

# Dynamics of Asymmetric Conflict

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# Intergroup images mediate the relationships between government abuse, sociopolitical orientations, and political action

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## ABSTRACT

What factors impact how people mobilize against state human rights abuses? Drawing on Image Theory, we examine how perceptions of an out-group, government abuse, and sociopolitical orientations impact political action. Using an online survey-embedded experiment with a sample of 2,932 U.S. adults, we manipulated two factors: (1) the level of government abuse and (2) the risk of punishment for taking action against the state, while also including social dominance orientation (SDO) and right-wing authoritarianism (RWA) as covariates. Participants indicated their propensity to engage in and justify both protest and violence. Participants rated the out-group as oppressive and evil. State abuse of human rights was associated with more oppressive and evil out-group images. Oppressive out-group images increased protest engagement and justification, whereas evil out-group images increased violence engagement and justification. Abuse increased all forms of action and justifications for them. Oppressive and evil images mediated many of the relationships between abuse, SDO, and RWA on one hand and political action on the other.




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In the context of contentious politics, does it matter how people view their opponents? Specifically, how do images of one's opponent lead to protest and even violence? Further, how do images of one's opponents help explain these outcomes? A diverse range of perspectives and approaches to the general study of contentious politics have yielded some important insights on these questions. Both qualitative (Horgan, 2004; Irons, 1998; Victoroff, 2005) and quantitative individual-level research has found that state abuse of human rights, such as discrimination, repression, and physical harm, influences mobilization (Chong, Liu, & Zhang, 2016; Opp, 1988; Shi, Hao, Saeri, & Cui, 2015; Simon & Klandermans, 2001; Van Stekelenburg, Klandermans, & Van Dijk, 2011; Verhulst & Walgrave, 2009) – in particular, willingness to engage in and justify both violent and non-

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violent action (Lemieux & Asal, 2010). Oppression and discrimination are among the potential motivators of support for (or opposition to) political action (Bloom, 2005; Crenshaw, 1981; Gurr, 2000; Klandermans, 1997; Ross, 1993; Van Zomeren, Postmes, & Spears, 2008).

While these government behaviors have received more extensive empirical investigation, perception of grievances based in humiliation – which is often associated with the intergroup perceptions that accompany occupation – have also been noted as a salient factor in suicide terrorism (McCauley, 2004; Pape, 2006). This suggests that – beyond the actions that people face from the government – perceptions of a political out-group may impact engagement in and justification for political action. To motivate action and imbue support, is it important that the enemy to be addressed (or targeted) through contentious action is depicted and perceived as an *oppressive* or *evil* force? These images are often at the root of the debate about which types of actions can be taken to address abuse from the government, as well as the level of justification for such actions.

In the present study, we draw on psychological research exploring the consequences of intergroup images (Alexander, Brewer, & Hermann, 1999; Alexander, Brewer, & Livingston, 2005) to examine the impact that said images have on various forms of political action in response to various government human right abuses. This body of work developed out of a longstanding literature in international relations on image theory (Boulding, 1956; Cottam, 1977) that posits systematic relationships between the structure of intergroup relations and how groups perceive one another. In the present study, we look at how abuse in the form of comprised discrimination, repression, and physical harm perpetrated by an ethnic majority group towards an ethnic minority group – along with the risk of mobilization and individual-level sociopolitical orientations – predict perceptions of that majority ethnic group as *oppressive* or *evil*. We then examine how these images relate to support and justification for different forms of political action. Finally, putting these pieces together, we explore how individuals' views of a majority ethnic group as oppressive or evil may mediate the relationship between abuses and sociopolitical orientations (on one hand) and political action (on the other).

We theorize that perceptions of the majority out-group's image as oppressive and evil mediate the effects of human rights abuses and sociopolitical orientations in distinct ways, despite the fact that both images are negatively valenced. The key distinction between an oppressive group and an evil group is that oppression is a policy choice of abuse that a group adopts and could in principle be reversed through political action, whereas evil reflects profound immorality that is immutable. Perceptions of the majority out-group as oppressive and evil are not mutually exclusive. An oppressive image should lead to greater support for protest, which pressures the out-group to change its policies. Evil, in contrast, is a more intrinsic characteristic of a group that is less subject to influence by opponents' political actions. This should lead to more support for violence aimed at weakening or destroying the majority out-group.

## **Intergroup images and their antecedents**

The psychological research on intergroup images that we draw on in the present study suggests that groups view each other through the lens of generalized group schemas, or "images" (Alexander et al., 1999; Alexander et al., 2005; Alexander, Levin, & Henry, 2005;

see also Herrmann, 1985). These images incorporate assumptions about various groups' motives and stereotypical characteristics, and they influence members' assessment of what kinds of intergroup actions are warranted and necessary (Alexander et al., 2005). The content of these images is thought to derive from structural features of relations between groups, such as the extent to which they are thought to share goals or values, how powerful they are relative to one another, and their level of status. In the context of contentious politics, such images have a particular relevance for what kinds of actions people choose to engage in or to support. Perceptions of the out-group can impact the type of action taken to maximize the likelihood of a desired outcome. This can take shape in terms of direct action, but also in the context of understanding the increase or decrease in support that non-violent and violent courses of action receive. In short, the way that people perceive their out-group may influence the type of collective action they are willing to take against that group.

In this vein, Marsella (2005) notes that culture is often central to conflict, as culture influences how people construct reality. Part of the process of constructing reality and developing group images comes from projecting values onto groups. Engaging in violent conflict with a group would likely not be a desirable option if the out-group is perceived as having the same values as the in-group. Groups that share similar values are presumably groups that can reason with and empathize with one another. The values that are projected onto groups represent how the projector views that group's goals and behaviors, which are also perceived as representative of the nature of the group (Schwartz & Struch, 1989). Marsella's (2005) examples of culturally constructed perceptions that can result in violent conflict include: the perception that an out-group is evil or threatening; that an in-group is being unfairly humiliated or punished; that an in-group has no legitimate recourse to remediate government abuse; that an in-group is "good" and therefore is justified in engaging in violent action on behalf of its goals; and that an in-group has the social and military support to engage in violent conflict. These factors can create a feedback loop that results in conflict that is not only violent, but also prolonged.

