence against out-groups. Based on another sample of Republicans, in a regression model, $F(2, 168) = 35.63$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .30$, 90% CI [.20, .39], fusion with Trump had a medium-sized positive effect on willingness to participate in ethnic persecution, β = .38, p = .006, 95% CI [.11, .65], whereas the effect of fusion with the group of Trump supporters was statistically non-significant, β = .18, p = .186, 95% CI [-.09, .45]. In terms of zero-order correlations, both fusion variables were related to more support of the immigrant family separation policy (see SI). Yet, in a regression model, $F(2, 168) = 23.00$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .22$, 90% CI [.13, .30], fusion with Trump supporters had a medium-sized positive effect on such

support, β = .43, *p* = .003, 95% CI [.15, .71], but fusion with Trump had no statistically significant effect, β = .04, *p* = .798, 95% CI [-.25, .32].

Thus, as expected and consistent with the previous studies, fusion with Trump predicted personal willingness to actively engage in the persecution of out-groups. Yet, although fusion with Trump also correlated with general support for the separation of immigrant families at the Mexican border, fusion with Trump supporters as a group, and not fusion with Trump as a person, emerged as primary predictor of general support of this policy when the predictors were considered simultaneously. This finding suggests that leader fusion may specifically motivate behavioral intentions to engage in out-group violence in support of the leader's agenda (as reflected by willingness to engage in ethnic persecution), rather than support for political violence and harsh outgroup policies when it requires no direct behavioral involvement (as reflected by support of the border separation policy).

Study 7. In this last study, we aimed to replicate the findings from the previous study during a time that a caravan of several thousand immigrants from Central America was approaching the U.S. border, and in the immediate aftermath of mail bombings sent to various prominent critics of Donald Trump, including CNN. In response to the immigrant caravan, President Trump ordered several thousand soldiers to the U.S. border and called the caravan "an invasion of our country" (https://www.foxnews.com/politics/5000-troops-deploying-to-us-mexico-border-in-response-to-migrant-caravan). Here, we tested whether fusion with Trump would be associated with a willingness to personally volunteer protecting the border (and if necessary, applying force), over and above the effect of fusion with Trump's group of supporters or with the Republicans.

We also measured whether participants thought that mail bombings were an acceptable means to intimidate Trump's opponents, an issue that also involved violence in a different domain, was clearly illegal, but did not involve active personal participation. This aspect of the study was exploratory: Although Trump attacked some of the recipients of these bombs (https://www.newsweek.com/donald-trump-continues-attack-critics-mail-bombs-1190881), during the time of data collection, he strongly distanced himself from the events (https://www.wsj.com/articles/democrats-criticize-trumps-past-rhetoric-on-violence-after-bomb-scares-1540419853).

As predicted, in the first regression model, $F(3, 172) = 34.32$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .37$, 90% CI [.28, .47], only fusion with Trump significantly predicted a higher willingness to personally protect the border, $\beta = .44$, $p = .005$, 95% CI [.14, .73], and this effect was of medium to large size (all other *p*s > .199). However, in the second regression with support of the mail bombings as dependent variable, $F(3, 172) = 2.20$, $p = .090$, $R^2 = .04$, 90% CI [-.01, .08], none of the fusion variables statistically significantly predicted higher support (all *p*s > .518). Although all three fusion variables were weakly correlated with more support of the mail bombings in zero-order terms (see SI), support for the mail bombings was generally very low and skewed, possibly due to the fact that the bombings clearly violate legal and social standards, and that Trump strongly condemned the acts. Hence, it is also possible that the resulting limited variance in this response variable obscured a potential effect.

Discussion

In seven studies conducted over the course of the 2016 U.S. elections into 2019, fusion with Trump predicted Republican partisans' willingness to violently challenge elections and to persecute, with legal or authoritarian justifications, religious, immigrant and political out-groups.

Theoretically, the present research thus extends prior work on charismatic leaders and their personal qualities, social identification, and identity fusion in various ways. Our research demonstrated that fusion with a leader (in this case Trump) is distinct from identity fusion with a group (in this case his followers and political party) and has distinct consequences for extreme group behavior – in particular for the willingness to personally and actively engage in out-group violence, rather than for general support of political violence. We found these effects correlationally, longitudinally and experimentally, and also illuminated conditions that can facilitate fusion with a leader (e.g., relative deprivation). Finally, the present work demonstrated the broad and deep social impact that a leader's rhetoric can have, particularly among people highly fused with the leader, on the individual welfare of particular groups of people (e.g., immigrants and political opponents), and in defining what it acceptable and desirable actions taken by members of society.

