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# Psychological responses to jihadist terrorism: Exploring a small but significant opinion shift towards minority inclusion among French citizens in response to the Charlie Hebdo terrorist attacks

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## Abstract

Experiences with jihadist terrorism sparked debates about the boundaries of religious expression within secular societies. Standpoints majority members hold in such discussions may be inclusive or exclusive towards religious minorities and inform wider intergroup perceptions. The present research explores these relationships in the context of the 2015 Charlie Hebdo terrorist attacks in Paris, France. Using longitudinal data from a diverse French sample ( $N = 558$ ) collected before and after the attacks, we test whether within-person changes in exclusionary and inclusionary interpretations of the French Laïcité principle can account for changes in public perceptions of context-relevant minorities. Meta-analytical findings suggest a small significant conservative shift after experiences with terrorism. Previous research conducted in the context of the Charlie Hebdo terrorist attacks departed from this pattern, however, without identifying underlying psychological mechanisms. Accordingly, the present data suggests a small but significant opinion shift in favor of context-relevant minorities. This shifting was partially explained through an increased endorsement of an inclusionary interpretation of the Laïcité principle that stresses the freedom of religious expression. We offer a contextualized interpretation of our data, suggesting that the collective coping dynamics that followed the events (i.e., republican marches, #JeSuisCharlie) have been critical for the observed effects.

## KEYWORDS

Charlie Hebdo, conservative shift, Laïcité, prejudice, secularism, terrorism

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Within the last two decades, Europe has witnessed an unprecedented number of jihadist terrorist attacks. Consistent with the long-standing interest of political psychologists for the study of societal threat (Duckitt & Fisher, 2003), researchers have tried to understand the impact that terrorist attacks pose on the general population (Brouard et al., 2018; Van de Vyver et al., 2016). Several meta-analyses (Godefroidt, 2022; Jost et al., 2017) suggest that people tend to become more authoritarian, more conservative, and more hostile towards ethno-religious minorities following terrorist attacks—a pattern that has been articulated by the so-called *conservative shift hypothesis* (Jost et al., 2003). However, some puzzling results that do not match this general trend exist. The goal of the present study is to offer a deeper look at these conflicting results by presenting original data from a research project conducted in France that was specifically designed to better understand how collective experiences with jihadist terrorism affect the perceptions that majority members hold towards contextually relevant minorities.

At the heart of this project lies a concern with the role of national models of immigration and integration as elements of the sociopolitical context that can influence intergroup relations (Guimond et al., 2014). Whereas up to 2001, debates about immigration centered around issues of cultural, ethnic, or racial diversity, the role of religious diversity came to the fore more recently. More specifically, experiences with jihadist terrorism sparked debates about the boundaries of religious expression within secular societies. These debates took particularly acute forms in France, home to one of the largest Muslim minorities in Europe, and prototype of a country with a secularism policy denoted by the concept of *Laïcité* (Koopmans, 2013). After describing the development of this secularism policy and summarizing research on the effects of terrorism, we will consider how the level of support for such a policy within the French population may have had an important bearing on the response that occurred following the Charlie Hebdo terrorist attacks.

### ***Laïcité*: A political framework to manage relations between people with different spiritual beliefs**

With the law of 1905, the so-called *Laïcité principle* was introduced in France to organize the separation between the Church and the State (Maclure & Taylor, 2011; Roebroek & Guimond, 2015). Its main goal was to ensure that the French republican values of freedom, equality, and fraternity (i.e., *liberté, égalité, fraternité*) can serve as guiding principles for all French citizens independent of their spiritual and agnostic beliefs. Government representatives and public institutions were separated from religious bodies and interests in order to guarantee citizens' freedom of conscience, the right to believe or not to believe.

Scholars noted that in the 1990s in response to changing conditions and several “headscarf” affairs in schools, a reinterpretation of the *Laïcité* principle has found its way into French society (Baubérot, 2015; Jennings, 2000). Other than its original definition, this reinterpretation of the *Laïcité* principle demands the expression of religious neutrality not only from public bodies and agents but from each citizen who is navigating the public sphere (Akan, 2009; Baubérot, 2015). Some have argued that reinterpreting *Laïcité* in such a way may counteract the inclusion of cultural minorities into society by constraining possibilities of religious expression in public settings (e.g., Roebroek & Guimond, 2016). Freedman (2004) exemplifies this argument based on discussions on whether *Laïcité* is compatible with the expression of religious symbols in schools, noting that this topic is primarily linked to questions such as whether Muslim girls should be allowed to wear headscarves in classrooms or not. In fact, in 2004 the French government implemented a law that forbids public school pupils to show obvious religious symbols, thus forwarding a rather restrictive interpretation of the *Laïcité* principle.

