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**By Any Means Necessary: Utilitarian Moral Reasoning Amplifies the Connection Between  
Obsessive Passion and Ideological Violence**

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All data is available on Open Science Framework at  
[https://osf.io/5wn4j/?view\\_only=6e8226cf21a84e4c8495f0d2c75d8af2](https://osf.io/5wn4j/?view_only=6e8226cf21a84e4c8495f0d2c75d8af2)

### **Abstract**

This research delves into the nexus between moral reasoning and ideological passion, examining their combined effect on ideological violence. Building upon the dualistic model of passion, we posited that obsessive passion for an ideology would predict increased ideological violence intentions. We further postulated that utilitarian moral reasoning would amplify the obsessive passion-ideological violence relationship. We used correlational methods to investigate these hypotheses in three distinct samples (Studies 1A-1C): members of the US Democratic Party ( $N=209$ ), members of the US Republican Party ( $N=114$ ), and police cadets in the Republic of Kazakhstan ( $N=340$ ). An experiment further tested these hypotheses with an additional sample of US Democrats (Study 2;  $N=280$ ). In Studies 1A-1C, our hypotheses were supported: there was a significant interaction between utilitarian moral reasoning and obsessive passion. Specifically, the relationship between obsessive passion and ideological violence was magnified for individuals with high levels of utilitarian moral reasoning. In Study 2, there was also a significant interaction between utilitarian moral reasoning and obsessive passion, such that being in the obsessive passion condition had a stronger positive effect on ideological violence intentions for participants with greater utilitarian moral reasoning. In all studies, deontological reasoning had no effect on the obsessive passion-ideological violence relationship. Our findings highlight the previously overlooked significance of utilitarian and deontological moral reasoning in the context of ideological violence. This research also introduces novel potential strategies for the prevention of violent extremism.

*Keywords:* Violent extremism, moral reasoning, motivation, utilitarianism, ideological violence, obsessive passion

### **By Any Means Necessary: Utilitarian Moral Reasoning Amplifies the Connection Between Obsessive Passion and Ideological Violence**

In the aftermath of the 2016 U.S. presidential election, America experienced a marked increase in protests, particularly from anti-Trump protestors. Demonstrations erupted in cities nationwide, largely in response to President Donald Trump's controversial campaign rhetoric and his subsequent electoral win (Sottile, Schmidt, & Murphy, 2016). Although the majority protested peacefully, a minority engaged in violent actions. For instance, Washington, D.C. experienced violent incidents in January 2017, where protestors damaged storefronts, hurled rocks and bricks at police, and set a limousine on fire (Corasaniti, Flegenheimer, & Schmidt, 2017). A similar pattern was observed after President Joe Biden's 2020 election victory, with dissent primarily arising from allegations of election fraud. While thousands demonstrated peacefully, a violent minority staged a deadly attack on the US Capitol in January 2021. Whether to protest police brutality against African-Americans, requirements to wear masks during the COVID-19 pandemic, the US's financial support of Israel's military, or any other cause, there is typically an overwhelming majority of peaceful activists and a small minority that turns to violence. These recurring patterns of ideological mobilization beg the question: What fuels ideological violence?

Existing psychological research provides evidence that the type of passion a person has for their ideology—be it obsessive or harmonious—is associated with the propensity for ideological violence (for a review, see Bélanger, 2021). Notably, studies have consistently identified obsessive passion for one's ideology as a dominant predictor of ideological violence (Wolfowicz et al., 2021). However, a dimension that remains underexplored in this context is the role of moral reasoning. After all, engaging in violent extremism often involves the moral decision to harm outgroup members for a purpose deemed worthwhile, such as gaining status for or protecting the

interests of one's social, religious, or political group. Thus, a deeper examination of moral frameworks, such as utilitarianism (which prioritizes outcomes) and deontology (which focuses on following rules), could elucidate why some people view violence as a legitimate tool to advance their group's ideological goals. While violence is typically condemned in deontological systems, utilitarian moral reasoning emphasizes the consequences of actions and does not necessarily preclude violence if that violence produces the best outcome. Obsessive ideological passion may interact differently with the normative prohibitions of deontology and the outcome-oriented justifications of utilitarianism.

The present research delves into the relationship between ideological passion and moral reasoning in endorsing ideological violence by exploring whether the strength of the connection between obsessive passion for a cause and support for ideological violence differs based on individuals' moral reasoning stances (deontological vs. utilitarian). We explore these effects in both civilian and police samples to discern if motivations between civilian and law enforcement groups align, or if they each harbor unique rationales for endorsing violent political actions.

### **The Dualistic Model of Passion and Ideological Violence**

Passion for an ideology is defined as having "a strong inclination towards a self-defining cause that is deeply valued, in which one invests significant time and energy" (St-Louis et al., 2016, p. 263). Vallerand and colleagues (2003) introduced a dualistic model distinguishing two forms of passion: obsessive and harmonious. The core distinction hinges on how the passionate activity is regulated in relation to other life domains (Bélanger et al., 2019; Vallerand et al., 2003)

Expanding on core ideas of motivational imbalance (see Significance Quest Theory; Kruglanski et al., 2019 for a review), ideological obsession can be described as an uncontrollable urge where a particular belief or philosophy becomes the primary driver of an individual's identity

and actions (Vallerand et al., 2003). Those gripped by such an obsession feel an overwhelming need to align their thoughts, behaviors, and goals with this specific ideology, constantly seeking validation and a distinct sense of self-worth from it. This intense connection not only provides them with a sense of meaning, purpose, and societal acceptance (Mageau et al., 2011) but often dominates their lives to the point where other priorities are overshadowed, consuming vast amounts of their focus and attentional resources (Bélanger et al., 2013; 2019).

In contrast, people with harmonious passion are strongly committed to an ideological belief, yet it remains well balanced with other life domains. Their ideological pursuit is not anchored in contingencies of self-worth (Mageau et al., 2011), ensuring individuals have a secure sense of self with or without their ideology (Bélanger et al., 2013; Lafrenière et al., 2013). As such, their involvement with their ideology stays within their control and harmoniously coexists with other life domains without conflict (Séguin-Lévesque et al., 2003). This equilibrium enables individuals to engage in their ideology freely, without the weight of external pressures.

