

The End of the World

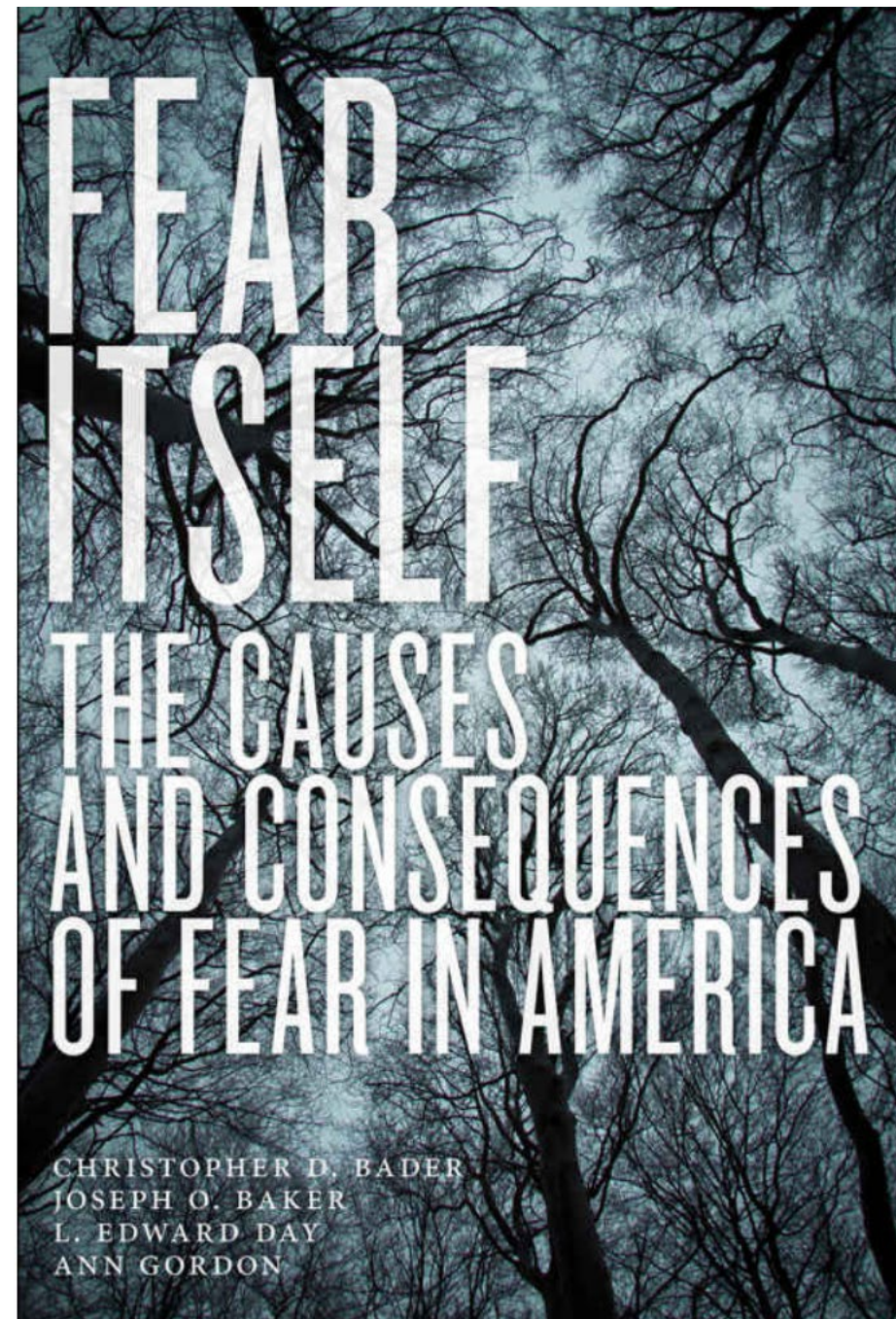
Fear in American Culture (Part I)

Week 5 Lecture | Professor Crews
Religious Studies 357 W

As Christopher Bader, Joseph Baker, L. Edward Day, and Ann Gordon make clear in their 2020 book *Fear Itself: The Causes and Consequences of Fear in America*, researchers are just now beginning to gain a better understanding of precisely how fear shapes and informs American cultural beliefs and actions.

The underlying research in the book comes from the annual Chapman University Survey of American Fears (2014-2019), one of the most in-depth sociological study to date looking at a wide range of American fears, what informs these fears, and how these beliefs are affected by everything from race and gender to social media usage and paranormal beliefs.

As they note in the introduction, the goal of the study was to understand “the patterns and consequences of fear” and “what kinds of Americans are afraid of certain things and how those fears are related to other beliefs and behaviors.”



One of the most fascinating insights from the Survey of American Fears is the finding that the top fear among Americans for five years running is government corruption. According to the most recent survey data from 2019, **77.2% of respondents** said they were either Afraid or Very Afraid of “corruption of government officials”.