Our results are consistent with a self-expansion perspective[14,16] and research within organizational psychology[17,18,27,28], and may elucidate dynamics of past and future leader-focused political movements, replicating them within controlled social psychological research. For instance, economic recessions and the resulting dissatisfaction of the population have often been viewed as antecedents of authoritarian political movements[44-46,61]. The findings from Study 3 suggest that Trump's continued emphasis on the relative deprivation of "ordinary American citizens" likely helped his election by increasing his followers' fusion with him, arguably in the promise of greater potential access to the power and resources under his control. Study 4 lends further support to this proposal, demonstrating longitudinally that fusion with Trump increased after his election that made him more powerful and hence a more attractive target to fuse with. As Haslam et al. (2010) concluded, "leadership is not vested in leaders alone, but rather results

from the contextual dynamics that create a sense of unity between them and their followers" (p. 94).

We acknowledge that our work focused on the effects of fusion with one particular leader, Donald Trump. We did so, theoretically, to triangulate the results of these initial studies on leader fusion using a range of empirical approaches and addressing various interpretive issues, and, practically, because it provides a timely and socially consequential context for understanding the dynamics and consequences of leader fusion. In future research, it is thus important to test the generalizability of our findings with other leaders, differing in relevant dimensions. For instance, given that the present research focused on the right of the political spectrum in the U.S., our findings can primarily be expected to generalize to fusion with leaders of Western right-wing political parties. Still, we believe that leader fusion may also occur in other types of populations, political movements and cultural contexts, and future research should address this. Also, the majority of participants in this research were White Republicans and we primarily assessed their willingness to persecute minority-group members. We focused on White participants because they by far make up Trump's primary group of supporters[34], are responsibly for about half of all hate crimes conducted in the U.S.[35], and are a readily available group in online panels. However, a particularly strong test of our relations would be if even Republicans with a minority-group background who show fusion with Trump would support the persecution of members of their own ethnic group.

In terms of testing our relationships with different political groups, some left-wing movements are also characterized by authoritarianism, dogmatism, and a willingness to violently enforce the group's agenda[62], and previous research shows that Leftists who fuse with groups they perceive as disadvantaged are willing to violently support them[7]. Because various leftist

movements have also nurtured strong leader cults (e.g., towards Stalin in the Soviet Union, or Mao in the People's Republic of China)[63,64], it would be of great interest to test whether fusion with Leftist political leaders also predicts partisans' willingness to engage in persecution of political opponents. From the perspective of research on identity fusion[4,7,12,13] and our current findings on leader fusion, we would hypothesize similar effects regardless of whether the leader represents the political left or right.

Future research might also productively consider the generalizability of our findings, for example to follower-leader relations in non-political contexts, and in terms of boundary conditions for leader fusion effects. With respect to context, for example, fusion with unethically-behaving leaders in non-political organizational contexts, such as the police, could lead to a greater willingness to cover up unethical or criminal police behavior (see [28] for evidence suggesting this). Conversely, one could ask what happens when a leader gets convicted for criminal behavior? On the one hand, provided that fusion with a person is motivated by a desire to enhance one's sense of efficacy[16], coming to perceive that a leader is incompetent might reduce fusion with the leader and ultimately decrease support for the leader's agenda. On the other hand, individuals who are highly fused with a leader might continue to strongly support a leader and the leader's agenda even when the leader is generally viewed as incompetent. Because they are accepting of a wider range of leader behavior, such followers may not fully recognize or acknowledge the leader's incompetence such that their fusion becomes more resistant to external events.

We acknowledge that most of our studies used data collected via Amazon Mechanical Turk. This type of data is generally believed to be reliable and more representative than the student samples that commonly have been utilized in psychological research[65,66]. Yet, parts of

the data collection (Studies 5, 6 and 7) took place during a controversy around the presence of bots and automated responses within the Mechanical Turk network. We used different strategies to ensure the quality of the data (see SI), and reliability estimates suggested the absence of automated responses, but of course we cannot fully rule out that some responses may have been generated by bots. It is also important to note that most of the studies presented here relied on non-representative samples, which limits the generalizability of their findings to the broader general population. We therefore conducted an additional study with a representative sample that replicated the general pattern of results observed across the studies. The findings with the representative sample give further credence to the external validity of our results. Furthermore, in most studies the majority of participants were women. However, if at all, this gender skewness would have resulted in conservative estimates of the effects reported here and worked against our hypothesis, given that men tend to be more prone to participate in acts of out-group violence and similar behavior[67,68]. Moreover, we successfully replicated our main findings in the gender-balanced representative sample of Study 2.