The following experimental research has shed light on two crucial self-regulatory mechanisms through which obsessive passion shapes an individual's endorsement of ideological violence (Bélanger, 2021). First, individuals driven by obsessive passion often assume a defensive stance, grounding their self-esteem in unwavering commitment to their ideologies. Notably, self-uncertainty tends to propel those with high levels of obsessive passion towards connecting with like-minded peers who advocate violence as a means to realize their common objectives (Bélanger et al., 2020). Moreover, any perceived challenge to this ideological framework is perceived as a direct personal threat, prompting them to embrace violent methods in its defense (Bélanger et al., 2020). In situations where their ideological identity is under duress, obsessive

passion becomes positively associated with support for ideological violence, while individuals with harmonious passion lean more towards nonviolent approaches (Rip et al., 2012).

Second, several experimental contributions, described below, indicate that individuals characterized by obsessive passion often inhibit alternative goals that conflict with their ideological commitment (Bélanger et al., 2013; 2022). There is a growing body of evidence indicating that when such individuals are unfettered by competing considerations, they become predisposed to using violent means to fulfill their ideological aims (Bélanger et al., 2022). Indeed, research across diverse ideological groups has shown that obsessive (vs. harmonious) passion for one's ideology results in the negative views of outgroup members (those who hold contrasting ideological perspectives), which in turn, fosters support for ideological violence (Bélanger et al., 2019). For those with an obsessive passion for their ideology, anyone who is not for them is against them—part of an enemy outgroup. Importantly, this shifts the balance for how such individuals perceive and behave towards outgroup members, making them more likely to perceive outgroup members as threatening, hold negative views about them, and use hostility against them. This reflects major theories of intergroup conflict, such as integrated threat theory (Stephan & Stephan, 2013), social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), and realistic conflict theory (Sherif & Sherif, 1953). This pattern of results hints to the possibility that individuals driven by obsessive passion for an ideology might be more inclined to embrace a 'the end justifies the means' philosophy, primarily because they lack alternative objectives to moderate their actions. In light of this, the present research endeavors to delve deeper into this hypothesis, suggesting that the inclination of ideologically obsessed individuals towards engaging in ideological violence could be linked to their moral reasoning.

### **Moral Reasoning**

The concept of moral reasoning plays a pivotal role in the intersection of moral psychology and moral philosophy. It refers to a deliberate, multi-step cognitive process through which individuals arrive at moral judgments and decisions (Haidt, 2001). In essence, it is the cognitive process by which people assess whether a specific action or behavior is morally good or bad. Many researchers have employed philosophical dilemmas to formulate theories regarding our moral reasoning processes. A notable example is Greene and colleagues' (2001) dual-processing theory of moral reasoning, which relies on two longstanding ethical theories in philosophy: deontology and utilitarianism.

Deontology is a moral framework characterized by a strict adherence to rules and principles in determining the morality of an action. It assesses the rightness or wrongness of an action based on the inherent nature of the action itself, rather than its consequences. This approach is often referred to as rule-based moral reasoning because it operates under the assumption that individuals possess a predefined set of rules that dictate the morality of actions, irrespective of their outcomes. In deontological ethics, the right course of action is typically determined in terms of duties, obligations, and rights (Robinson, 2017). For example, a deontologist might argue that ideological violence is always morally wrong because individuals have a duty to resolve ideological conflicts peacefully and that violence violates the fundamental freedoms of others, regardless of the circumstances or potential consequences.

On the other hand, utilitarianism, also known as consequentialism, evaluates the morality of actions by focusing on the consequences they produce. Utilitarianism posits that one should choose the action that maximizes the greatest amount of net good or happiness for the greatest number of people (Mill, 1863). Unlike deontology, utilitarianism does not assert that any particular action is inherently right or wrong; instead, it advocates for actions that lead to the most

favorable outcomes. For instance, a utilitarian might argue that ideological violence is morally acceptable if it leads to greater net happiness or benefit for the most people, for example, by ending a nation's brutal dictatorship and promoting its long-term stability.

Greene et al.'s (2004) dual-processing theory of moral reasoning is rooted in the broader psychological dual-processing framework and proposes that deontological and utilitarian judgments arise from distinct neural systems. The first system (System 1) operates swiftly and is driven by emotions and intuitions, while the second system (System 2) unfolds more slowly and involves deliberate, rational processing. Substantiating this theory, research shows that deontological judgments tend to prevail when the presented moral dilemma is personal and thus laden with emotional salience, for instance, when the choice necessitates harming or even causing the death of others (Greene et al., 2004).

In contrast, utilitarian judgments are associated with longer response times when under cognitive load and the use of brain regions that control elaborative reasoning and executive functioning, such as the prefrontal cortex (Greene et al., 2004). Research also reveals that emotion suppression can increase the use of utilitarian moral reasoning while decreasing deontological moral reasoning (Lee & Gino, 2015). In a similar vein, ego-defensiveness—provoked by identity-threatening scenarios—is associated with both utilitarian moral reasoning and aggression (Fousiani et al., 2019). Furthermore, utilitarian reasoning for sacrificial moral dilemmas correlate with a greater willingness to harm others (Wiech et al., 2013), an increase in psychopathy and Machiavellianism (Bartels & Pizarro, 2011), and a greater propensity to endorse the belief that "the end justifies the means" (Abumere et al., 2019; Amit & Greene, 2012). These findings hint at the potential of utilitarian reasoning to support the view that the use of violence is an acceptable strategy to achieve political ends.

Some research has explicitly linked ideological violence to deontological moral reasoning. For example, Atran (2016) describes "devoted actors," a group that is likely to engage in ideological violence, as inherently deontological in their moral reasoning. Such individuals are committed to sacred values, beliefs or socio-political positions that they will not abandon even for material tradeoffs, and thereby, according to Atran, engage in rule-bound moral reasoning that determines the morality of an action irrespective of its consequences. The "devoted actor" model of violent extremism is one of the most influential and, it states that violent extremists tend to engage in deontological, and not utilitarian, moral reasoning. While one might readily imagine that the moral steadfastness imposed by high levels of deontological reasoning could potentially fuel support for violence in the pursuit of a cause (for example, a rigid and fanatical devotion to a set of moral rules), it is equally plausible that deontological moral reasoning could act as a deterrent to violence for one's cause (e.g., conscientious objectors; Magil & Dudley, 2008; Wiberg, 1985).