Empirical research corroborated the existence of two conceptually distinct lay interpretations of the Laïcité principle thereby defining *Historical Laïcité* as a universalist interpretation reflecting the liberal position of the law of 1905, and, *Neo-Laïcité* as a confining interpretation reflecting the law of 2004 banning religious signs in public schools (Nugier & Guimond, 2016; Roebroek & Guimond, 2016). The aim of the present research is to test not only whether and how these different lay conceptions of the Laïcité principle translate into intergroup perceptions but also their possible role in shaping majority responses to jihadist terrorism. Whereas the concept of Laïcité is somewhat unique to the French context, tensions between more egalitarian approaches to cultural and religious diversity (i.e., Historical Laïcité) as opposed to more assimilationist ones (i.e., as embodied by Neo-Laïcité) have obvious connections with broader international concerns with expressions of religious identity in secular societies.

## The Laïcité principle as a malleable ideology

Despite being introduced as a cultural principle that promotes equality and inclusion, there is evidence that Laïcité may be exploited as an ideological corpus that legitimizes exclusionary standpoints towards cultural minorities. Experimental research conducted by Roebroek and Guimond (2018) showed that counterintuitively, people with high social dominance orientation could embrace Laïcité under conditions of heightened symbolic threat. This observation confirms a key hypothesis of the theory of malleable ideologies (Knowles et al., 2009): Under threat, people with anti-egalitarian worldviews can adjust the meaning of egalitarian concepts to defend existing sociopolitical hierarchies. Extending research suggested that the concept of Neo-Laïcité may indeed serve social dominance goals (Adam-Troian et al., 2018). Based on correlational and experimental results, Adam-Troian et al. (2019) concluded that Neo-Laïcité is used by high national identifiers to define intergroup boundaries and legitimize unfavorable views of immigrants.

In sum, research suggests that embracing Laïcité may entail contrasting motivations with different effects on how majority members perceive cultural minorities. If conceptualized in inclusive and egalitarian terms, Historical Laïcité should be tolerant towards religious diversity and favorable towards minorities. Conversely, if conceptualized in exclusive and antiegalitarian terms, Laïcité should be intolerant towards religious diversity and unfavorable towards minorities. Given these competing interpretations of Laïcité and their potentially opposing relationships with intergroup perceptions, we consider it to be important to better understand how lay conceptions of Laïcité evolve in response to religiously motivated terrorism.

## The Charlie Hebdo attacks and the republican marches

On January 7, 2015, two jihadist terrorists targeted the headquarters of the French satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo*,<sup>1</sup> killing 12 people, and leaving several wounded. Two days later, French police officers killed the two perpetrators as well as a third accomplice who was responsible for the killing of a police officer and the death of four hostages in a kosher supermarket. We refer collectively to these three days of terror as the Charlie Hebdo terrorist attacks. The satirical outlet *Charlie Hebdo* weekly publishes sociocritical content in the form of cartoons and texts, which had raised controversial public debates as well as lawsuits filed by

<sup>1</sup><https://charliehebdo.fr/>

political and religious agents. However, the conflicts escalated when the magazine published cartoons of the Islamic prophet Muhammed. In 2011, the magazine became the victim of a firebomb and hacking attack, and in 2013 death-calls from Al-Qaeda were posed at *Charlie Hebdo's* chief editor.

The attacks at Charlie Hebdo and the subsequent murders strongly reinforced the public discourse about the meaning of Laïcité. Starting as an online phenomenon, the hashtag #JeSuisCharlie (engl.: #IamCharlie) rapidly became an international synonym for the condemnation of the terrorist attacks. On the days of January 10–11, around 3.7 million people including 40 world leaders and representatives of all major religious groups participated in nationwide *republican marches* to express solidarity with the victims of the attacks and to highlight the republican values of freedom, equality, and fraternity. Efforts from the radical right to capitalize from the marches failed as data showed that the rallies were widely driven by attempts to promote an inclusionary understanding of the French republican principles (Mayer & Tiberj, 2016; Zerhouni et al., 2016). On first sight, this conclusion might seem at odds with the considerable body of research suggesting that terrorist experiences tend to foster exclusionary viewpoints among majority populations. However, as we will show in the following paragraph, the existing literature on human responses to terrorism is considerably inconsistent.