It has been suggested that the outcomes of feeling overlap with a leader (and groups) are moderated by the leader's values[27,69]. For instance, fusion with Obama, who generally held relatively liberal values towards immigration, likely would lead to less willingness to engage in violence against immigrants and possibly even willingness to help integrating them. One promising way to investigate such positive potential of leader fusion for intergroup relations may be to examine whether fusion with leaders with a clearly pro-social ideological orientation (e.g., the Dalai Lama) could engage followers in positive forms of extreme behavior (e.g., strong and costly pro-social altruism).

Finally, we emphasize that our findings should not be interpreted as condoning violent acts committed by followers who seek some benefit from associating with their leader. Indeed, it has been argued that the motivation to expand the self can be a conscious process, although this does not need to be the case[16]. Hence, partisan's motivation to fuse with leaders is likely at least in parts a choice that followers can make. As suggested by the reciprocal relationship between leader fusion and willingness to engage in violence in Study 4, those fusing with an extreme leader may also a priori have a certain mindset and behavioral inclinations that are ideologically aligned with those of the leader (cf. [7]). This fusion may then become a catalyst for violent behavioral tendencies, be they pro-social or anti-social and violent.

Methods

Study 1. This and the remaining studies were approved by the Institutional Review Board of the Department of Psychology at the University of Oslo, except for Study 2 that was approved by the Institutional Review Board of the Department of Psychology at Yale University. All studies were conducted in accordance to the rules and regulations of the American Psychologist Association. Informed consent was obtained from all participants before they took part in the studies. No participants were excluded and all conditions and measures are reported in each study. Statistical tests reported in all studies are two-sided. Data collection and analysis were not performed blind to the conditions of the experiments. In this and the remaining studies, data distributions were assumed to be normal but this was inspected visually rather than tested formally.

A power analysis in G*Power 3.1.9.2 indicated that 171 participants would warrant a 90% chance to observe a small to medium effect (f^2 = .10; α = .05) in regression-based analyses. Hence, we collected data from 205 White Republican partisans (M_{age} = 42.46, SD_{age} = 13.16; women = 57.1%) in September 2016 through Amazon Mechanical Turk. Participants responded

to a series of items representing, in random order, identification with Republicans, fusion with Republicans, fusion with Donald Trump, SDO, and RWA. Unless otherwise noted, in this and the remaining studies, responses were scored on scales ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*).

Social identification with Republicans was measured with a three-item scale[70] (e.g., "I identify with other Republicans"; $\alpha = .85$). This scale was chosen because it is a more direct measure of people's social identification than scales measuring combinations of social identification and its consequences (see, e.g., [71,72]), has been widely used in psychological research, and because it is very similar in content to measures of what is sometimes referred to as "partisan identity" (cf. [73]).

Fusion with Republicans and fusion with Trump were measured with the identity fusion scale[5]. This measure of fusion (with Republicans) included seven items (e.g., "I am one with Republicans"; $\alpha = .97$). We adapted this scale to measure fusion with Donald Trump, re-wording items to read, for example, "I am one with Donald Trump" ($\alpha = .97$). All participants completed both measures. In this and all remaining studies, factor analysis supported that fusion with Trump was distinct from fusion and identification with Republicans (see SI).

Social dominance orientation (SDO) was assessed with the validated short-form of the SDO-7 scale[38]. Participants rated eight items (e.g., "Some groups of people are simply inferior to other groups"; $\alpha = .87$) on 7-point scales (1 *strongly oppose* – 7 *strongly favor*). Right-wing authoritarianism (RWA) was measured with the 15-item scale (e.g., "Our country needs a powerful leader, in order to destroy the radical and immoral currents prevailing in society today"; $\alpha = .89$) developed by Zakrisson [74].