In sum, extant evidence suggests that both utilitarian and deontological moral reasoning could potentially contribute to the endorsement of ideological violence. Critically, moral reasoning, whether utilitarian or deontological, explicitly defines when it is morally acceptable to harm outgroup others in order to advance a cause one perceives as righteous (i.e., ideological violence). It is thus highly relevant to a major question posed in the context of intergroup conflict: When do people consider it morally justifiable to harm outgroup members to advocate for their ingroup? The present research sought to explore whether these distinct moral reasoning frameworks play a role in shaping the well-documented connection between obsessive passion and support for ideological violence.

### **The Present Research**

This study seeks to understand the interplay between ideological passion and moral reasoning in shaping support for ideological violence. Central to our inquiry is the hypothesis that obsessive passion (OP), defined as the overwhelming need to engage in one's ideology, will be positively associated with support for ideological violence (Hypothesis 1). This connection has been substantiated by prior studies, which have shown in a variety of contexts that obsessive, but not harmonious passion for one's ideology are associated with ideological violence (for a review see Bélanger 2021; for a meta-analysis see Wolfowicz et al., 2021). While we are not making a specific prediction about the relationship between harmonious passion and support for ideological violence, we include it in our study measures as a critical comparison point to assess if obsessive passion specifically, and not passion for one's ideology in general. Similarly, though we only make explicit hypotheses related to the effects of key variables on support for violent ideological activism, we also measure peaceful activism to provide a similar comparison point. This is typical for both the study of passion and the study of ideological activism (Bélanger, 2021; Bélanger et al., 2013; 2019; 2022; Vallerand et al., 2003).

Utilitarian reasoning, which evaluates actions based on their outcomes rather than their inherent morality, is hypothesized to amplify the link between OP and violent activism intentions (Hypothesis 2). The foundation of this hypothesis rests on the tenet of utilitarianism that places emphasis on the greater good, even if it necessitates compromising individual ethical boundaries. For individuals with obsessive passion, this reasoning might enable them to rationalize aggressive actions as necessary sacrifices for their ideological objective. If a violent approach is seen as an effective means for advancing a cause one believes will maximize good, it might be justified. In contrast, the influence of deontological reasoning presents a more complex picture. A strict adherence to a moral code, characteristic of deontological reasoning, might lead some to endorse

violence, but only if they believe it aligns with their moral principles (e.g., if their moral code allows violence in that specific context). If this is not the case, deontological reasoning might discourage support for violence, viewing it as intrinsically wrong, regardless of the perceived righteousness of the cause (e.g., it is never morally right to kill another person).

To empirically assess the proposed hypotheses, we first examined three distinct samples in Study 1: Study 1A targeted US Democrats, Study 1B focused on US Republicans, and Study 1C assessed police cadets in Kazakhstan. The inclusion of police cadets from Kazakhstan provides a valuable, additional perspective to test these hypotheses for several reasons. First, Kazakhstan's cultural milieu is very different from that of the US and other Western nations. Kazakhstan is located in central Asia, is predominantly Turkic (e.g., Kazakh, Uzbek) ethnically and Muslim religiously, and, as a former USSR satellite state, has been heavily influenced by neighboring Russia and China. These contextual factors contrast sharply with those of the US. Additionally, this sample allows for the juxtaposition of civilian and law enforcement mindsets. Kazakhstan's police force is directly tied to the central government and is deeply nationalistic and patriotic, with the expectation that police will sacrifice for their government and use violence in service of its sociopolitical objectives. In addition, police, in general, are one of the few groups in any society with legitimated authority to use violence for the sake of maintaining social and political policies (e.g., laws). Because we expect Kazakhstani police cadets to hold different perspective on ideological violence than US civilians, we find the inclusion of this sample helpful to understand if the role of obsessive passion and moral reasoning in ideological violence spans these contexts.

Following Study 1, we conducted Study 2 using an experimental design with a sample of US Democrats. This study manipulated both obsessive passion (OP) and harmonious passion (HP) to further explore the interplay between ideological passion and moral reasoning.

## Studies 1A-1C

### Methods

#### Participants

For each of the studies we assumed medium effect sizes and power set at 0.80, which yielded a suggested sample size of at least 59 participants (G\*Power; Faul et al., 2007). For Studies 1A-1C we recruited US Democratic Party members ( $N=209$ ; 88 women, 121 men, 1 other,  $M_{\text{age}}=36.57$ ,  $SD_{\text{age}}=11.17$ ), US Republican Party members ( $N=114$ ; 45 women, 69 men, 1 other,  $M_{\text{age}}=40.84$ ,  $SD_{\text{age}}=12.34$ ), and police cadets in the Republic of Kazakhstan ( $N=340$ ; 340 men,  $M_{\text{age}}=18.85$ ,  $SD_{\text{age}}=1.25$ ), respectively. To ensure the robustness of our findings, we adopted an oversampling approach. Participants in Studies 1A and 1B were sourced via MTurk and Cloud Research, and they had been pre-qualified as either Democratic or Republican Party supporters before taking our survey, meaning that in a pre-screening survey participants had been presented with a variety of social and political causes (e.g., Republican party, environmentalism) to select as most relevant or important to them and they had selected the Democratic or Republican party and had espoused the ideological (e.g., social and political) positions of that political party. Thus, the ideology of these participants discussed below refers to the official positions of the US Democratic and Republican parties. These participants were provided with financial compensation. For Study 1C, our participants were cadets from police academies in Kazakhstan. Participants were invited to join a voluntary study, presented as an optional activity within their routine duties. Kazakhstan's police force is directly tied to its government and to national civic duty and so, the police cadets in our sample who were undergoing rigorous training to be part of the police force are highly patriotic and motivated by national pride. Thus, the ideological cause most relevant to measure among Kazakhstani police cadets is Kazakhstani nationalism. For

example, questionnaire items were phrased to assess the willingness of a cadet to use violence to protect their nation. The surveys for Studies 1A-1C included an attention check question; participants who failed were removed from the dataset. Because the surveys were designed to be short (about 7 minutes) participants with time scores of more than three standard deviations above the mean were removed. These were the only exclusion criteria applied. All research was approved by the university IRB (masked).