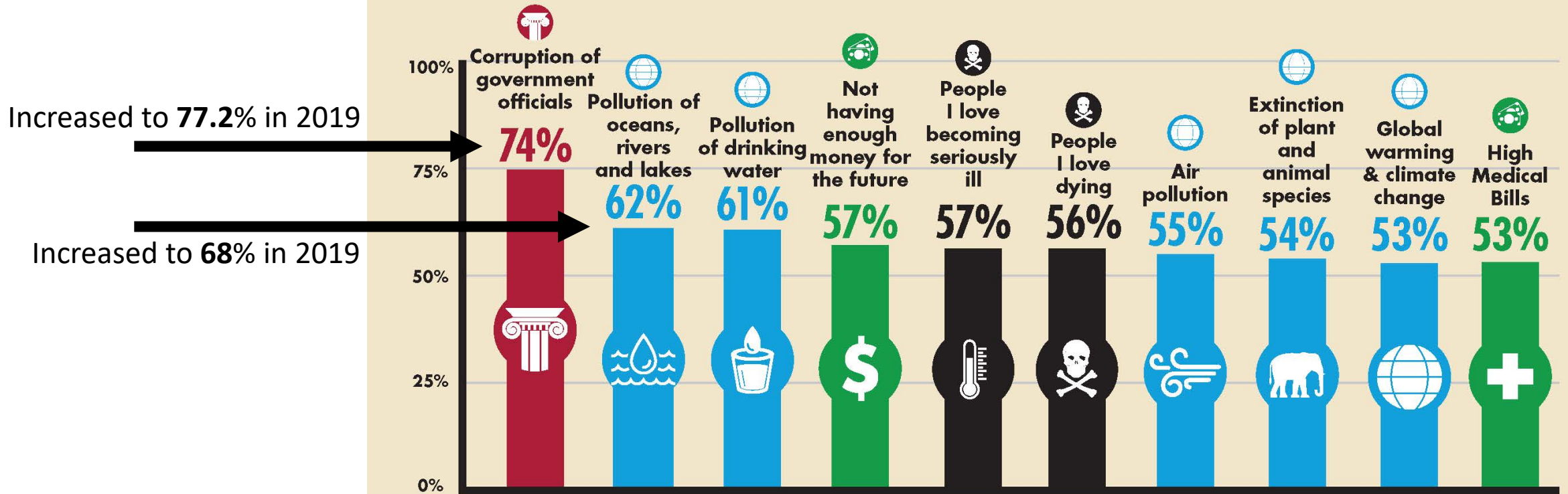
Equally interesting, 5 of the top 10 American fears have to do with the environment, with “pollution of oceans, rivers, and lakes” ranking as the second highest fear among respondents (68%).

Another important aspect of the study is the strong connections between fear and belief in conspiracies, with belief in conspiracies and heightened levels of fear showing strong correlations, although the direction of causality remains less clear. Are Americans more prone to conspiratorial thinking, and thus more afraid in general, or does a culture of fear in American drive belief in conspiracies?

While the answer to that question is uncertain, what the Survey of American Fears helps us see is that there are important connections between what Americans fear and how those fears shape our beliefs. Equally important, these fears have a clear impact on partisan politics in America.

We can see this most clearly in how growing belief in conspiratorial politics in America has given rise to the explosive growth of figures like Alex Jones and QAnon conspiracy theorists in recent years.