We are specifically interested in images that have relevance both for engaging in these actions and justifying them against the out-group (Leudar, Marsland, & Nekvapil, 2004; see also Cuddy, Fiske, & Glick, 2008). Among those who are involved in violent or terroristic political action, there is a recurrent theme: they frequently label the out-group target of their attacks as being *oppressive* and *evil* (i.e., Bin Laden's 1996 declaration of jihad; Lawrence, 2005). Moreover, the negative characteristics ascribed to out-group members are often portrayed as fixed and immutable. This phenomenon has been described in the context of scapegoating and essentializing (Glick, 2002) processes which make it more feasible to justify, or at the very least to come to terms with using, violence (Staub, 1990). We describe these images and their significance in greater detail below.

### ***The "oppressive" image***

Perceptions rely heavily on stereotyping both the in-group and the out-group. As noted above, previous work suggests that inter-group stereotypes are both the result of and influenced by perceived intergroup competition, and the relative power and status of the groups involved (Alexander et al., 2005a).<sup>1</sup> The images create perceptions that have an

influence on how groups approach intergroup interactions. The oppressive group image, referred to as the “imperialist” image, is described as follows (Alexander et al., 2005):

“Imperialist image, generated when the in-group perceives itself as weaker and lower in cultural status and sophistication than a threatening out-group. Rather than directly attacking the out-group to deal with the goal incompatibility (not a viable option given the out-group’s strength), the in-group responds with indirect resistance, sabotage, and acts of revolt or rebellion. Here, the out-group is seen as arrogant, paternalistic, controlling, and exploitative and includes the belief that some of one’s own in-group members have sold out to the out-group and have allowed themselves to be used as pawns of the imperialists” (2005, p. 783).

Thus, perceptions of the outgroup as imperialist may motivate in-group members to resist and rebel. This does not necessarily result in violent conflict, but often the reaction the image inspires can cause the out-group to oppress the in-group more, causing a cycle of resistance and oppression.

### ***The “evil” image***

Perceived differences in group values make it easier to dehumanize and demonize out-groups (Schwartz & Struch, 1989). If a group is demonized and dehumanized, then rules about fairness and how to treat others no longer apply to that group (Opatow, 1995; see also Kteily, Bruneau, Waytz, & Cotterill, 2015). Eicher, Pratto, and Wilhelm (2013) examined how value projection influences perceptions of conflict, and found some evidence that people tended to project their own values onto groups that they perceived as allies, although not in all cases. Further, while allies might not hold all the same values, enemies were perceived as holding none of the same values as the participants’ groups and the wider this difference in values is, the more other groups are seen as inhuman or evil (Eicher et al., 2013). To quote Eicher et al. (2013, p. 139) “This complete perceived value incompatibility is consistent with the enemy image which serves to demonize, dehumanize, and morally exclude members of the opposing group.” This relationship between perceived values and group relations was further supported by the fact that participants assigned most values to neutral groups about equally (Eicher et al., 2013).

## **Government abuse and intergroup images**

### ***The role of government abuse***

Our first aim is to examine how these negative out-group images might be rooted in the nature of government abuse of human rights – specifically discriminatory, repressive, and physically harmful actions – towards marginalized groups. Hostile actions towards a marginalized group that seem reasonable or deserved to a member of a dominant group may be insufferable and unfair to a member of the marginalized group, and an unwillingness or inability to reconcile these perspectives can lead to non-violent and violent conflict. Grievances rooted in abuse by the state of fundamental human rights have long been seen as an important cause for both non-violent and violent forms of political action. Three types of abuses have been identified as especially strong precursors of mobilization on the part of marginalized groups: discrimination, repression, and

physical harm (Kearns, Asal, Walsh, Federico, & Lemieux, 2018). Discrimination refers to inequitable treatment based on group membership, in particular denial of the same level access to social goods such as housing and employment that other groups enjoy (Pager & Shepherd, 2008). Repression refers to denial of democratic political rights, particularly in the form of legitimate means of registering one's political concerns. These include the absence of fair elections or the ability to engage in free political speech. Lastly, physical harm refers to violent action or threats of violent action deployed by the authorities against individuals from marginalized groups, which can further mobilization by virtue of the moral opprobrium they generate and the extent to which they help members of marginalized groups overcome the collective action problem and resist more strongly (Kalyvas & Kocher, 2007; Keck & Sikkink, 2014). For the ease of readability, we collectively refer to government behavior in the form of discrimination, repression, and physical harm as *abuse* in this paper.

The importance of government abuse in generating conflict is supported by state-level theoretical work (Gurr, 2015; McAdam, Tarrow, & Tilly, 2001; Tarrow, 2011), qualitative research (Tarrow, 2011), and quantitative research (Collier & Hoeffler, 2004; Fearon & Laitin, 2003). At the individual level, qualitative (Horgan, 2004; Irons, 1998; Victoroff, 2005) and quantitative work (Cronin & Smith, 2011; Klandermans, 1997; Olson, Roesesc, Meen, & Robertson, 1995; Opp, 1988; see also Simon & Klandermans, 2001; Van Zomeren et al., 2008; Van Zomeren, Kutlaca, & Turner-Zwinkels, 2018) also supports these findings. Previous experimental work confirms these findings as well (see Lemieux & Asal, 2010 for a full discussion). Even a cursory review of terrorists' statements and sayings of provide key illustrations of the concept of perceived abuse as a motivating factor for violence.

Extant literature suggests that abuse by the state should be one factor promoting political mobilization. Yet we also know that abuse alone does not lead to political action: some people take action when faced with abuse, while others do not. Even individuals who may be inclined to act do not always do so. We first investigate if the level of abuse increases the likelihood that a person will take action when they also view the out-group in a certain way. Images put forth about the enemy out-group serve to create compelling messages both to motivate the use of violence against civilians and targets of symbolic value and to justify such attacks (Keppel, Milelli, & Ghazaleh, 2008; Lawrence, 2005). These perceptions of the out-group's image may impact whether or not action is taken and the form of action deemed most appropriate. We expect that – in the face of government abuse – how people respond will be mediated by their view of the out-group. Specifically, we expect that:

**H1.** State abuse of human rights will increase the tendency for those who identify with a marginalized in-group to see the out-group in control of government as both **oppressive** and **evil**.