### **Procedure and Materials**

For Studies 1A and 1B, participants were invited to read and digitally sign an informed consent form before continuing to the survey. For Study 1C, cadets at the national police academy were given the opportunity to voluntarily participate in an online survey and also completed an informed consent form before continuing to the survey. For all participants, the study was entirely self-administered (no researchers were present with them while taking the survey) and anonymous. All participants then completed a questionnaire measuring their passion for their ideology (i.e., for Democratic Party, the Republican Party, or Kazakhstani nationalism), their moral reasoning, and support for various forms of ideological activism. For all survey items, please refer to the Supplementary Material File. All data for Studies 1A-1C and Study 2 is available on Open Science Framework at

[https://osf.io/nqr2j/?view\\_only=6e8226cf21a84e4c8495f0d2c75d8af2](https://osf.io/nqr2j/?view_only=6e8226cf21a84e4c8495f0d2c75d8af2).

### ***Passion***

Passion for one's ideology was assessed using the passion scale (Vallerand et al., 2003) which contains 12 statements. The items are identical except for the ideological group for the participants of each of the studies. For example, an item from the harmonious passion subscale (Study 1A  $\alpha=.93$ , Study 1B  $\alpha=.92$ , Study 1C  $\alpha=.83$ ) for the Democratic Party reads, "My

involvement in the Democratic Party is in harmony with other things that are part of me” and an item from the obsessive passion subscale (Study 1A  $\alpha=.91$ , Study 1B  $\alpha=.90$ , Study 1C  $\alpha=.78$ ) for the Democratic Party reads, “I have the impression that my involvement in the Democratic Party controls me.” Both subscales include 6 items and participants were asked to rate each item on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (*do not agree at all*) and 7 (*completely agree*).

### ***Commitment to Ideology***

Four items from the passion scale (Vallerand et al., 2003) measured the degree to which participants are committed to their ideology (Study 1A:  $\alpha = .89$ , Study 1B:  $\alpha = .86$ , Study 1C:  $\alpha = .81$ ). For example, one of the items for Democratic Party participants (Study 1A) reads, “The Democratic Party is important to me”. Participants were asked to rate this item on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (*do not agree at all*) to 7 (*completely agree*). Because it is important to distinguish obsessive and harmonious passion from simply being committed to one’s ideology, we use this measure to statistically account for its variance in affecting violent activism intentions.

### ***Peaceful and Violent Activism Intentions***

To assess the kind of activism participants were willing to engage in for their ideology, participants were presented with 13 statements. The scale contained 7 items measuring willingness to conduct peaceful activism (e.g., for Democratic Party participants, “Organizing fundraising activities for the Democratic Party”; Study 1A  $\alpha=.95$ , Study 1B  $\alpha=.92$ ) and 6 items measuring willingness to conduct violent activism (e.g., for Democratic Party participants, “Physically attacking Republicans”; Study 1A  $\alpha=.93$ , Study 1B  $\alpha=.96$ , Study 1C  $\alpha=.81$ ). Due to survey length limitations, only violent activism intentions, but not peaceful activism intentions, were measured in Study 1C. An example item measuring willingness to conduct violent activism for Study 1C is “I would fight someone insulting or making fun of my country [Kazakhstan].” For

each statement, participants were asked to rate their level of agreement on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (*not agree at all*) to 7 (*very strongly agree*). In addition, participants were given the possibility to pick: “I do not wish to answer” for each of the items presented, as well as the ability to skip any question that they did not wish to answer.

### ***Deontological and Utilitarian Moral Reasoning***

We used the Consequentialist Scale (Robinson, 2017) to measure participants' endorsements of deontological and utilitarian moral reasoning. Participants were asked to rate the degree to which they agree with 10 moral reasoning statements, five of which represent deontological reasoning and five of which represent utilitarian reasoning, on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*completely disagree*) to 5 (*completely agree*). Examples from the deontological subscale (Study 1A  $\alpha=.78$ , Study 1B  $\alpha=.79$ , Study 1C  $\alpha=.86$ ) include, “Some rules should never be broken” and, “If an action is a violation of society's most basic rules it should not be committed; even if it will result in a large amount of good.” An example from the utilitarian subscale (Study 1A  $\alpha=.85$ , Study 1B  $\alpha=.91$ , Study 1C  $\alpha=.87$ ) is, “If rules and laws do not maximize happiness for people they should be ignored.”

## **Results**

The model was tested with standardized predictor variables using Hayes' (2018) PROCESS Macro, using Model 1 to test for moderation. For each study, we tested a model that included obsessive passion as a predictor variable and utilitarian moral reasoning for one's ideology as the moderator variable, and we also included gender, age (gender and age were not included in the model for study 1C, since all participants were male and between age 18 and 23), ideological commitment, deontological moral reasoning, and harmonious passion for one's ideology as predictors. Using Hayes' Process model, this automatically produced, and tested, the

interaction variable between obsessive passion and utilitarian moral reasoning as part of the model. All coefficients reported below are unstandardized. The relationships between all of these variables, including the interaction between utilitarian moral reasoning and obsessive passion, and violent activism intentions were tested simultaneously in this model. Neither gender nor age were significant predictors of violent activism intentions in any of the models. Using this model, we were able to test Hypothesis 1 by assessing the effect of obsessive passion on violent activism intentions, and also to test for Hypothesis 2 by assessing if there was a significant interactive effect of utilitarian moral reasoning and obsessive passion on violent activism intentions. Full regression results for Studies 1A, 1B, and 1C are shown in Tables 1-3 below. Correlations for key variables are displayed in Table 1 in the Supplementary Material File. A visual representation of the results is also displayed in the Supplementary Material File (Figure 1).