Top 10 Fears of 2018

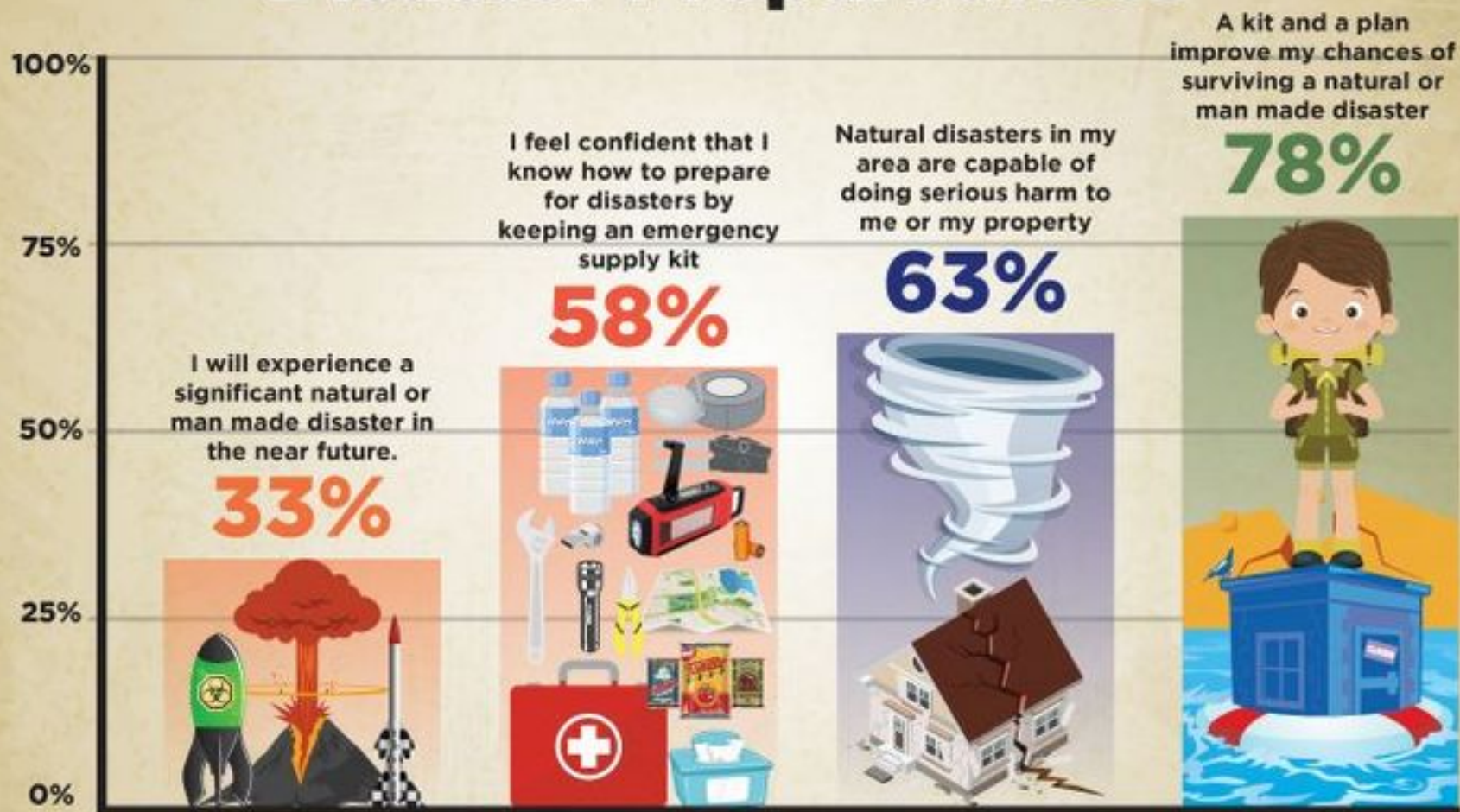


Above are the 10 fears for which the highest percentage of Americans reported being *afraid* or *very afraid*.