### Intergroup images and action

As noted previously, different intergroup images are likely to lead to different sorts of political action. Depending on how members of one group view members of another, it may be possible to predict a range of attitudinal and possibly behavioral responses. This

point is made more explicitly in the context of the study of intergroup emotions (Mackie, Devos, & Smith, 2000). In the present context, we expect that perceptions of the out-group's image as oppressive and evil will predict various forms of political action against the out-group and/or its regime.

On one hand, viewing the out-group's image as oppressive is most clearly linked to concrete government actions in particular circumstances. Governments (even those controlled by political opponents) are not always abusive. Thus, it should be possible to compel an abusive government to change its policies via collective action from below. Protest is less of a mortal threat to such governments but it does serve to pressure them. On the other hand, out-groups (and out-group regimes) that are perceived to be evil may be seen as less malleable. Whereas abuse is a government behavior pertains more closely to concrete regime actions, evil is more likely to be seen as an essential, stable characteristic of the out-group. If so, then those who identify with a marginalized in-group are unlikely to believe that the out-group and its regime can change. Attempting to pressure them to act differently, as with conventional protests, is less likely to be seen as effective; ultimately, they may be thought to respond only to violent, mortal threats. In short, perceptions that the out-group is oppressive or evil whereas the marginalized in-group is good and capable of fighting back, are strong motivators for both violent and non-violent conflict.

### Images as mediators of government abuse on action

Thus far, we have argued (1) that individuals who identify with a marginalized group that faces government abuse should hold stronger perceptions of the out-group's image as oppressive and evil; and (2) that those who hold perceptions of the out-group's image as oppressive and evil will be more inclined to political action. Together, these predictions also imply that group images may serve as a pathway through which state abuses of human rights relate to political action. That is, perceiving out-group in control of the state in a specific way (oppressive and evil) may serve as mediator. As noted previously, extant work suggests that experiencing government abuse is associated with greater support for political action. According to our argument, these relationships may be accounted for by the fact that individuals who experience government abuse are more likely to hold negative images of the controlling out-group that encourage resistance. To examine these possibilities, we offer the following mediational hypothesis:

**H2.** The relationship between government abuse and political actions will be mediated by images of the out-group in control of government as **oppressive** and **evil**.

Finally, in addition to examining the role of government abuse, we also include two individual-level sociopolitical orientations that may predict the images attributed to the out-group as covariates. Here, we ground our thinking in the dual-process model of ideology and intergroup attitudes (Duckitt, 2001; Duckitt & Sibley, 2010), which suggests that two general sociopolitical orientations are especially important to intergroup relations. These orientations are *social dominance orientation* (SDO) and *right-wing authoritarianism* (RWA). On one hand, SDO reflects a general preference for hierarchy and inequality among groups (Ho et al., 2015; Sidanius & Pratto, 2001). On the other hand, RWA reflects a broad preference for conventional values, deference to authority, and hostility towards to culturally marginal

groups (Altemeyer, 1988; Altemeyer & Altemeyer, 1996). Whereas psychological research suggests that SDO reflects a desire for power, a dispositional lack of empathy (especially for the vulnerable and powerless; Lucas & Kteily, 2018), and a competitive view of the world, RWA appears to be rooted in a lack of openness, an inclination towards conformity, and a tendency to see the world as full of danger (Duckitt & Sibley, 2010).

Both constructs reliably predict intergroup attitudes – albeit in different ways, as the dual-process model would suggest. Among other things, SDO is associated with positive views of powerful groups at the top of existing social hierarchies (Sidanius & Pratto, 2001). RWA, in turn, is associated with positive views of groups that are seen as a worthy of cultural deference, due to their status as the culturally prototypical group in a particular society or their traditional control of positions of influence (Altemeyer & Altemeyer, 1996).

Consistent with this, recent studies indicate that both variables are associated with reduced support for collective action directed against majority out-groups or towards political ends that might threaten the power of dominant groups (Cameron & Nickerson, 2009; Kearns et al., 2018; Lemieux & Asal, 2010). Together, these features of SDO and RWA suggest that individuals high in either variable should be less inclined to see the majority out-group as oppressive or evil and that any negative relationships between SDO and RWA and political action will be mediated by weaker perceptions of the out-group in control of government as oppressive and evil.

## Sample

We conducted a general population survey-embedded experiment with participants recruited from Zogby International's online panel, which provides a sample of the adult population of the United States. Since we are testing theory in general, a strength of using a US sample is that participants are less likely to see the vignettes as reflecting their *own* lived experience. In contrast, conducting such a study in a country that experiences high levels of government abuses of human rights might lead to a concern that such government behaviour, rather than the manipulations in our experimental treatments, influence the results as was the case in a similar design with samples from Egypt and Morocco (Lemieux, Kearns, Asal & Walsh, 2017). It is important to note, however, that members of racial and ethnic minority groups in the US have and do experience both state-sanctioned abuses as well as discrimination similar to that described in our study, which we discuss and address in more detail below.

There were a total of 2,932 participants, ranging from 18 to 96 years of age ( $M = 54$ ). The number of women who participated in the study was 1,052 (36%), and 1,877 men participated (64%), while 3 participants did not provide information about their gender. Most of the participants were White (2,259), followed by Hispanic (239), Black (181), Asian (78), other (160), and no answer (15). All participants responded to an email invitation sent by Zogby International, which contained a statement of informed consent and a link to the current study.

## Research design

This project's aims are to: (1) explain how abuse by a majority out-group government predicts perceptions that the out-group is oppressive and/or evil; (2) examine how these images relate to views of different types of political action; and, (3) explore how views of



the majority group as oppressive or evil mediate the relationships between government abuse political action. The online study included both measured and manipulated variables. We measured the following: demographic variables, a 16-item measure of social dominance orientation (Pratto, Sidanius, Stallworth, & Malle, 1994; Sidanius & Pratto, 2001), and a 30-item measure of right-wing authoritarianism ( $\alpha = .96$ ; Altemeyer & Altemeyer, 1996, p. 1998).