For Study 1A ( $N = 209$  US Democrats), our overall model significantly predicted violent activism intentions ( $F(8, 200) = 17.76, p < .001, R^2 = .415$ ). The results revealed that obsessive passion positively predicted violent activism intentions ( $b = 0.43, p < 0.001$ ), supporting Hypothesis 1, and harmonious passion negatively predicted violent activism intentions ( $b = -0.18, p = 0.049$ ). Commitment to the ideological cause was not related to violent activism intentions ( $b = 0.11, p = 0.31$ ). Utilitarian moral reasoning ( $b = 0.26, p = 0.006$ ), but not deontological moral reasoning ( $b = -0.15, p = 0.133$ ) predicted violent activism intentions. Finally, there was a significant interaction between obsessive passion and utilitarian moral reasoning ( $b = 0.16, p = 0.005$ ), supporting Hypothesis 2, such that the greater the levels of utilitarian moral reasoning, the stronger the positive relationship between obsessive passion with violent activism intentions. The  $R^2$  change associated with including this interaction in the model was significant ( $F(1, 200) = 8.19$ ,

$p=.005$ ). Simple slope analyses indicated that at low scores for utilitarianism, the slope coefficient for the relationship between obsessive passion and violent activism intentions was not significant ( $b= 0.22, p = 0.133$ ), but that at mean ( $b= 0.38, p < .001$ ) and high levels of utilitarianism ( $b= 0.61, p < .001$ ), the relationship was significant and increasingly strong.

Insert Table 1 here

For Study 1B ( $N= 114$  US Republicans), our overall model significantly predicted violent activism intentions ( $F(8, 105)= 29.80, p<.001, R^2= 69.42$ ). The results revealed that obsessive passion positively predicted violent activism intentions ( $b= 0.83, p < 0.001$ ), supporting Hypothesis 1, but harmonious passion did not predict violent activism intentions ( $b= -0.002, p = 0.998$ ). Commitment to the ideological cause was not related to violent activism intentions ( $b = -0.22, p = 0.101$ ). Neither utilitarian moral reasoning ( $b = 0.09, p = 0.432$ ), nor deontological moral reasoning ( $b = -0.25, p = 0.108$ ) predicted violent activism intentions. Finally, there was a significant interaction between obsessive passion and utilitarian moral reasoning ( $b = 0.25, p < .001$ ), supporting Hypothesis 2, such that the greater the levels of utilitarian moral reasoning, the stronger the positive relationship between obsessive passion with violent activism intentions. The  $R^2$  change associated with including this interaction in the model was 0.048, which was significant ( $F(1, 105)= 19.36, p < .001$ ). Simple slope analyses indicated that the slope coefficients for the relationship between obsessive passion and violent activism intentions was significant at all levels of utilitarianism, but that they were increasingly large moving from low scores for utilitarianism, ( $b= 0.44, p= 0.007$ ) to mean ( $b= 0.66, p < .001$ ) and high scores for utilitarianism ( $b= 1.09, p < .001$ ).

Insert Table 2 here

For Study 1C ( $N = 340$  Kazakhstani police cadets), our overall model significantly predicted violent activism intentions ( $F(8, 331) = 6.90, p < .001, R^2 = .143$ ). The results revealed that obsessive passion positively predicted violent activism intentions ( $b = 0.27, p = 0.004$ ), supporting Hypothesis 1, but harmonious passion did not predict violent activism intentions ( $b = -0.07, p = 0.444$ ). Commitment to the ideological cause was positively related to violent activism intentions ( $b = 0.19, p = 0.013$ ). Utilitarian moral reasoning ( $b = 0.17, p = 0.004$ ), but not deontological moral reasoning ( $b = -0.06, p = 0.329$ ) predicted violent activism intentions. Finally, there was a significant interaction between obsessive passion and utilitarian moral reasoning ( $b = 0.08, p = 0.045$ ), supporting Hypothesis 2, such that the greater the levels of utilitarian moral reasoning, the stronger the positive relationship between obsessive passion with violent activism intentions. The  $R^2$  change associated with including this interaction in the model was 0.010, which was significant ( $F(1, 331) = 4.03, p = .045$ ). Simple slope analyses indicated that at low scores for utilitarianism, the slope coefficient for the relationship between obsessive passion and violent activism intentions was not significant ( $b = 0.15, p = 0.328$ ), but that at mean ( $b = 0.30, p = 0.006$ ) and high levels of utilitarianism ( $b = 0.44, p < .001$ ), the relationship was significant and increasingly strong.

Insert Table 3 here

In our analysis, the results reveal that across three distinct samples, representing different cultures, nations, and ideologies, obsessive passion for one's ideology was associated with violent activism intentions (supporting Hypothesis 1). Furthermore, in line with our predictions, utilitarian moral reasoning significantly moderated the relationship between obsessive passion for one's ideology and the violent activism intentions for that ideology (supporting Hypothesis 2).

Since Studies 1A-C were correlational, we sought to test the internal validity of our findings by experimentally inducing an obsessive (versus harmonious) mindset among participants in Study 2 and examining the resulting interplay between ideological passion and moral reasoning as predictors of political activism.

## **Study 2**

### **Methods**

#### **Participants**

For Study 2, we recruited a sample of 280 US Democratic Party members (149 women, 130 men, 1 other,  $M_{\text{age}} = 40.88$ ,  $SD_{\text{age}} = 12.54$ ) via MTurk and Cloud Research who had been pre-screened for being members of the US Democratic Party. As before, participants received financial compensation for their participation and the study was approved by the IRB (masked).