Participants were then randomly assigned to a condition in which they read about a law outlawing Islamic cultural organizations that was attributed to either "the Republicans" (n = 100) or "Donald Trump" (n = 105). In both conditions, participants were presented with the following persecution scenario developed by Altemeyer [36] for communists and "radicals," later applied in an immigration context by Thomsen, et al. [40]:

> Now suppose that [dependent on condition: the Republicans or Donald Trump] won the election and some time in the future passed a law outlawing Islamic cultural organizations in your country. [Dependent on condition: The Republicans or Donald Trump] then stated that the law would only be effective if it was vigorously enforced at the local level and appealed to every citizen to aid in the fight against these organizations.

Next, participants indicated how much they agreed with the following statements (please note that wordings differed dependent on condition, see squared brackets): "I would tell my friends and neighbors that it was a good law"; "I would tell the police about any Islamic cultural organizations that I knew"; "If asked by [the Republicans/Donald Trump], I would help hunt down and arrest members of Islamic cultural organizations"; "I would participate in attacks on the Islamic cultural headquarters organized by [the Republicans/Donald Trump]"; "I would support physical force to make members of Islamic cultural organizations reveal the identity of other members"; "I would support the execution of leaders of Islamic cultural organizations if [the Republicans/Donald Trump] insisted it was necessary to protect our country" (α = .92).

Originally, this scenario attributed the law to the "government" which is somewhat diffuse and leaves room for interpretation regarding the source of the law. For instance, to some the term may give the impression that a group of politicians that are part of a political apparatus

have passed the law, while others may primarily associate the government with the main political leader. This variation in interpretations may influence whether fusion with Republicans – a variable that operates at the group level – or fusion with Trump – a variable that operates at an interpersonal level – may emerge as the primary predictor. To limit this interpretational ambiguity, we randomized in the scenario (in this and all studies in which a similar scenario was used) whether the law originated from Trump or the Republican Party. As presented in the SI, this law attribution did not moderate any effects in any study and is therefore not reported here.

Study 2. This study was preregistered (https://osf.io/mxj8e/?view_only=f9e156a318324d33903906662206d482). We followed the same power analysis as in Study 1, but due the goal to collect a sample that was representative of the White U.S. population in terms of age, gender, income and education, we decided to collect a total of 350 participants, which would keep the margin of error at 5%. Qualtrics Panels, who was responsible for data collection, collected the data in April 2019 and provided a total of 385 White American participants (35 additional responses free of charge) with a Republican affiliation (M_{age} = 49.34, SD_{age} = 14.79; women = 50.1%).

We assessed participants' fusion with Donald Trump (α = .96), as well as fusion (α = .96) and identification with Republicans (α = .87), SDO (α = .77) and RWA (α = .73) as in Study 1. In addition, participants also completed the 4-item authoritarianism measure developed by Feldman and Stenner[41]. For this measure, participants were presented with four pairs of traits and each time asked to select the one that is most desirable for a child to have. Each pair contained one trait conceptualized by these authors to reflect authoritarianism (pair 1: independence or respect for elders; pair 2: obedience or self-reliance; pair 3: curiosity or good manners; pair 4:

being considerate or being well-behaved). As in the original study by Feldman and Stenner[41], participants could for each item choose "unsure" instead of selecting one of the two traits. We followed the exact scoring instructions by the authors, scoring authoritarian responses as 1, non-authoritarian responses as 0, and unsure as 0.5. The resulting scale had poor reliability ($\alpha = .41$). Finally, as in the previous study, participants indicated their willingness to engage in the persecution of Muslims ($\alpha = .93$).

Study 3. Because we used a novel experimental manipulation, we aimed to recruit more than 266 participants, which would provide a 90% chance to observe a small to medium effect ($f = .20$; $\alpha = .05$) in analyses of variance (ANOVA). Satisfying this criterion, 301 White American participants indicating a Republican political affiliation were pre-screened and recruited through Amazon MTurk in October 2016 ($M_{age} = 42.74$, $SD_{age} = 12.46$; 59.5% women).

Participants were randomly assigned to one of two conditions. In the realistic deprivation condition ($n = 151$), they were asked to share their experiences with four issues presented in random order using an open-response format: (a) "Some people say that ordinary American citizens are losing their jobs and suffering greatly because of it. Please describe the experiences of you and those around you"; (b) "Some people say that ordinary American citizens are suffering because of a drug epidemic brought on this country. Please describe if this is something you also see happening where you live"; (c) "Some people say that ordinary American citizens are becoming a minority in their own country that is changing before their eyes. Please describe your experiences with this"; (d) "Some people say that America is changing to the worse before their very eyes and that we need to make America great again. Please tell us what you think about this." In the control condition ($n = 150$), participants instead described their experiences (a)

shopping, (b) driving, (c) with the weather and (d) dining. In both conditions, participants were asked not to rush through the questions but to take at least a minute for each to complete them thoroughly. As a manipulation check, the text responses in the experimental condition were coded by judges (two research assistants with graduate degrees in social or cultural/community psychology) unaware of the manipulation as 0 (absence of relative deprivation) or 1 (mention of relative deprivation; see coding instructions and manipulation check results in SI).