For the manipulated variables, participants were asked to assume a first-person perspective as they read one of four fictional vignettes describing their experience as a member of a marginalized ethnic minority group called the Estamese, in a region called Bucharastan. Thus, in the study scenario, participants were induced to identify with a marginalized in-group, in opposition to an out-group in control of the government. The region and groups are fictional in order to prevent unintentionally activating specific ethnic or geographical identities in participants. The vignettes systematically varied: (a) the levels of government abuse and (b) risk of punishment by the majority group, thus creating a  $2 \times 2$  experimental design. While we derive specific expectations about the role of government abuse on action, research suggests that the impact of government abuse on political action is often moderated by the perceived *risk of punishment* by the regime (Tilly, 1978). When in-group members expect that the authorities will respond to protest or violence with violence targeted specifically at those most suspected of anti-regime activity, they are less likely to take action, even in the presence of government abuses (Kearns et al., 2018; see also Van Dyke, 2003). Given the documented role of perceived risk in shaping political action, we consider it in the present study. The impact of risk on perceptions of the out-group's images may be somewhat different from their effects on protest. Though perceived risk of punishment may tamp down protest and violence and dull the impact of perceived grievances from abuse on the latter, it is not likely to shift views of the out-group in a more positive, regime-accepting direction and it is not likely to attenuate the relationship between abuse from the state itself and images. Thus, we manipulated risk of punishment and treat this as a covariate.

The experimental vignettes presented Bucharastan as an ethnically divided society, where the Estamese are weaker and historically discriminated-against by the dominant ethnic group, the Buchari. The vignettes provide the basis for the current  $2 \times 2$  experimental design in which level of abuse (low or high; determined by the extent of discrimination and harm that is portrayed) and level of personal risk (low or high; determined by the ability to participate in political action with varying level of consequence and reprisal) are manipulated. Abuses come from both the agents of the state and members of the majority out-group more broadly to signal that the government is coterminous with the majority out-group. The nature of the abuses were intended to be inclusive of both group-based elements and personal experience as portrayed in the vignette; and it was intended to be pervasive. We intended to provide as much of a sense of both mundane and experimental realism as is possible using a vignette, which was crafted to provide a historical context that accounts for, and situates, the current experience of abuses. The conditions here mirror those that have been shown to experimentally manipulate (a) level of government abuse and (b) risk in our related research (Lemieux et al., 2017; Kearns, 2018).<sup>2</sup> The texts of the vignette treatments are reproduced in the appendix.

The vignette describes the reader as being a member of the Estamese minority group who is approached by two friends: one asking the participant to engage in a peaceful protest and another asking the participant to participate in a planned terrorist attack. After reading the vignette, participants completed measures about taking action as requested in the vignette. Participants were asked “which type of political action would you choose to engage in?” where were: participating in a protest, participating in an explosive attack, or neither action. Participants also indicated how justified each form of action was with two questions measured on 7-point Likert scales: “To what extent is Dalig justified in organizing the protest?” and “To what extent is Vadan justified in organizing the attack against the student union?” In the current paper, choice of action and level of justification serve as our dependent variables.

Some participants may have similar lived experiences to those described in our vignettes, while others may not. Participants who are themselves members of a racial or ethnic minority group identified more strongly with the Estamese ( $t(2930) = -8.16$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) than non-minority participants, though there is no difference in identification with the Buchari ( $t(2930) = 0.06$ ,  $p = 0.95$ ) between minority and non-minority participants. Random assignment to treatment assumes that participants’ experiences are evenly distributed across condition. As a robustness check, we also estimate models reported in text to include a binary indicator for whether or not the participant is a member of a racial/ethnic minority group (see footnote 4 and appendix). To verify that participants did in fact identify with the marginalized in-group (i.e., the Estamese), we asked about participants’ level of identification with both the Estamese and the Buchari using 7-point scales where higher scores mean greater identification. Overall, participants identified more with the Estamese ( $M = 3.43$ ;  $SD = 2.01$ ) than the Buchari ( $M = 2.29$ ;  $SD = 1.46$ ), ( $t(2931) = 29.25$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). Further, Cohen’s effect size ( $d = 0.54$ ) suggests moderate practical significance. This also holds across conditions.

Using a series of descriptive adjectives derived from previous work on intergroup images (e.g., Alexander et al., 2005), our final measures asked participants to rate the extent to which each word was representative of the out-group Buchari people. Based on insights derived from Image Theory, we created 7-point scales that represented images for the following characteristics: Oppressive ( $\alpha = 0.88$ ; 5 items include powerful, prejudiced, discriminatory, hostile, and privileged) and Evil ( $\alpha = 0.85$ ; 4 items include evil, hateful, cruel, and cunning). For each participant, scores for each image were calculated by taking the average across items.<sup>3</sup>

## Data analysis

Table 1 presents descriptive statistics for the key variables in our analysis pooled across the four experimental conditions. Of particular note is the skewness of the dependent variables. Participants generally indicated more willingness to engage in and justify protest. In contrast, fewer respondents viewed the attack advocated in the vignette as justified. These distributions are consistent with earlier survey experiments, which typically find that individuals are more willing to engage in protest than political violence (Kearns et al., 2018; Lemieux & Asal, 2010). Table 2 presents a matrix of correlations among variables.

**Table 1.** Descriptive statistics.

Variable	Observations	Mean	SD	Minimum	Maximum
<b>Dependent Variables</b>					
Action: Protest	2932	73.1%			
Action: Attack	2932	2.5%			
Action: None	2932	24.4%			
Protest Justification	2932	5.42	1.86	1	7
Attack Justification	2932	2.29	1.77	1	7
<b>Independent Variables</b>					
Oppressive	2932	3.96	1.66	1	7
Evil	2932	3.13	1.56	1	7
SDO	2932	2.70	1.08	1	7
RWA	2932	3.68	1.40	1	7

Higher scores indicate greater level of agreement. For Action options, the percentage of participants who preferred each action is shown.