#### **Procedure and Materials**

The procedure and materials used in Study 2 were identical to those of Studies 1A-1C, with the exception that passion was manipulated, such that participants were randomly assigned to be in one of two conditions: an obsessive passion condition or a harmonious passion condition. This method of experimentally manipulating passion for an ideological cause has been validated in multiple samples across various ideological contexts (e.g., Belanger et al., 2013; Belanger et al., 2019; Curran et al., 2015; Schellenberg et al., 2016). In the obsessive passion condition, participants were given the following prompt: “Write about a time when you had an almost obsessive feeling for the Democratic Party and you thought that, if you could, you would devote yourself entirely to the Democratic Party. Recall this time vividly and include as many details as you can to relive the experience.” In the harmonious passion condition, they were given the following prompt: “Write about a time when your participation with the Democratic Party was in

harmony with other things that are part of you, and when the new things that you discovered about the Democratic Party allowed you to appreciate it even more. Recall this time vividly and include as many details as you can to relive the experience.” Any participants who did not write at least one sentence, indicated that they had never had such an experience, or wrote about something unrelated to the prompt were removed from the data set. This resulted in the removal of 23 participants. As in the previous studies, Study 2 included an attention check question; participants who failed were removed from the dataset. Because this survey was designed to be short (about 7 minutes) participants with time scores of more than three standard deviations above the mean were removed. Manipulation checks conducted via independent samples *t*-tests demonstrated that participants in the obsessive passion condition exhibited significantly higher levels of obsessive passion ( $M = 2.34$ ,  $SD = 1.47$ ) than those in the harmonious passion condition ( $M = 2.02$ ,  $SD = 1.49$ ,  $t = -1.80$ ,  $p = 0.038$ ). Likewise, participants in the harmonious passion condition exhibited significantly higher levels of harmonious passion ( $M = 4.44$ ,  $SD = 1.33$ ) than those in the obsessive passion condition ( $M = 3.97$ ,  $SD = 1.44$ ,  $t = 2.88$ ,  $p = 0.002$ ). Following the passion manipulation, participants responded to survey items measuring peaceful activism intentions ( $\alpha = .92$ ), violent activism intentions ( $\alpha = .96$ ), utilitarian moral reasoning ( $\alpha = .92$ ), and deontological moral reasoning ( $\alpha = .77$ ) as described in Study 1’s methods.

## Results

The model was tested with standardized predictor variables using Hayes’ (2018) PROCESS Macro, using Model 1 to test for moderation. As in Study 1, we tested a model that included experimental condition (obsessive vs. harmonious passion) as a predictor variable and utilitarian moral reasoning for one’s ideology as the moderator variable, and we also included gender, age, and deontological moral reasoning as predictors. Using Hayes’ Process model, this

automatically produced, and tested, the interaction variable between obsessive passion and utilitarian moral reasoning as part of the model. The relationships between all of these variables, including the interaction between utilitarian moral reasoning and obsessive passion, and violent activism intentions were tested simultaneously in this model. Using this model, we were able to test Hypothesis 1 by assessing the effect of obsessive passion on violent activism intentions, and also to test for Hypothesis 2 by assessing if there was an interactive effect of utilitarian moral reasoning and obsessive passion on violent activism intentions. Full regression results for Study 2 is shown in Table 4 below. Correlations for key variables are displayed in Table 2 in the Supplementary Material File. A visual representation of the results is also displayed in the Supplementary Material File (Figure 2). There were no significant differences in mean scores for participants in the obsessive passion condition for utilitarian ( $M = 2.34$ ,  $SD = 1.01$ ) and deontological moral reasoning ( $M = 3.60$ ,  $SD = 0.73$ ) compared to the harmonious passion condition ( $M_{Utilitarian} = 2.31$ ,  $SD = 0.96$ ;  $M_{Deontological} = 3.53$ ,  $SD = 0.75$ ).

In Study 2 ( $N = 281$  US Democrats), our overall model significantly predicted violent activism intentions ( $F(6, 273) = 41.49$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $R^2 = .310$ ). The results demonstrated that whether participants had been randomly assigned to experience obsessive or harmonious passion for the Democratic Party did not significantly predict their violent activism intentions ( $b = 0.23$ ,  $p = 0.095$ ), although the mean violent activism scores were in the hypothesized directions ( $M_{Harmonious} = 1.49$ ,  $SD = 1.30$ ;  $M_{Obsessive} = 1.74$ ,  $SD = 1.52$ ). Thus, for Study 2 Hypothesis 1 was not directly supported. However, utilitarian moral reasoning was strongly associated with violent activism intentions ( $b = 0.76$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), whereas deontological moral reasoning was not ( $b = 0.03$ ,  $p = .758$ ), and there was a significant interaction between manipulated passion and

utilitarian moral reasoning ( $b = 0.28, p = 0.048$ ), supporting Hypothesis 2. The  $R^2$  change associated with including this interaction in the model was 0.010, which was significant ( $F(1, 273) = 3.91, p = .048$ ). Simple slope analyses revealed that the relationship between utilitarian reasoning and violent activism intentions was significantly stronger when individuals were in the obsessive passion condition ( $b = 0.91, p < .001$ ) than when individuals were in the HP condition ( $b = 0.63, p < .001$ ). These findings provided causal evidence that obsessive passion interacts with utilitarian reasoning to produce more pronounced effects (i.e., increases) on violent activism intentions.

Insert Table 4 here

### **General Discussion**

The primary objective of this study was to deepen our understanding of the relationship between obsessive passion and violent activism intentions, with an emphasis on the moderating role of moral reasoning. Drawing upon existing literature, our hypothesis was anchored in research indicating a strong association between utilitarianism and a reduced aversion to causing harm (Abumere et al., 2019; Amit & Greene, 2012; Bartels & Pizarro, 2011; Wiech et al., 2013). Consequently, we anticipated that individuals with obsessive passion for a cause would display a heightened propensity for violent activism, especially if they adhered to a utilitarian mindset.

Through three cross-sectional studies encompassing ideologically diverse groups, our findings consistently underscored the predictive role of obsessive passion in violent activism intentions, supporting Hypothesis 1. In line with our predictions, this association was amplified with increasing levels of utilitarianism, supporting Hypothesis 2. Our second study, which incorporated experimental manipulations of both harmonious passion and obsessive passion,

further demonstrated the role of utilitarian moral reasoning in moderating the relationship between obsessive passion and violent activism intentions, supporting Hypothesis 2.

Importantly, our research involved both civilian and police cadet samples. These groups each have unique backgrounds—typically US civilians lack combat training and are not legally permitted to use ideological violence, whereas Kazakhstani police cadets undergo rigorous combat training, maintain a culture of civic duty and martial discipline, and can legally engage in ideological violence in support of their government’s policies—providing a valuable basis for comparison. Yet, despite these differences, a consistent motivational pattern emerged: when obsessed about their ideology and using utilitarian reasoning, both groups showed a propensity to morally justify ideological violence. This observation challenges a natural assumption: that due to their distinctly rule-based training, police cadets would gravitate towards deontological moral reasoning regarding the use of violence compared to civilians. However, our findings in both groups emphasize the importance of examining motivational (passion) and moral components of individuals' decisions to support or engage in ideological violence. This is typical of research on ideological violence, which often demonstrates that interactions better explain such behavior (e.g., dark personality traits interact with obsessive passion and group relative deprivation to produce violent activism intentions; see Bélanger et al., 2023; Pavlovic & Franc, 2023).