 Government  Environment  Economic  Illness and Death

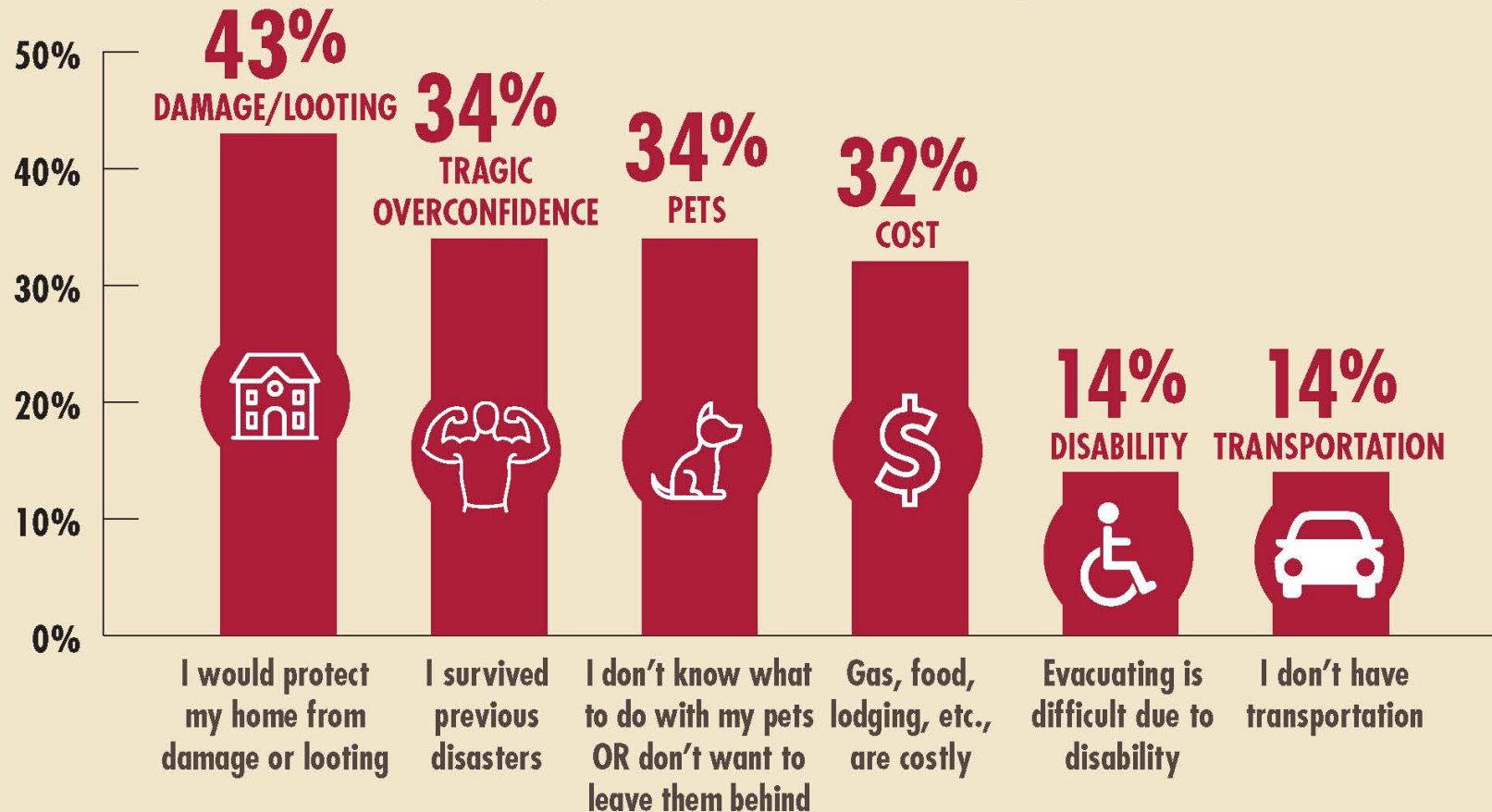
THE
CHAPMAN
UNIVERSITY
SURVEY OF
AMERICAN
FEARS

Top Motivators of Disaster Preparedness



WHY AMERICANS DON'T EVACUATE

One in five Americans report they or their families have had to flee their homes due to disaster. Evacuations save lives, but many choose not to leave. Why?





Kathryn Steinle was a 32-year-old white woman killed in San Francisco in 2015 by a stray bullet fired by an undocumented immigrant.

As the authors note, this event highlighted many of the common fears among white Americans—guns, drugs, random acts of violence, undocumented immigrants, and a broken criminal justice system.

The fear and outrage which was stoked by certain media outlets and politicians following her death played on deeply held anti-immigrant fears to help leverage support for hardline immigration reforms, despite the fact that study after study has shown that areas dominated by immigrants have lower crime rates than majority-white areas.

As the authors of the *Fear Itself* argue, the result is that:

“[T]he United States has become a culture driven by fear.”

Anti-Vaccination Demographics – Reality vs Perception

As our authors suggest, coverage of the anti-vaxx movement has tended to focus on vocal elites, such as wealthy white celebrities like Jenny McCarthy and Jim Carrey. Based on the Chapman Survey's Anti-Vaxx scale (1-18), the average American scores a 7 regarding claims about vaccines leading to autism.

Yet when we look at which Americans are accepting the anti-vaccination movement claims, the picture is quite different.

“All told, the person most likely to hold anti-vaccination beliefs is a younger, politically conservative, nonwhite person of either gender who has a lower level of income and education.”

As the authors suggest, the best remedy to such beliefs is focusing more resources on science-based public education.



We have been exploring one aspect of this fear-driven culture for the past few weeks in Bradley Garrett's book *Bunker*, looking at how “merchants of doom” have made a living by selling protection from various apocalypses or end of the world scenarios. The authors of *Fear Itself* similarly note that “Companies market unnecessary products to consumers promising protection from exaggerated harms,” a process which relies on constant activation of these underlying fears.

Yet fear is not a monolithic experience, so we need to account for both hard-wired biological threat responses and subjective cultural fears that are grounded in learned behavior.

We know from political psychology (Affective Intelligence research) that fear and other emotional systems operate on two levels, and different stimulus can impact our cognitive responses:

- **Disposition system:** Experience-based mental processes, such as ingrained belief (‘rule of thumb’).
- **Surveillance system:** Immediate responses to negative influences or dangers (‘fight or flight’)

In political psychology and media studies we refer to this process as “priming” or “framing”, a process where the response of a subject can be manipulated by “cueing” certain emotional reactions (anger, excitement, fear) in order to make a viewer more receptive to certain political messages.



**1964 "Daisy" ad
Presidential campaign of Lyndon Johnson**

"These are the stakes. To make a world in which all of God's children can live, or to go into the dark. We must either love each other, or we must die.

Vote for President Johnson on November 3rd.

The stakes are too high for you to stay home."





11 Major “Fear Factors” in America

TABLE 1.1. Fear Factors.