**Table 2.** Correlations between variables.

	Action: Protest	Action: Attack	Action: None	Protest Justification	Attack Justification	Oppressive	Evil	SDO	RWA
Action: Protest	1.00								
Action: Attack	–	1.00							
Action: None	–	–	1.00						
Protest Justification	0.30	–0.01	–0.31	1.00					
Attack Justification	–0.14	0.28	0.04	0.01	1.00				
Oppressive	0.17	0.02	–0.19	0.14	0.08	1.00			
Evil	0.06	0.05	–0.08	0.06	0.16	0.81	1.00		
SDO	–0.29	0.08	0.28	–0.21	–0.03	–0.16	–0.07	1.00	
RWA	–0.33	0.02	0.34s	–0.25	–0.09	–0.14	–0.02	0.60	1.00

Note: Point-biserial correlations presented between the dichotomous outcome variables and continuous predictor variables.

### **Factors that impact image of the majority out-group**

Our first set of analyses test **H1** by examining the extent to which perceptions of the majority out-group’s image relate to the treatments in the vignettes.<sup>4</sup> It is possible that, for example, a vignette that describes abuse from the majority out-group government influences participants’ images of the government. To test this, we estimate a series of ordinary least square models where the dependent variables are the extent to which a person views the majority out-group as both oppressive and evil.<sup>5</sup> Results on [Table 3](#) show that both level of government abuse and the sociopolitical orientation covariates predict how participants view the majority out-group. As expected in **H1**, participants assigned to the high government abuse condition are more likely to view the out-group as both oppressive and evil. In contrast, participants with higher SDO and higher RWA scores tend to have more positive views of the majority group, viewing them as less oppressive. Participants with higher SDO also viewed the out-group as less evil. Across all models, greater risk of punishment is also associated with viewing the out-group as more oppressive and evil. The interaction between abuse and risk, however, failed to reach significance in either case. Taken together, results suggest that the manipulations of both abuse and risk succeeded in systematically varying participants’ perceptions of the majority out-group’s images, and that individual preferences also impact images.

**Table 3.** Images of the majority group.

	Oppressive		Evil	
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Government Abuse	0.69*** [0.34] (0.06)	0.67*** [0.34] (0.08)	0.76*** [0.38] (0.06)	0.73*** [0.37] (0.08)
Risk	0.19** [0.09] (0.06)	0.18* [0.09] (0.08)	0.20*** [0.10] (0.06)	0.18* [0.09] (0.08)
Government Abuse x Risk		0.03 [0.01] (0.12)		0.05 [0.02] (0.11)
SDO	-0.18*** [-0.19] (0.03)	-0.18*** [-0.19] (0.03)	-0.14*** [-0.15] (0.03)	-0.14*** [-0.15] (0.03)
RWA	-0.08** [-0.11] (0.03)	-0.08** [-0.11] (0.03)	0.05 [0.07] (0.03)	0.05 [0.07] (0.03)
N	2,932	2,932	2,932	2,932

Ordinary least squares regression models.

Coefficients are presented with robust standard errors in parentheses. X-standardized coefficients in brackets to allow for comparison of the relative impact of each variable.

\*p < 0.05. \*\*p < 0.01. \*\*\*p < 0.001.

### ***Factors that impact justification for and willingness to engage in political action***

Next, we look at how the experimental treatments impact justification for and willingness to engage in both protest and violence or choose to not act, again including the individual sociopolitical orientations as covariates. We estimate a series of ordinary least squares (for justifications) and logistic (for actions) regression models as shown in Table 4.<sup>6</sup> Participants in the high abuse condition are more likely to justify and state that they would engage in both protest and violence, and were less likely to say that would take no action. Risk, in contrast, does not impact justification for or engagement (or lack thereof) in protest and violence. Similarly, the interaction between abuse and risk is not significant in any model. Moreover, participants with higher SDO scores are less likely to justify or engage in protest and are more likely to either engage in violence or no action. Participants with higher RWA scores are less likely to justify either form of action or engage in protest, and are more likely to take no action. In short, these results show that manipulated context (level of abuse) impacts support for and willingness to engage in non-violent and violent action.<sup>7</sup>

More importantly, we examine how views of the majority out-group impact justification for and willingness to engage in both protest and violence, or lack of willingness to take action. As shown on Table 5, participants who view the out-group as more oppressive are more likely to justify and engage in protest, but less likely to either justify violence or take no action. In contrast, those who view the majority group as more evil are less likely to justify or engage in protest, but are more likely to justify and engage in violence and more likely to take no action. In short, how a person views the majority group (oppressive or evil) impacts support for and willingness to engage in non-violent and violent action.



**Table 4. How treatments and sociopolitical preferences impact justification for and willingness to engage in protest or violence or to engage in no action.**

	Protest Justification		Protest Action		Attack Justification		Attack Action		No Action	
	Model 5	Model 6	Model 7	Model 8	Model 9	Model 10	Model 11	Model 12	Model 13	Model 14
Government Abuse	0.50*** [0.25] (0.07)	0.49*** [0.25] (0.09)	1.37*** [0.16] (0.12)	1.40** [0.17] (0.18)	0.65*** [0.33] (0.06)	0.69*** [0.35] (0.09)	2.44** [0.45] (0.63)	2.66** [0.49] (0.93)	0.62*** [-0.24] (0.06)	0.59*** [-0.26] (0.08)
Risk	-0.003 [-0.002] (0.07)	-0.02 [-0.008] (0.09)	1.00 [-0.001] (0.09)	1.02 [0.008] (0.12)	-0.04 [-0.02] (0.06)	0.002 [0.001] (0.08)	0.74 [-0.15] (0.18)	0.85 [-0.08] (0.36)	1.05 [0.02] (0.10)	0.99 [-0.001] (0.12)
Government Abuse x Risk	0.03 [0.01] (0.13)	0.03 [0.02] (0.17)	0.96 [-0.02] (0.17)	0.96 [-0.02] (0.17)	0.05 [0.06] (0.13)	-0.08 [-0.04] (0.13)	0.82 [-0.09] (0.42)	0.82 [-0.09] (0.42)	1.05 [0.02] (0.21)	1.12 [0.05] (0.21)
SDO	-0.17*** [-0.18] (0.04)	-0.17*** [-0.18] (0.04)	0.72*** [-0.35] (0.04)	0.72*** [-0.35] (0.04)	0.05 [0.06] (0.04)	0.05 [0.06] (0.04)	1.71*** [0.58] (0.23)	1.71*** [0.58] (0.23)	1.31*** [0.29] (0.07)	1.31*** [0.29] (0.07)
RWA	-0.25*** [-0.35] (0.03)	-0.25*** [-0.35] (0.03)	0.64*** [-0.62] (0.03)	0.64*** [-0.62] (0.03)	-0.14*** [-0.19] (0.03)	-0.14*** [-0.19] (0.03)	0.85 [-0.22] (0.10)	0.85 [-0.22] (0.10)	1.65*** [0.70] (0.07)	1.65*** [0.70] (0.07)
N	2,932	2,932	2,932	2,932	2,932	2,932	2,932	2,932	2,932	2,932