Next, participants completed, in randomized order, the fusion with Republicans ($\alpha = .96$) and fusion with Trump ($\alpha = .98$) scales and, finally, a modified version of the persecution scale. Specifically, participants were asked to "suppose that [the Republicans/Donald Trump] said the election was rigged and asked all supporters to join organized protests." Participants then completed the six items from Studies 1 and 2 adapted to this new context (e.g., "I would support the execution of the leader of the other side if [the Republicans/Donald Trump] insisted it was necessary to protect our country" or "I would participate in attacks on the government if authorized by [the Republicans/Donald Trump]"; $\alpha = .90$).

Study 4. For this and the remaining studies, we used Amazon MTurk's built-in political affiliation selection criteria because our pre-screened pool of White Americans with a Republican political affiliation was exhausted. Because Amazon does not offer ethnicity as an additional selection filter, samples in this and the remaining studies are multi-ethnic but still majority-White.

As part of this study involved the estimation of an autoregressive model with nine manifest variables, we aimed to recruit 100 to 150 participants who completed each wave, following suggestions by Wang and Wang [75] and satisfying a 10/1 ratio between the number of

participants and observed variables[76]. To account for a possible attrition rate of up to 30% from T_1 to T_3, we planned to recruit approximately 200 participants at T_1. Accordingly, 194 Republicans were recruited via Amazon MTurk (M_{age} = 40.44, SD_{age} = 12.44; 61.3% women; 83.5% White/Caucasian) and completed the measures described below one week before Election Day 2016 (T_1). One day after Trump had been elected as president (T_2), 153 (78.9%), participants (M_{age} = 41.35, SD_{age} = 12.60; 60.1% women) completed the survey a second time, and 143 (73.1%) participants (M_{age} = 42.74, SD_{age} = 12.96; 62.1% women), a third time directly after Trump had ordered a ban of Muslim immigrants during his first week in office (T_3).

At each time point, the surveys consisted of the fusion with Republicans measure (α: T_1 = .96 / T_2 = .96 / T_3 = .97), fusion with Trump measure (α: T_1 = .97 / T_2 = .97 / T_3 = .98) and the persecution measure (α: T_1 = .94 / T_2 = .93 / T_3 = .93), which targeted immigrants generally (rather than Muslims specifically). Attrition analyses showed that participants did not statistically significantly differ on the study variables at T_1 depending on the number of waves they participated in (*ps* > .317). In each wave, the fusion with Trump and fusion with Republicans measures loaded on separate factors (see SI).

Study 5. Using Amazon MTurk's built-in political affiliation selection criteria, 176 Republicans (M_{age} = 43.19, SD_{age} = 12.76; 58.5% women; 89.8% White/Caucasian) were recruited in February 2019 based on the power analysis from Study 1. In addition to assessing their fusion with Trump (α = .97), fusion with the Republicans (α = .96), and social identification with the Republicans (α = .94), here we also measured personal identification[11] with him (α = .95). This personal identification was measured with three items (e.g., "I identify with Trump"; α = .95) adopted from Steffens, et al. [11]. As dependent variables, we included one outcome variable that is

representative of Trump's political perspectives and values and two measures that are rather representative of those of the Republicans.

First, participants read the same scenario as in the previous studies, this time framed toward "Iranian cultural organizations," and completed the same six items (α = .95). For consistency, as in the previous studies, we randomly varied whether the persecution law was passed by Trump (*n* = 88) or the Republican Party (*n* = 88).

Next, extreme conservative policy support was measured by asking participants to indicate on 7-point scales (1 *strongly oppose* – 7 *strongly favor*) their position on four issues: "Death penalty for abortion," "punish same-sex marriage," "outlaw labor unions," and "harsher drug laws" (α = .69).

Support for military interventions in the Middle East was measured by asking participants to rate their agreement with four statements such as "We should deploy ground troops to Syria to fight the Syrian regime" or "The U.S. military should maintain a strong presence in Iraq and Afghanistan" (α = .88).