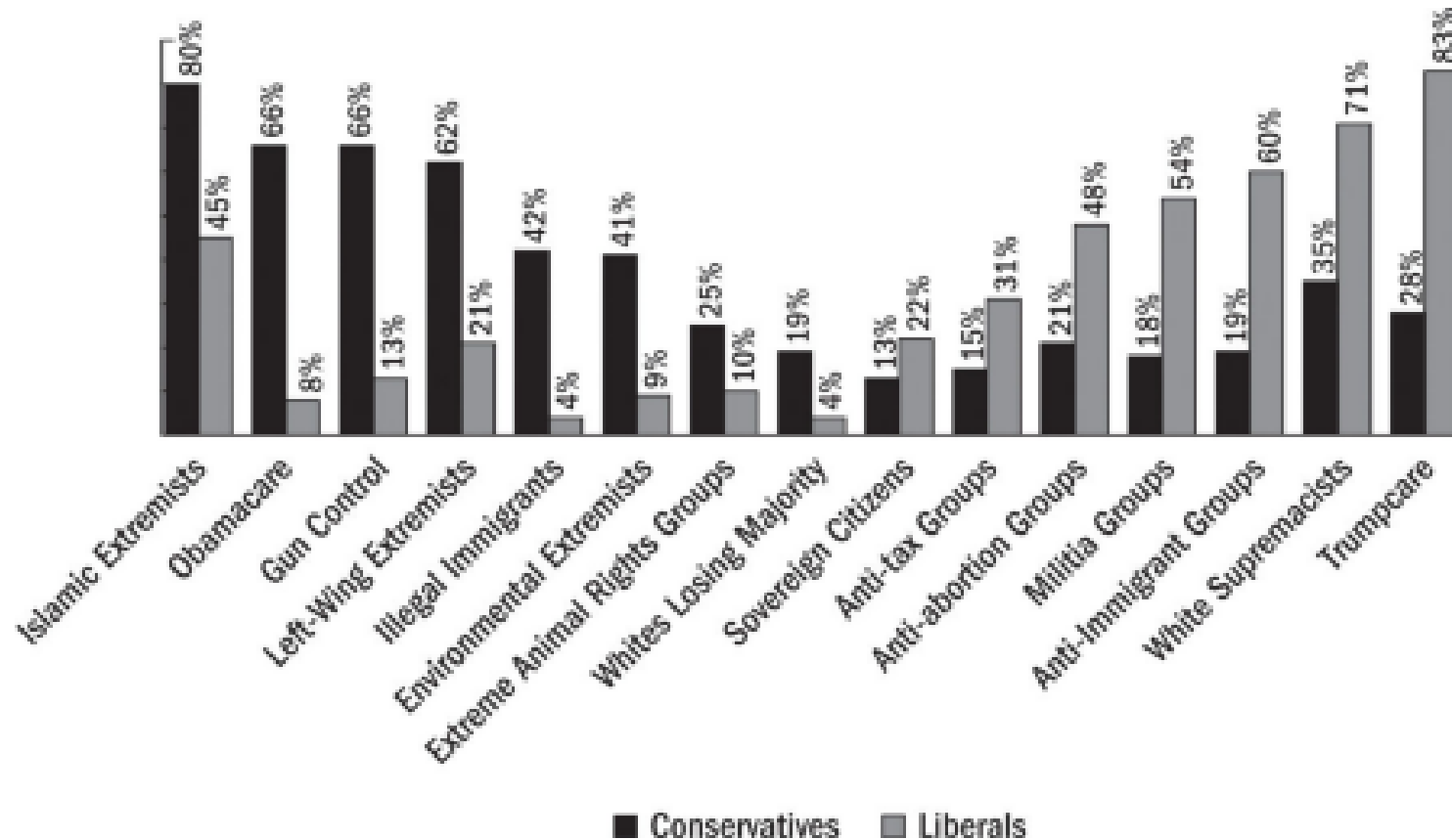
Fear factor	Includes fears of ...
Animals/Entities	Insects, reptiles, animals, sharks, germs, clowns, ghosts, zombies, strangers
Crime/Victimization	Walking alone at night, mugging, stalking, murder by a stranger, murder by someone you know, being a victim of a drunk driver, police brutality, sexual assault by a stranger, sexual assault by someone you know, hate crime, mass shootings, break-ins, theft, gang violence, kidnapping, financial fraud, being the victim of terrorism
Environmental	Air pollution, pollution of drinking water, pollution of the oceans, extinction of plant and animal species, oil spills, global warming
Government	Corrupt government officials, government tracking of personal information, government use of drones
Man-made disasters	Electromagnetic pulse attack, nuclear attack, nuclear meltdown, economic collapse, pandemics, widespread civil unrest, world war, biological warfare, terrorist attacks, North Korea using nuclear weapons
Natural Disasters	Earthquakes, hurricanes, tornadoes, floods, blizzards, droughts, volcanoes
Personal tragedies	Becoming ill, loved ones becoming ill, dying, loved ones dying, high medical bills, becoming unemployed, running out of money, others talking about me
Phobias	Blood, needles, flying, heights, public speaking, small spaces, water
Technology	Being fooled by fake news, computers replacing the workforce, technology I don't understand, cybercrime, corporate tracking of personal information, identity theft, credit card theft, losing personal data
Things American conservatives fear	Islamic extremists, extreme animal rights groups, extreme environmental groups, left-wing extremists, whites no longer being the majority, illegal immigrants, gun control, Obamacare
Things American liberals fear	Sovereign citizens, militias, white supremacists, anti-immigration groups, anti-abortion groups, anti-tax groups, Trumpcare

As our authors note, “Fears often reflect social and political divisions.” And while most fears ignore partisan divides, there are a few important exceptions concerning conservative vs liberal fears.

Partisan Fears

Conservative Fears

Liberal Fears



*Chart based on 2017 survey data.

Partisan Fear

Conservative Fears

Islamic extremists, extreme animal rights and environmental groups, left-wing extremists, whites no longer the majority, undocumented immigrants, gun control, Obamacare.

- **Identifies as conservative (.540)**
- Older (.154)
- Lives in a rural area (.107)
- Biblical literalist (.091)
- Race other than black (.081)
- Women (.061)

Liberal Fears

Sovereign citizens, militias, white supremacists, anti-immigration groups, anti-abortion groups, anti-tax groups, Trumpcare.