Models 5, 6, 9, and 10 estimated with ordinary least squares regression. Models 7, 8, 11, 12, 13, and 14 estimated with logistic regression with odds ratios presented. Coefficients are presented with robust standard errors in parentheses. X-standardized coefficients in brackets to allow for comparison of the relative impact of each variable. \*p < 0.05. \*\*p < 0.01. \*\*\*p < 0.001.

**Table 5.** How group image impacts impact justification for and willingness to engage in protest or violence or to engage in no action.

	Protest Justification	Protest Action	Attack Justification	Attack Action	No Action
	Model 15	Model 16	Model 17	Model 18	Model 19
Oppressive	0.31*** [0.51] (0.03)	1.70*** [0.88] (0.09)	-0.15*** [-0.25] (0.03)	0.79 [-0.40] (0.12)	0.59*** [-0.88] (0.03)
Evil	-0.19*** [-0.30] (0.04)	0.69*** [-0.58] (0.04)	0.31*** [0.49] (0.04)	1.52** [0.65] (0.24)	1.40*** [0.53] (0.07)
N	2,932	2,932	2,932	2,932	2,932

Models 15 and 17 with ordinary least squares regression. Models 16, 18, and 19 estimated with logistic regression with odds ratios presented.

Coefficients are presented with robust standard errors in parentheses. X-standardized coefficients in brackets to allow for comparison of the relative impact of each variable.

\* $p < 0.05$ . \*\* $p < 0.01$ . \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ .

### ***How group image mediates the impact of government abuse***

Thus far, results show that the experimental treatments impact how they view the majority out-group. Further, both treatments impact justification for and willingness to engage in both non-violent and violent political action. We now test **H2** by examining whether perceptions of the out-group's image as oppressive and evil mediate the relationships between abuse and the outcome variables.<sup>8</sup> We also examine the indirect effects of the two individual sociopolitical covariates (SDO and RWA). Results of these models are presented in [Table 6](#) through 10. Bias-corrected confidence intervals were estimated with bootstrapping with residual resampling.<sup>9</sup>

For each potential indirect, we estimate two models. The first regresses the mediator (oppressive or evil) on the independent variable (abuse or one of the sociopolitical covariates). The second regresses one of the dependent variables on both the independent variable and the mediator. Three conditions must hold to find significant mediation. First, the independent variable (abuse or one of the covariates) in the first model should have a significant relationship with the mediating variable (oppressive or evil image). Second, this mediator should have a significant relationship with the dependent variable in the second model. Third, the average causal mediation effect (ACME) should be different from zero. The ACME indicates the statistical effect of the independent variable on the dependent variable that operates through the mediating variable. Mediation effects were only tested for relationships that meet these criteria.

[Table 6](#) shows how perceptions of the out-group's image mediate the respective impacts of abuse and the sociopolitical covariates on protest justification. Viewing the majority out-group as more oppressive partially mediates the effects of abuse (as well as SDO and RWA) on protest justification. However, seeing the majority out-group as more evil does not mediate the relationship between abuse and protest justification, though it does partially mediate the relationship between SDO and protest justification.

We next examine how perceptions of the out-group's image mediates the impact of abuse and the covariates on willingness to engage in protest, as shown in [Table 7](#). Seeing the majority out-group as more oppressive fully mediates the effect of abuse on willingness to protest. Moreover, it partially mediates the effects of SDO and RWA on protest.

**Table 6.** Mediation analysis results for protest justification.

	Mediator: Oppressive			Mediator: Evil	
	SDO	RWA	GOVERNMENT ABUSE	SDO	GOVERNMENT ABUSE
ACME	<b>-0.031</b> [-0.052, -0.030]			<b>-0.006</b> [-0.016, -0.006]	
Direct Effect	<b>-0.333</b> [-0.437, -0.331]			<b>-0.358</b> [-0.452, -0.357]	
Total Effect	<b>-0.364</b> [-0.461, -0.362]			<b>-0.364</b> [-0.455, -0.363]	
ACME		<b>-0.020</b> [-0.038, -0.020]			
Direct Effect		<b>-0.308</b> [-0.378, -0.307]			
Total Effect		<b>-0.329</b> [-0.399, -0.327]			
ACME			<b>0.094</b> [0.042, 0.095]		0.027 [-0.029, 0.028]
Direct Effect			<b>0.424</b> [0.224, 0.429]		<b>0.492</b> [0.302, 0.494]
Total Effect			<b>0.519</b> [0.320, 0.522]		<b>0.519</b> [0.331, 0.522]

Significant effects in bold. Bias-corrected confidence intervals in brackets.

**Table 7.** Mediation analysis results for protest action.

	Mediator: Oppressive			Mediator: Evil	
	SDO	RWA	GOVERNMENT ABUSE	SDO	GOVERNMENT ABUSE
ACME	<b>-0.008</b> [-0.014, -0.008]			<b>-0.001</b> [-0.003, -0.001]	
Direct Effect	<b>-0.113</b> [-0.135, -0.112]			<b>-0.120</b> [-0.142, -0.119]	
Total Effect	<b>-0.121</b> [-0.143, -0.120]			<b>-0.121</b> [-0.143, -0.120]	
ACME		<b>-0.006</b> [-0.010, -0.005]			
Direct Effect		<b>-0.100</b> [-0.119, -0.100]			
Total Effect		<b>-0.106</b> [-0.123, -0.106]			
ACME			<b>0.031</b> [0.019, 0.031]		0.011 [-0.007, 0.011]
Direct Effect			0.028 [-0.023, 0.029]		0.05 [-0.001, 0.049]
Total Effect			<b>0.059</b> [0.006, 0.060]		<b>0.059</b> [0.016, 0.059]

Significant effects in bold. Bias-corrected confidence intervals in brackets.