### **Theoretical Contributions**

One contribution of this study lies in deepening understanding of the relationship between obsessive passion and ideological violence. Existing research has posited that this connection is, in part, a product of goal-shielding, a motivational imbalance that permits the unbridled pursuit of a singular ideology while subduing alternative goals (Bélanger, 2021; Bélanger et al., 2013; 2019; 2022; Köpetz et al., 2011; Kruglanski et al., 2019; 2021). The present research advances this

understanding by demonstrating that this motivational pattern is amplified by utilitarian moral reasoning. While obsessive passion creates self-regulation tendencies that make individuals more likely to engage in counter-final means, such as violent actions, for their ideology, utilitarian reasoning provides them with a moral justification for those actions, thereby increasing their likelihood to use them. Conversely, individuals characterized by harmonious passion maintain a wide array of goals that can be pursued through various and multi-final means (Bélanger et al., 2019). Consequently, even if they were to adopt a utilitarian framework, their more diverse set of goals acts as a safeguard against embracing a "by any means necessary" mindset, as they may recognize that such an approach could jeopardize their other objectives.

This is also in line with major theories of intergroup conflict, which dovetail with Significance Quest Theory and Ideological Obsession Theory (Bélanger, 2021; Kruglanski et al., 2019; 2021). As motivational imbalance increases and obsessive passion for one's ideology grows, ingroup favoritism and outgroup derogation will also increase, resulting in negative attitudes and behaviors towards outgroup members. For example, processes such as feelings of ingroup relative deprivation (Borum, 2011; Moghaddam, 2007), outgroup delegitimization (Bar-Tal, 2000) and dehumanization (Struch & Schwartz, 1989) help connect obsessive passion for one's ideology to violence against ideological outgroups. Utilitarian reasoning seems to amplify these processes by making it easier for ideologically motivated individuals to see outgroup members as numbers in cost-benefit analyses rather than human beings; in such calculations, harming outgroup members is a small price to pay for the greater good that will come from successfully advancing the ingroup's ideology. Styles of moral reasoning, like utilitarianism and deontology, are used to dictate how a person ought to treat others (i.e., social behaviors), including if and when it is justified to harm others. How people treat ingroup others, those with

whom they share social identities, tends to differ from how they treat outgroup others (Sherif & Sherif, 1953; Stephan & Stephan, 2013; Tajfel & Turner, 1979), and moral reasoning is likely to influence these processes. Ideological Obsession Theory suggests that those who have obsessive, rather than harmonious, passion for their cause will perceive those who belong to an opposing ideological group as more threatening than those with harmonious passion for their cause. If ideologically obsessive individuals also engage in utilitarian reasoning, then harming those outgroup others can be justified by the benefits that will be conferred from eliminating the threat they represent and successfully advancing one's cause, and violence becomes a viable means. However, if they engage in deontological reasoning, where the consequences of one's actions are irrelevant to the morality of those actions (i.e., harming people is simply wrong), then it does not matter if those outgroup others represent a threat, and violent means remain difficult to justify.

The second contribution relates to moral reasoning and ideological violence. Prevailing narratives about violent extremism often fall into one of two camps: one portrays extremists as deontological moral absolutists, while the other views them as rational actors making calculated decisions. The deontological perspective posits that violent extremists, particularly those motivated by religious ideologies, are unwavering in their moral convictions, their sacred values. Such individuals are perceived as seeing the world strictly in black and white, incapable of compromise or negotiation due to their strict adherence to a moral code (Atran & Ginges, 2015). Rooted in this perspective is the idea that their propensity for violence emanates from an entrenched sense of deontological outrage over perceived injustices, epitomized by sentiments such as “it’s not right” or “it’s not fair” (Borum, 2011). This states that violent actors are inherently deontologically motivated, since they are unwilling to make material tradeoffs that compromise their “sacred values” (Atran, 2016; Graham, Haidt, & Nosek, 2009; Tetlock, 2003).

On the other hand, the rational actor camp suggests a different narrative. Here, violent extremists are not simply driven by ironclad moral beliefs but are, in essence, strategic players. These individuals continually engage in cost-benefit analyses, weighing the consequences of their actions which might bring them closer to or push them further away from violent activism (Taylor & Horgan, 2006). They may or may not be indoctrinated into the deontological beliefs of their cause but are acting based on perceived outcomes (McCauley & Moskalenko, 2017). Indeed, research on many forms of terrorism, such as suicide bombing, has suggested that groups with relatively low power will engage in those strategies because they perceive them to carry a strategic advantage (Pape, 2003). Commitment to violent extremism has even been considered in as an equation, in which costs, rewards, and alternatives are calculated (Altier et al., 2017, p. 309).

Our research contributes to this ongoing debate and provides some evidence for the latter perspective, suggesting that ideological violence can be understood through a utilitarian lens. Such a viewpoint presents violent extremists as calculating (whether consciously or unconsciously) actors, prepared to employ any means, even if morally contentious, to bring about a society reflecting their ideology. This would be done under the belief that their chosen path, despite its immediate harm, serves *the greater good* in the long run. This perspective is made crystal clear in statements from violent extremists ranging from Trotsky to Bin Laden, who have advocated that if violence against noncombatants is the fastest or most efficient way to bring about a truly just society, then the end justifies violent means (Rapoport, 2013).

The results of our studies also fall in line with previous findings on differences in utilitarian and deontological reasoning. For instance, our findings show that the use of utilitarianism, on average, was predictive of violent activism intentions, but that the use of deontology was not. This follows research on moral reasoning and other violence, like torture.