- **Identifies as liberal (.362)**
- Religion reported as Protestant (–.227)
- Religion reported as Catholic (–.204)
- Religion reported as “just Christian” (–.183)
- Hispanic (.135)
- Black (.116)
- Older (.091)

**Values closer to 1 are more significant, – value are inverse correlations.*

“What did prove quite shocking to us was how sharply the political divide in the United States is expressed via our fears. It is not that conservatives and liberals have different ideas about how to fix the issues that cause them anxiety and fear. They simply do not fear the same things at all, and that itself is frightening.”

As the authors argue, the fact that fear is now partisan makes it even harder to address underlying concerns and results in a weakening of civic culture and heightened fears about the political “Other.”

Another important fear factor involves the media. Starting with cable TV in the 1990s, and then expanding with internet news platforms in the 2000s, people are increasingly relying on social media for news. The result is a media ecosystem that operates like an echo chamber, shielding people from differing views while reinforcing and validating existing beliefs (“media bubble”). This effect becomes even stronger when people repeatedly consumer specific content from specific platforms.

As our authors note, “Someone who reports watching Fox News every day is, on average, afraid of three times as many conservative political concerns compared to someone who never does” and “those who watch [MSNBC] every day are fearful of almost twice as much.”

Using the results of the Survey of American Fears the researchers constructed a “Sum of All Fears” score that provides a snapshot of non-political fears in America. On a scale of 0-31, the average American has a fear score of 13.1. These general fears don’t appear to follow partisan affiliations.

Several important factors do have a measurable impact on Americans fears:

- Education (–.068; higher education equals less fear)
- Lives in the south (.069)
- Unemployed (.086)
- Income (–.115; higher income equals less fear)
- White (–.120; whites less fearful than nonwhites)
- Younger (.175)
- Women (.229)
- Frequency of religious attendance (.709; curvilinear effect)

“The hypothetical, most frightened person in American is a younger, nonwhite woman who lives somewhere in the South. She has a lower level of education and is likely unemployed, which is, obviously, associated with a lower level of income. But far greater than any of these effects is that of religious service attendance.”

The story of religion and fears is complicated, with three specific factors explaining curvilinear trends.

“The first is found when examining levels of religiosity and a specific fear: the fear of death. The highest levels of death fear are found among people with a moderate, rather than a high or low, level of religiosity.”