## Changes in intergroup perceptions after terrorist experiences

Observations from the aftermath of terrorist acts such as the London and Madrid train bombings indicate that terrorist experiences gravitate societies towards authoritarianism and anti-immigrant sentiments (Canetti-Nisim et al., 2009; Echebarria-Echabe & Fernández-Guede, 2006; Van de Vyver et al., 2016). Such findings corroborate the prediction of the conservative shift hypothesis that individuals tend to embrace exclusionary viewpoints in response to threats (Jost et al., 2003). Consistently, a recent meta-analysis based on experimental, cross-sectional, and longitudinal studies suggested a small but significant impact of terrorism on outgroup hostility, conservative shifting, and rally-around the flag effects (Godefroidt, 2022). The findings corroborate an earlier review conducted by Jost et al. (2017) which reported conservative shifting in response to a range of threats, including, among others, terrorism. Despite meta-analytical evidence for the conservative hypothesis, a noticeable number of empirical exceptions justify further investigation.

For instance, a recent contribution by Van Hauwaert and Huber (2020) reported no increase in outgroup prejudice in response to the November 2015 Paris terrorist attacks in a representative French sample. What the authors did observe, however, was an increase in perceived ingroup solidarity indicated by higher levels of experienced social cohesion, societal integration, and institutional trust. Comparably, a multiple country analysis conducted by Larsen et al. (2020) provided no evidence for ideological shifts or increased outgroup prejudice in response to the 2016 Christmas Market attack in Berlin, Germany, with one notable exception: a more positive perception of the European Union. Finally, based on a set of cross-sectional French samples collected during the years 2015–2016, Brouard et al. (2018) observed a significant right-wing shift tendency among left leaners and centrists which, however, was limited to security issues (e.g., border monitoring and law enforcement). Notably, the effect did not apply to topics with arguably stronger intergroup implications such as immigration policies, welfare policies, and gender equality.

Particularly relevant for the present research context, some researchers evaluated public responses to the Charlie Hebdo attacks in France and other European countries. As outlined by Mayer and Tiberj (2016), annual surveys conducted in France provided no evidence that the jihadist terrorist attacks in Paris in January 2015 (Charlie Hebdo), nor the November 2015 (Bataclan, Stade de France) had increased self-reported levels of racism, islamophobia, or

antisemitism. On the contrary, the described annual data suggested a relative increase in tolerance towards different minority groups between March 2015 and January 2016 across the political spectrum (cf. Mayer et al., 2017). Castanho Silva (2018) analyzed data from the seventh round of the European Social Survey (ESS) and included the Charlie Hebdo attacks as a natural experiment but found no systematic shifts in outgroup attitudes or policy preferences neither in France nor in a pooled set of European countries. Investigating the same dataset but with a different analytical strategy, Savelkoul et al. (2022) found increased resistance towards Muslim immigrants in a pooled sample of six European countries. A closer look at the data, however, revealed that this effect was due to conservative shifts in Ireland and in the Czech Republic. Particularly relevant for the present research, Savelkoul et al.'s analyses suggested a *decrease* in outgroup prejudice among French participants. Finally, again using ESS data, Solheim (2021) reached an intermediate conclusion: The Charlie Hebdo attack did produce conservative shifts outside but not inside France.

In short, existing cross-sectional evidence on the effect of the Charlie Hebdo attacks on the French population does not provide clear results allowing us to distinguish between null effects (something that can be accommodated within the conservative shift hypothesis), and a reverse effect, that would imply the existence of alternative mechanisms. Moreover, previous research yielded no support that intergroup competition (Savelkoul et al., 2022) or intergroup anxiety (Castanho Silva, 2018) moderated public opinion shifts in response to the Charlie Hebdo attacks. Thus, the question about the involved psychological mechanisms calls for further investigation.

In the present research, we reexamine the described issues and conflicting results using longitudinal data from a research project designed to examine effects of the Charlie Hebdo terrorist attacks on the French population. The presented dataset includes self-reports from over 500 people from the general French population collected in December 2014 (i.e., shortly before the attacks) and in July 2015 (i.e., approximately six months after the attack). The dataset therefore allows us to assess intraindividual attitude change effects that occurred between the two measurement points. Moreover, by assessing support for two competing lay interpretations of the Laïcité principle (i.e., Historical Laïcité and Neo-Laïcité), we can test to what extent these two distinct sociocultural organizing principles can inform changes in the perception of context-relevant minorities among the majority population.