Torture is never permissible using deontological reasoning, whereas under a utilitarian approach, torture is *necessarily* justified if it could prevent a threat that would harm many (Allhoff, 2003; Dershowitz, 2003). Likewise, research has demonstrated that deontological reasoning is associated with decreased tolerance for violent protest behaviors (even if it is for an ideological cause one agrees with), whereas utilitarian reasoning is associated with increased acceptance of violent protest behaviors for causes deemed worthy; Verkuyten et al., 2023).

### **Limitations**

This study presents several limitations that warrant consideration. Firstly, while we analyzed the effects of moral reasoning and passion on violent activism intentions among participants supporting three distinct ideologies across two countries, this represents merely an initial step in comprehending the relationships between these variables. To enhance the external validity and replicability of our findings, studies across diverse ideological samples are essential. Another potential limitation is the relatively small effect size for interaction in the sample from Study 1C ( $b = 0.08, p = .045$ ). Although statistically significant and in line with the pattern of results from the other studies described here, this finding is not as strong as those in Study 1A and 1B, and should be interpreted cautiously, particularly when considering the unique occupational and cultural differences present in this sample. Similarly, the null effect of the experimental passion manipulation on violent activism scores in Study 2 also dampens the strength of our conclusions, though the fact that the interaction between experimental condition and utilitarian moral reasoning was significant does mitigate this concern. Although this manipulation has been shown to be effective in prior studies (Belanger et al., 2013; Belanger et al., 2019; Curran et al., 2015; Schellenberg et al., 2016), it is possible that because participants in Study 2 completed other measures, although brief, between the manipulation and the violent activism measure, its

effect was diminished. This limitation should be considered in future uses of this manipulation.

Additionally, this research only gauges participants' self-reported violent activism intentions for their cause. It is crucial to note that this, although related, should not be conflated with actual acts of ideological violence. Similarly, mean scores for obsessive passion and violent activism intentions are lower than their counterparts (harmonious passion and peaceful activism intentions), because relatively few people hold an ideological obsession or are willing to carry out ideological violence. This limits the generalizability of the research presented, which must be considered with this information in mind. It should also be considered that these results only account for two facets of ingroup identification (whether or not one identifies with the ideological group in question and the extent to which they are committed to their ideological group), when there may be many facets of ingroup identification that could influence results (see Ellemers, Kortekaas, & Ouwerkerk, 1999). Lastly, this paper only includes the results of one experiment. While this allows us to infer some causality—in this instance, the interplay between obsessive passion and utilitarian reasoning amplifying violent extremism—there is a pressing need for more experimental research to delve deeper into the causal relationships among these variables.

### **Future Research Directions**

Considering the theoretical significance of whether utilitarian or deontological moral reasoning is more strongly associated with violent extremism the present study, more research is on this topic is needed. Likely, both styles of moral reasoning uniquely contribute to violent extremism. Future research should measure the effects of utilitarian and deontological moral reasoning on violent activism using generalizable scales across a variety of ideological groups, as well as within specific contexts, such as local or national conflicts between political parties, racial and ethnic groups, and religious group. Future research should also include more experimental

work in which moral reasoning, rather than passion, is manipulated, to more directly assess the relationships between moral reasoning, passion, and violent extremism.

### **Prevention Implications**

The results of our research make a novel contribution: utilitarian, but not deontological, moral reasoning interacts with obsessive passion for one's ideology to increase willingness to engage in violent extremism. This is potentially useful information for those involved in preventing and countering violent extremism (PCVE) efforts. Developing new interventions aimed at assessing and modifying moral reasoning, specifically to reduce utilitarian moral reasoning in specific circumstances, may be a fruitful avenue for PCVE. Previous interventions to reduce moral disengagement (e.g., morally justifying violence by dehumanizing outgroup members), which is common among individuals with obsessive passion for their ideology (Bélanger, 2019), has been met with some success in programs like the "Beyond Bali" PCVE program in Australia (Davies, 2018; Taylor et al., 2017). The program aims to develop students' moral reasoning capabilities by having them think about the 2002 Bali Bombing and comparing its events with the values they hold. This moral engagement (rather than disengagement) may reduce support for violent extremism because it encourages participants to use deontological moral reasoning—i.e., to consider that some deontological "lines in the sand" are worth upholding regardless of the consequences. Another PCVE program, "Philosophy for Children" also presents ethical dilemmas (e.g., "Is it ever OK to steal") to children as a means of developing their moral reasoning (Davies, 2018). This program has also met with some success, increasing participants' empathy, cooperative behaviors, and tolerance for others (Gorard et al., 2015). Such programs may benefit from the knowledge gained in this study—that is, it may be more beneficial for these programs to promote deontological moral reasoning over utilitarian moral reasoning for

some cases (e.g., “It is never OK to use violence for what you believe”), but far more research should be conducted on these topics before any strong conclusions can be drawn. Indeed, it seems plausible, based on the evidence from the studies we present here, that educational prevention efforts and reintegration programs that promote deontological stances in some cases may be successful in limiting the moral accessibility of the “by any means necessary” attitude permitted by pure utilitarianism that, in part, seems to drive violent extremism.

### **Conclusion**

Images of political protests often fill the news, sometimes showing peaceful demonstrations and other times showing illegal, violent behavior. How and why one person who is passionate for an ideological cause will engage in peaceful activism, while another will engage in violent activism is a pressing question. Research has already demonstrated that part of this difference in behavior is attributable to a difference in ideological passion: obsessively passionate individuals are more likely to do violence for their cause. Previously, it was not clear how (if at all) moral reasoning was related to violent extremism or how it played a role in explaining why obsessively passionate individuals are more willing to engage in ideological violence than harmoniously passionate individuals. This set of studies takes an important first step in answering that question. Not only did utilitarian, but not deontological, moral reasoning predict violent activism intentions, but it also moderated the relationship that obsessive passion had with violent activism intentions, significantly strengthening it. Thus, our findings highlight the importance of considering both the motivational and moral aspects of support for ideological violence. The results provide initial evidence of an important effect: utilitarian moral reasoning, but not deontological moral reasoning, seems to grease the socio-cognitive wheels that produce ideological violence by enabling obsessively passionate individuals to believe that violent means

are morally permissible to achieve the ideological goals that they believe will ultimately serve the greater good.

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