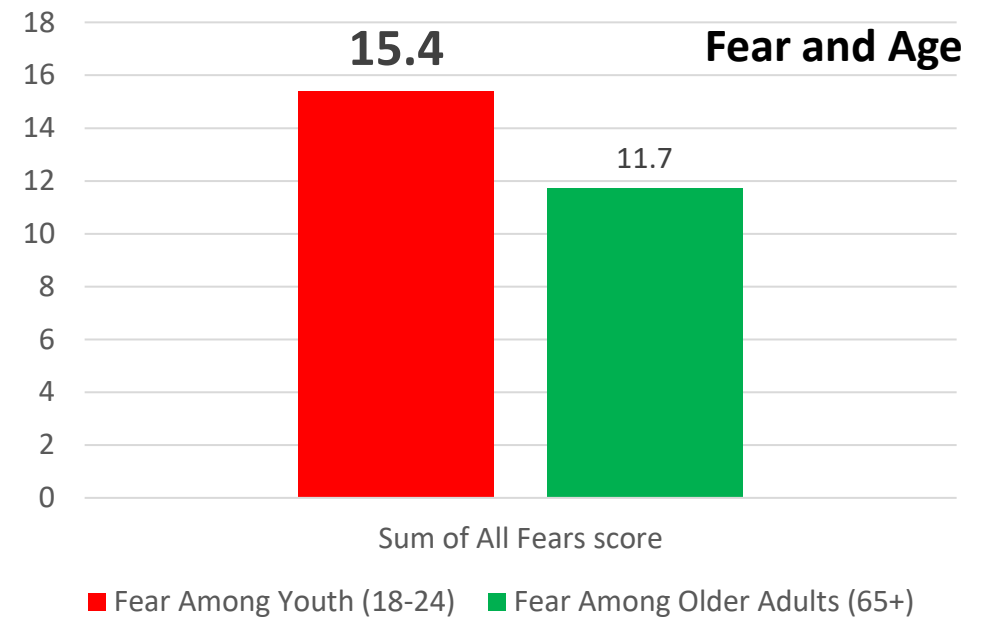
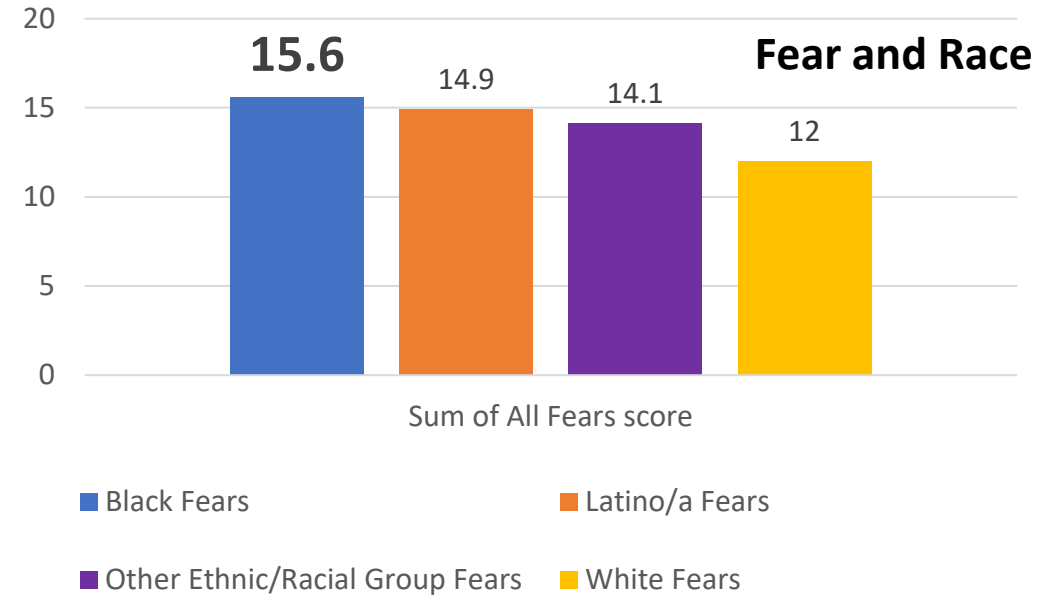
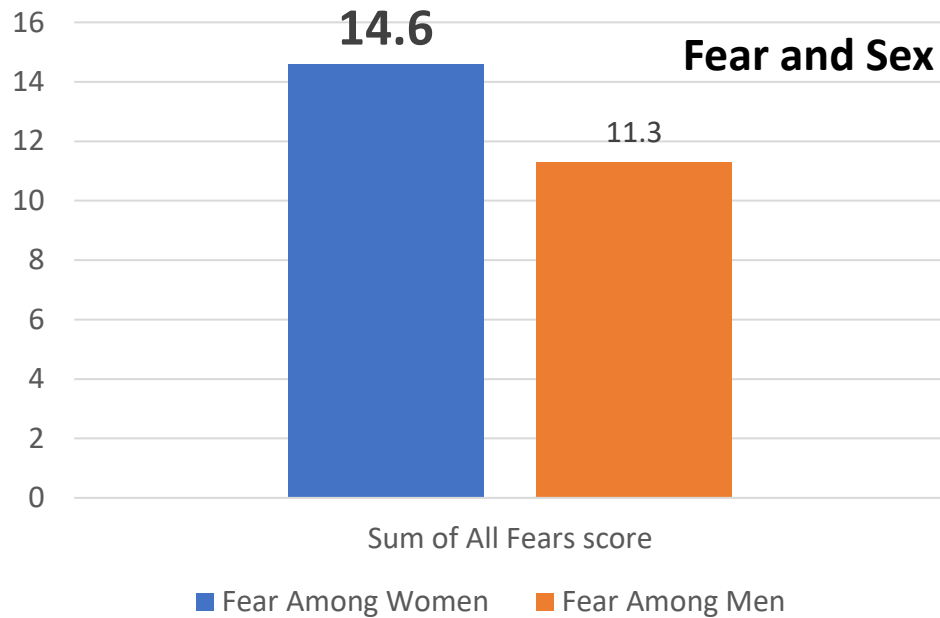
“The second empirical finding that is relevant for understanding the relationship between religiosity and fear is the curvilinear pattern between religiosity and prejudice. For instance, among respondents who were not black, those who attended religious services occasionally were the most likely to stereotype African Americans as criminal.”

“The third and final curvilinear pattern identified in empirical research that mirrors the relationship between fear and religiosity is the interplay between religion and “paranormal” beliefs and practices. Along with the highest levels of overall fear, the highest levels of paranormalism are found among people who are moderately religious.”

As our authors argue, “All in or all out beats in between when it comes to fear and religion.”