However, viewing the majority out-group as more evil does not mediate the relationship between abuse and protest justification, though it does partially mediate the relationship between SDO and protest justification.

Turning to how perceptions of the out-group's image mediate the impact of abuse and the covariates on justification for an attack (see Table 8), we can see that viewing the majority out-group as more oppressive does not mediate the relationship between abuse and attack justification, though it does partially mediate the effects of SDO and RWA on attack justification. Viewing the majority out-group as more evil partially mediates the effect of abuse on attack justification; a similar mediated effect is found for SDO. In turn, Table 9 examines how evil mediates the relationships between abuse and SDO on willingness to engage in a violent attack. As results show, evil does not mediate the effect of abuse on willingness to engage in violence, though it does partially mediate the effect of SDO on willingness to engage in violence.

**Table 8.** Mediation analysis results for attack justification.

	Mediator: Oppressive			Mediator: Evil	
	SDO	RWA	GOVERNMENT ABUSE	SDO	GOVERNMENT ABUSE
ACME	<b>-0.020</b> [-0.035, -0.020]			<b>-0.018</b> [-0.042, -0.018]	
Direct Effect	<b>-0.036</b> [-0.133, -0.034]			<b>-0.038</b> [-0.139, -0.036]	
Total Effect	<b>-0.055</b> [-0.147, -0.055]			<b>-0.056</b> [-0.155, -0.053]	
ACME		<b>-0.012</b> [-0.025, -0.012]			
Direct Effect		<b>-0.102</b> [-0.169, -0.101]			
Total Effect		<b>-0.115</b> [-0.184, -0.113]			
ACME			0.033 [-0.025, 0.034]		<b>0.105</b> [0.046, 0.107]
Direct Effect			<b>0.623</b> [0.420, 0.626]		<b>0.551</b> [0.360, 0.555]
Total Effect			<b>0.656</b> [0.450, 0.660]		<b>0.656</b> [0.471, 0.661]

Significant effects in bold. Bias-corrected confidence intervals in brackets.

**Table 9.** Mediation analysis results for attack action.

	Mediator: Evil	
	SDO	GOVERNMENT ABUSE
ACME	<b>-0.0006</b> [-0.002, -0.0006]	
Direct Effect	<b>0.012</b> [0.004, 0.012]	
Total Effect	<b>0.011</b> [0.003, 0.011]	
ACME		0.003 [-0.001, 0.003]
Direct Effect		0.017 [-0.010, 0.017]
Total Effect		0.020 [-0.006, 0.021]

Significant effects in bold. Bias-corrected confidence intervals in brackets.



Finally, Table 10 examines how views of the out-group's image mediate the impacts of abuse and the sociopolitical covariates on choosing not to engage in either action. Seeing the majority out-group as more oppressive fully mediates the effects of abuse, SDO, and RWA on choosing not to take action. Similarly, viewing the majority out-group as more evil fully mediates the effects of SDO and abuse on electing not to take action.

Looking across these models, a number of findings emerge. The first – and unsurprising – finding is that assignment to the high abuse condition increases perceptions of the image of majority out-group controlling the government as negative. More interesting is that some of these images have consistent relationships with the justification for both protests and attacks. Of particular note is that viewing the majority out-group in control of government as oppressive is correlated with higher levels of protest justification. Also important here is that perceiving the majority out-group's image as evil leads more respondents to view the attack described in the vignette as justified.

## Discussion, limitations, and implications

Several themes regarding the implications of perceptions of the out-group's image emerged from our analyses. First, as expected, government abuse predicted seeing the majority out-group in control of government as evil and oppressive. Second, viewing the out-group as evil predicted justification for an attack, whereas viewing the out-group as oppressive predicted justifying protest as the course of action. That is, when the out-group controlling the government was viewed as oppressive, participants asked to identify themselves with a marginalized in-group felt that the use of terror attacks was largely unjustified. The message here then is that one can protest against governments controlled by an oppressive out-group, but governments controlled by an evil out-group can (and perhaps should) be attacked. Given that demonization is one of the ultimate

Table 10. Mediation analysis results for choosing not to act.

	Mediator: Oppressive			Mediator: Evil	
	SDO	RWA	GOVERNMENT ABUSE	SDO	GOVERNMENT ABUSE
ACME	<b>0.009</b> [0.014, -0.008]			<b>0.002</b> [0.0002, 0.002]	
Direct Effect	<b>0.1001</b> [0.087, 0.114]			<b>0.108</b> [0.094, 0.122]	
Total Effect	<b>0.1096</b> [0.086, 0.110]			<b>0.110</b> [0.089, 0.109]	
ACME		<b>0.006</b> [0.002, 0.006]			
Direct Effect		<b>0.098</b> [0.080, 0.098]			
Total Effect		<b>0.104</b> [0.086, 0.104]			
ACME			<b>-0.032</b> [-0.045, 0.031]		<b>-0.014</b> [-0.027, -0.014]
Direct Effect			<b>-0.048</b> [-0.104, -0.047]		<b>-0.065</b> [-0.118, -0.065]
Total Effect			<b>-0.079</b> [-0.136, -0.078]		<b>-0.079</b> [-0.124, -0.078]

Significant effects in bold. Bias-corrected confidence intervals in brackets.

steps towards the actual justification and use of violence and terror (Juergensmeyer, 2017), these findings lend an empirical basis to the concept that many people behave as if evil cannot be dealt with, but must be destroyed.

It is also notable that our manipulation of risk has little impact on our outcomes. Here participants read the vignette first then answered questions about group images and political action, In the real world, however, it is possible that perceptions of risk are determined by group image and not the reverse, which may explain our null findings here and is worth exploring in future research.