Study 6. Again using Amazon MTurk's built-in political affiliation selection criteria, we recruited 171 Republicans (M_{age} = 43.18, SD_{age} = 12.64; 50.2% women; 84.8% White/Caucasian) in October 2018. We assessed participants' fusion with Trump (α = .97) as in the previous studies. In addition, participants completed the fusion scale this time framed toward the "group of Trump supporters" (e.g., "I am one with the group of Trump supporters"; α = .98). The scales were introduced as dealing with attitudes toward Trump (for the fusion with Trump measure), or attitudes toward the group of Trump supporters (for the fusion with Trump's supporters measure). Although both scales were highly correlated, $r(169) = .88$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [.84, .91],

a two-factorial solution, with each type of fusion items loading on separate factors, clearly outperformed a one-factorial solution (see SI). As dependent variables, we assessed participants' willingness to engage in ethnic persecution of immigrants in the U.S. as in Study 4 (α = .91). Consistent with the previous studies, we manipulated whether the law to do so was passed by Trump (*n* = 84) or the Republican Party (*n* = 87). Adopting a question from the Quinnipiac University National Poll [77], we also asked participants to respond to the following question on a scale ranging from -5 (*strongly oppose*) to +5 (*strongly support*):

> As you may know, some families seeking asylum from their home country cross the U.S. border illegally and then request asylum. In an attempt to discourage this, the Trump administration has been prosecuting the parents immediately, which means separating parents from their children. Do you support or oppose this policy?

Study 7. Again using Amazon MTurk's built-in political affiliation selection criteria, we collected a sample of 176 Republicans (M_{age} = 45.09, SD_{age} = 13.05; 53.4% women; 84.1% White/Caucasian) in the end of October 2018, meeting the power criterion from Study 1. We assessed three types of fusion measures in this study presented to participants in random order: fusion with Trump (α = .97), fusion with the Republicans (α = .96), and fusion with the group of Trump supporters (α = .98). The scales were introduced as dealing with attitudes toward Trump, toward the Republicans, or group of Trump supporters respectively. Although the scales were highly correlated, a three-factorial solution, with each type of fusion items loading on separate factors, outperformed a one-factorial and different two-factorial solutions (see SI). Having completed these independent variables, participants responded to two dependent outcomes presented in random order.

Before measuring willingness to protect the border from an immigrant caravan, participants read the following text:

> According to recent estimates, a caravan of about 7,000 migrants from Central America is currently headed toward the U.S. border. At the same time, reports indicate that further caravans are already forming and can be expected at the U.S. border soon. Now imagine that the U.S. border control agents were understaffed to handle the problem and relied on support by the general population.
>
> With this scenario in mind, please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with the following statements.

Next, they completed four items ($\alpha = .93$) scored on 7-point Likert scales ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*): "Given that funds were made available, I would be willing to volunteer to help the U.S. border control agents prevent the caravan from entering the U.S.," "As a volunteer, I would help arresting the organizers of the caravan," "I would be willing to personally use force to stop the immigrant caravan," and "If necessary, I would be willing to risk my life to protect the U.S. border."

Next, before assessing support of letter bombings, participants read the following: "As you may know, several potentially destructive devices were sent to prominent critics of President Trump including CNN. A couple of hours ago, a suspect was arrested. We are interested in your attitudes toward the events." Next, on 7-point Likert scales ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*), participants were asked to indicate their agreement with four items, "Although I don't condone the actions, I fully understand why some people send out such devices," "The actions are morally wrong in every possible way," (reversed item), "Actions like

this are important as they send an important political message to Trump's critics," and "In these times, such threats are a necessary means to silence the political opposition." After deleting the reverse-scored item due to low inter-item correlations (.25 - .33), the scale had satisfactory reliability ($\alpha = .85$).

Data Availability

The data for all studies presented in this research can be anonymously obtained at https://osf.io/mn273/?view_only=8d17df0542ac4f03b6673b5a3b039bca Please note that text written to open-ended prompts (i.e., the experimental manipulation) in Study 3 have been deleted to warrant participants' anonymity. The responses are available on request.

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Author Contributions

All authors designed the research. JRK collected and analyzed the data, created figures and tables, and drafted a first version of the manuscript. JFD and LT provided critical revisions.

Competing Interests

The authors declare no competing interests.