## Using Laïcité to explain changes in intergroup evaluations in response to the Charlie Hebdo attacks

We are aware of two previous research projects that outlined interplays between the Charlie Hebdo attacks, support for Laïcité, and intergroup perceptions. The first project was conducted by Cohu et al. (2016) and included a comparison of three cross-sectional French samples, each of them either collected before the attacks ( $N=65$ ), up to two weeks after ( $N=56$ ), or two to four weeks ( $N=41$ ) after the attacks. In line with the conservative shift hypothesis and hence in contrast to some of the outlined ESS data, Cohu et al. (2016) observed an increase in outgroup prejudice immediately after the attacks. Prejudice levels, however, returned to baseline after two to four weeks. The authors also observed an unexpected change in the zero-order correlation pattern between their samples when it came to participants' support for Laïcité. Whereas in the first two samples Laïcité support was negatively associated with prejudice and social dominance orientation, these relationships reversed in the last sample. In accordance with the previously outlined idea of Laïcité as a malleable ideological framework, the authors speculated that the reversed correlation coefficients could have indicated a shift in the social representation of Laïcité from an inclusionary to an exclusionary worldview. It is important to note, however, that the authors

measured Laïcité based on items that did not allow an empirical distinction between Historical Laïcité and Neo-Laïcité.

A second research project conducted by Nugier and Guimond (2016) manipulated the salience of different intergroup ideologies to test their effects on perceived symbolic and realistic threat, as well as on group bias. Two experimental conditions manipulated the salience of Neo-Laïcité and colorblind-equality. Colorblind-equality overlaps with Historical Laïcité in that both concepts incorporate the idea that people should be treated in the same way regardless of differences in race, culture, or religion (Guimond et al., 2014). However, like Laïcité, colorblindness is a malleable ideology that despite its egalitarian default characteristic can be interpreted in egalitarian and antiegalitarian ways (Knowles et al., 2009). Depending on its interpretation, colorblindness may therefore counteract (e.g., Guimond et al., 2014; Wollast et al., 2023) or legitimize prejudice (e.g., Bonilla-Silva, 2015; Neville et al., 2000; for a meta-analysis on the effect of colorblindness on prejudice, see Whitley Jr. & Webster, 2019). The manipulation used by Nugier and colleagues (Nugier & Guimond, 2016) emphasized an egalitarian interpretation of colorblindness thus contrasting their manipulation of Neo-Laïcité.

Because the experiment was conducted between November 2014 and February 2015, Nugier and Guimond (2016) included the Charlie Hebdo attacks as a natural independent variable. They observed a significant interaction suggesting that participants' post-attacks opinions varied as a function of salient intergroup ideologies. In the control condition which included no salient intergroup ideology, ingroup bias increased between the two time points (therefore supporting the conservative shift hypothesis). In the Neo-Laïcité condition, a similar trend was observed. However, in the colorblind-equality condition, participants reported reduced ingroup bias and lower threat experience after the attacks. The authors interpreted these different patterns in accordance with terror management theory (e.g., Jonas et al., 2008) as follows: Whereas in the control condition, participants swayed towards exclusion, a salient cultural worldview of colorblind-equality offered an alternative normative framework to remedy terror-induced fears in an inclusionary manner. The experiment also included two additional experimental conditions making salient the ideology of assimilation and multiculturalism respectively. There was no consistent effect of these conditions on the dependent variables. Thus, only the republican egalitarian worldview was apparently able, when salient, to orient participants towards inclusion.

The described results align with existing debates on the impact of terrorism on public opinion. For instance, due to a lack of longitudinal observations, controversy remains about the persistence of terrorism-induced opinion shifts (e.g., Arvanitidis et al., 2016). Additionally, there is an ongoing scholarly debate about whether and to what extent different symbolic frameworks may offer remedy against intrapsychological states of threat (cf. Jonas et al., 2014; Jost et al., 2017). If we turn to the behavioral level, we find that majority responses to jihadist terrorism are equally mixed. On the one hand, in the aftermath of jihadist terrorist attacks increases in violent actions against minorities are frequently reported. The Charlie Hebdo attacks are no exception in this regard, as the events triggered several anti-Muslims acts, such as attacks on Muslim places of worship (cf. Godefroidt, 2022). On the other hand, Anier et al. (2019) observed a significant decrease in discrimination against Muslim targets immediately after the Charlie Hebdo attacks based on a behavioral discrimination measure in a lab setting.

How could considering Laïcité help to resolve these controversies? We have outlined that Laïcité is a malleable ideology that might incorporate inclusionary and exclusionary visions of intergroup relationships and that these different outlooks are captured by the concepts of Historical Laïcité and Neo-Laïcité, respectively. Assuming further that embracing any of these interpretations can provide guidance for how to cope with terrorist-induced fears, different directions of public opinion shifts are possible. Finally, taking into account that the Charlie Hebdo attacks were followed by huge solidarity campaigns on the streets

and online, previous findings suggesting an inclusionary shift after the events appear less paradoxical.