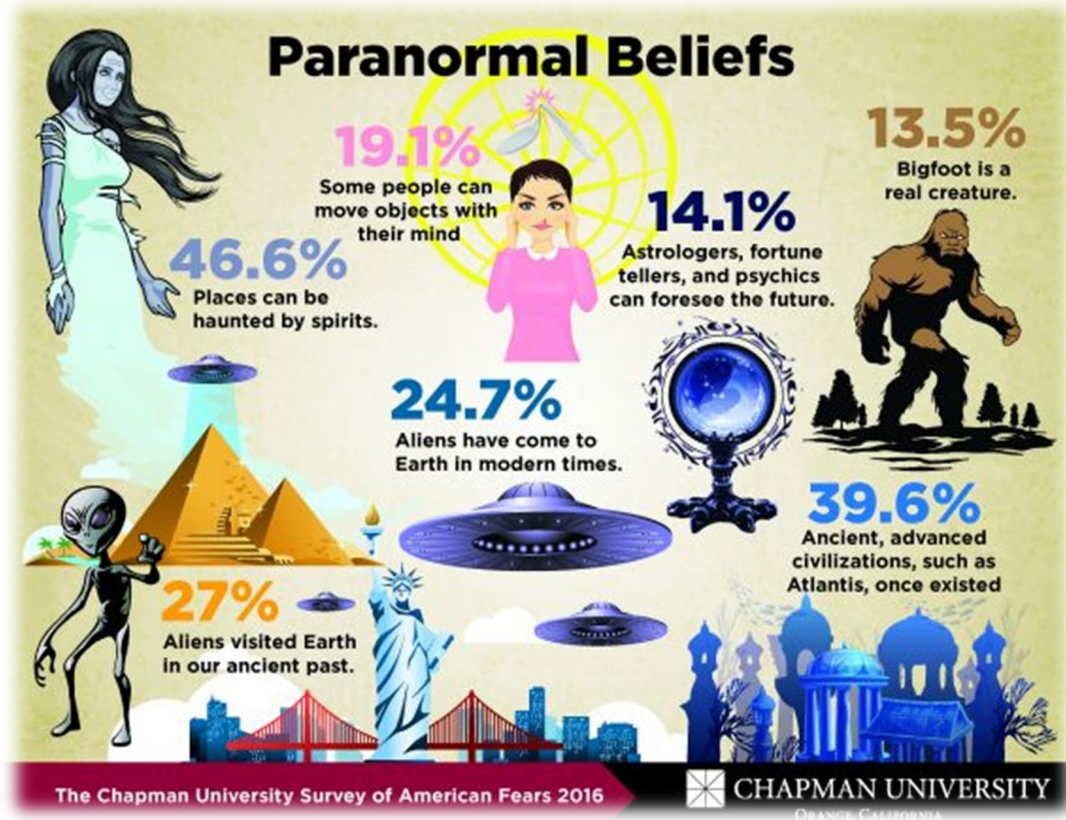
Vulnerability theory and American fears (physical and social vulnerability)

The average level of fear for Americans was **13.1** on the Sum of All Fears scale (0-33).



Stay Tuned for Part II

Fear and Conspiracies in America



SPOOKY

“Disasters Don’t Wait. Make Your Plan Today.”

September is National Preparedness Month, and this provides us a great opportunity to both think critically about questions of preparedness and assess our own preparedness for disaster.

WEEK 1

Week 1 September 1-5: Make A Plan

Talk to your friends and family about how you will communicate before, during, and after a disaster. Make sure to update your plan based on the Centers for Disease Control recommendations due to the coronavirus.

WEEK 2

Week 2 September 6-12: Build A Kit

Gather supplies that will last for several days after a disaster for everyone living in your home. Don’t forget to consider the unique needs each person or pet may have in case you have to evacuate quickly. Update your kits and supplies based on recommendations by the Centers for Disease Control.

WEEK 3

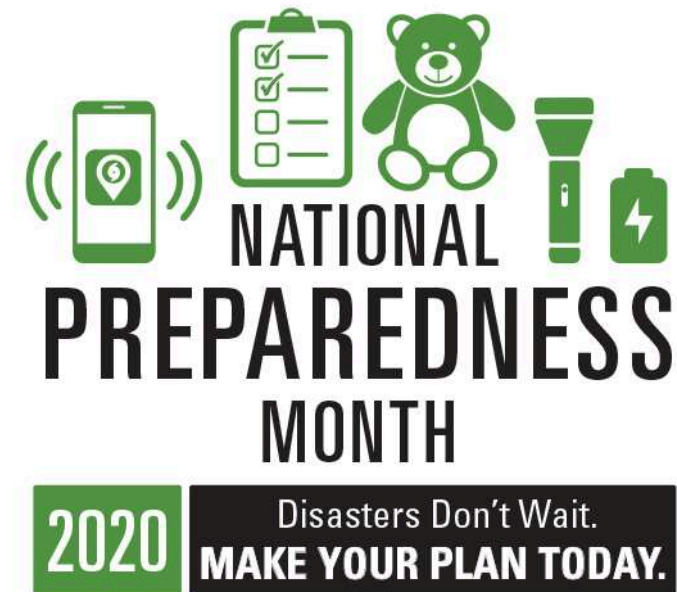
Week 3 September 13-19: Prepare for Disasters

Limit the impacts that disasters have on you and your family. Know the risk of disasters in your area and check your insurance coverage. Learn how to make your home stronger in the face of storms and other common hazards and act fast if you receive a local warning or alert.

WEEK 4

Week 4 September 20-26: Teach Youth About Preparedness

Talk to your kids about preparing for emergencies and what to do in case you are separated. Reassure them by providing information about how they can get involved.



#BeReady

Weekly Assignment Reminder

- Remember to check our class Blackboard regularly for updates, announcements, and other related class information...
- Have you done the weekly readings and watched any associated videos? Weekly readings are listed on the Class Schedule page.
- Complete the Class Activity #3, “When Disaster Strikes” exercise and weekly discussion post response. Initial post due Wed, Sept 30 by end of the day, and peer response post due Fri Oct 2 by end of the day.