Considering some of the types of rhetoric that terrorist groups use in the depiction of their actual or perceived enemies, it appears that careful efforts are often made to touch upon both the oppressive and evil images (for detailed discussions, see: Brachman, 2010; Jones, 2008). The effects of these combinations of out-group images, and the resulting behavioral choices and justifications, are one area of further study suggested by the present research. For instance, messages that combine the elements of portraying enemy out-groups as oppressive might serve to engage and mobilize a wider audience. Folding in language and imagery that conjures up the perception of evil may serve as a catalyst for more direct and destructive forms of action. This may be because a merely oppressive image implies a more malleable or persuadable enemy; oppressive behavior, in this regard, does not necessarily imply a global or stable out-group trait. The purpose of protest is to raise the profile of an issue and make people think about it. If an oppressive out-group can be induced to act differently under different circumstances, protest could logically lead to change. In contrast, the evil image implies inherent malice and suggests intent driven by intrinsic out-group characteristics. Protesting an evil force could be seen as ineffective because an indelibly evil force would not care if other groups are being oppressed or harmed and is unlikely to be induced to change its behavior. Destroying an irredeemably evil force via violence may therefore make more sense. Moreover, an oppressive out-group necessarily has power over other insofar as it is capable of carrying out oppression, meaning that violent action could plausibly provoke consequences. An evil force, on the other hand, may not necessarily have the resources or power to significantly raise the costs of resistance on the part of those who identify with marginalized groups. It is also likely that particular aspects of intergroup images more effective for motivating different segments of the intended audience. The current results suggest that in order to motivate an attack against an out-group specifically, images that suggest evil and oppressive out-group characteristics may be impactful. However, to generate broad mobilization in the form of protest, portrayal of the out-group as oppressive in particular appears to have promise and potential.

An important limitation of our research may be that many people in the United States have not personally experienced violent repression. The concern is that individuals who face the real threat of repression would make different choices than would the individuals included in our sample, particularly with respect for taking action. Indeed, we do see that members of racial and ethnic minority groups in this study view the government and some action differently than non-minority participants. It is important to note that our data collection took prior to the summer of 2020 and the larger-scale mass mobilization in reaction to the murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery and numerous other Black Americans at the hands of both police and racist vigilantes. Despite the larger discussions and awareness of the systemic racial discrimination that racial and ethnic

minorities – particularly Black Americans – face in the US, only 11% of people in a June 2020 Economist/YouGov poll indicated that they personally had participated in a peaceful protest in the prior two years. Yet, the majority of our sample indicated that they would support a protest. Similarly, while a small percentage of the sample indicated that they would engage in an attack, this is an overestimate of what happens in reality. We should keep in mind that the choices we asked participants to consider occurred in a research context and were relatively low-impact, even for those who were highly interested and involved in the vignette. Indeed, at the end of the experiment, they were able to go about their daily lives. Further, while participants had to choose a protest, a bombing, or neither, in the real-world people are able to make multiple choices about political engagement. Future research should capture this more fully.

Still, using participants from a country like the United States has an important advantage. Precisely because a smaller percentage of the participants have direct and immediate experience with the levels of repression described in the treatment vignettes, their responses may more directly reflect the information provided to them as part of the experiment and the group they were asked to identify with. One risk in using participants from countries with a recent history of widespread political violence is that the majority of individuals will interpret the information in the treatments through their own lens, or the lens of a group experience other than the one of interest to researchers. This process may systematically influence their responses. Indeed, we found support for this in a similar experiment using samples from Egypt and Morocco where vignettes were more closely connected to a larger percentage of participants' lived experiences than they are in the present study (Authors, 2017). Supplementing this, our use of a fictional marginalized in-group and majority out-group rather than real groups also helps to remove any pre-existing feelings or prejudices that participants may have about groups other than the ones that are the focus of the study. While this may limit external validity, we believe that the benefits of using a fictional group outweigh the costs. The primary purpose of the experiment reported here is to test hypotheses derived from research on intergroup images, not to generate estimates of the relationships between images and choices of protest and violence that reflect decisions in specific "real world" cultural contexts. Our present interest in testing theory means that that it is less important for our purposes to measure the influence of variation in such contexts. Doing so is, as we suggest above, an important priority for future research in this area.

## Notes

1. Alexander et al. (2005) also note that, while perceptions of power and status are often correlated, a group may be perceived as having high power but low status or high status but low power.
2. In the low government abuse condition, the participant's minority ethnic group was subjected to abuse some years ago and the group current hold fewer grievances stemming from abuse. We have opted for a low government abuse rather than a no government abuse condition here and in our related studies. In pilot testing, we found that participants were confused by a no government abuse condition since there would be no reason for contentious political action if there were not some grievances held by the participant's group.
3. While the items measuring Oppressive and Evil were derived from image theory, we also ran Confirmatory Factor Analysis with these two-factors versus a single-factor to ensure that the two-factor model is a better fit. Both a chi-square difference test ( $\chi^2(1, N=2,932)=112.88$ ,

$p < 0.001$ ) and comparison of the Akaike Information Criterion confirm that the two-factor model is a better fit.

4. As a robustness check, we also estimated the models in Tables 3–5 with a binary indicator for whether or not the participant was a racial/ethnic minority themselves. Racial/ethnic minority participants are more likely to view the government as both oppressive and evil, and see violence as more justified. This variable does not have a significant relationship with any of the other outcome variables and inclusion of this variable in any of the models does not impact the results.
5. The interactions involving the sociopolitical variables (SDO and RWA) and the treatment conditions (abuse and risk) were largely not significant. Thus, we do not report them in text.
6. None of the interactions involving the sociopolitical variables (SDO and RWA) and the treatment conditions (abuse and risk) were significant. Thus, we do not report them in text.
7. Insofar as SDO and RWA create a predisposition to accept the position of a dominant majority group, these sociopolitical orientations may weaken the effects of abuse on justification of and willingness to engage in political action. To examine this, we conducted exploratory analyses to test whether there is mediated moderation – for example, is the interaction between SDO and abuse mediated by image of an out-group to explain the dependent variables. Results do not support this explanation.
8. Since the interaction between abuse and risk did not have a significant relationship with either of the proposed mediators or any of the outcomes, we have not included this interaction in our mediation analyses.
9. We also estimated mediation effects with using bootstrapping with case resampling. The results were fundamentally the same and thus are not reported in text.

## Disclosure statement

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