

## POLITICAL SCIENCE

### Understanding risk

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Credit: Francesco Scatena/Alamy Stock Photo

When it comes to prioritizing threats and creating policy responses, people notoriously emphasize rare disasters at the expense of deadlier, but more common, threats. Research has generally explained this pattern by suggesting that cognitive biases and a lack of information lead people to misdiagnose the relative risks of threats. Providing more information about the likelihood of dangers is expected to increase the accuracy of risk assessments and result in more reasonable policy prioritizations.

However, a new study by Jeffrey Friedman of Dartmouth College shows that political values play a more important role than factual information in shaping reactions to risk. Using a large survey in which participants compared pairs of risks, the study found that people across backgrounds and political orientations are accurate in their understanding of which risks cause the most harm. However, this knowledge about the magnitude of a threat does not play a large role in determining policy preferences. Instead, reactions to risk are shaped more by value judgements about the unfairness of particular risks and the proper role of government in prevention. Values, more than information, drive responses to threats.

This study highlights the importance of underlying preferences for shaping reactions to objective information.

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