## PRESENT RESEARCH

Overall, evidence regarding the effect of the Charlie Hebdo attacks on public opinion is puzzling. Yet, knowing whether psychological responses to terrorism can vary as a function of the level of support for a political model is an important question for the political psychology of terrorism. Accordingly, the present data aims to test whether endorsing different interpretations of Laïcité can account for changes in intergroup perceptions following the Charlie Hebdo terrorist attacks that occurred in January 2015 in Paris, France. We also address shortcoming in some previous context-related research such as limitations emerging from small and/or specific (e.g., student-based) samples, from measurements that are insensitive to the distinct meanings of Laïcité, as well as from independent cross-sectional datasets.

### Hypotheses

Following the tenets of the conservative shift hypothesis, the Charlie Hebdo attacks should fuel negative perceptions of minorities among the French majority. Moreover, as jihadist terrorism raises debates about the place of religion within secular societies, one could expect such attitude shifting to be at least partially carried by an embracement of an exclusionary vision of Laïcité, namely, Neo-Laïcité. Even if evidence seems to support the conservative shift hypothesis on a general scale, some previous work leaves considerable room for doubt that conservative shifting occurred in France in response to the Charlie Hebdo attacks. Indeed, the Charlie Hebdo attacks were followed by the biggest solidarity marches in French history at that time and triggered an international online solidarity campaign promoted through the iconic hashtag #JeSuisCharlie. Research suggests that collective solidarity reflects an important tool to rebuild resilience and to strengthen social cohesion after the experience of collective trauma (Garcia & Rimé, 2019; Włodarczyk et al., 2016). Thus, there is reason to believe that the collective coping efforts that occurred in response to the Charlie Hebdo attacks could have improved the image of minorities among the French majority. A key argument that we put to test here is that Historical Laïcité, a concept that stresses intergroup equality and inclusion when considering the place of religion within society, could account for such a potential inclusionary shifting. We formulate these competing hypotheses more formally as follows:

**H1.** Under consideration of the powerful collective coping responses that followed the events and under consideration of previous context-related findings, we expect perceptions of minorities to become more positive in response to the attacks.

**H1b.** Such “inclusionary shifting” should at least partially result from an increased endorsement of Historical Laïcité.

**H2.** Following the conservative shift hypothesis, we expect perceptions of minorities to become more negative in response to the attacks.

**H2b.** Such “conservative shifting” should at least partially result from an increased endorsement of Neo-Laïcité.

TABLE 1 Sample characteristics.

Age (years)	Mean = 49.4; SD = 14.2; range = 18–78
Gender	46.5% female; 53.5% male
Nationality	French = 96.8%; French & Other = 1.8%; Other = 1.4%
Region (France)	South-East = 25.6%; North-West = 24.7%; North-East = 18.1%; Paris Region = 17.6%; South-West = 14%
Religion	Catholic = 56.3%; Protestant = 2.3%; Atheist/Agnostic = 34.8%; Jewish = 1.1%; Hindu and Buddhist = .4%; Other = 5.2%
Formal Education	No diploma = 10.2%; Primary school = 24.4%; High school = 38.7%; University I (Bachelor) = 14.2%; University II (Master and above) = 12.5%
Professional Situation	Employee = 55.6%; Retired = 28.9%; Unemployed = 5.7%; Houseman/Housewife = 4.5%; Student/Apprentice = 2.9%; Other = 1.8%; Nondisclosure = .7%

## PROCEDURE AND MATERIAL

### Data and participants

The present research uses parts of a larger dataset that examines evaluations of intergroup policies and intergroup perceptions<sup>2</sup>. The data broadly represents the adult French society in terms of gender, age, and regional residency. The data has been collected online in two waves by the polling firm YouGov from December 22, 2014, to December 31, 2014 (i.e., pre-attacks), and from July 16 to July 27, 2015 (i.e., post-attacks). Each wave included a sample of  $N = 1,000$  participants. Respondents were matched to a sampling frame on gender, age, and residence in one of five larger French regions. The frame was constructed based on population marginals provided by the National Institute of Statistics and Economic Studies. To allow tests of within-person variation, the present analysis includes only data of participants that completed the survey before and after the Charlie Hebdo attacks ( $N = 574$ ). Since previous literature had associated one of our key measures with Muslim-skepticism among majority members (i.e., Neo-Laïcité), we excluded participants who self-identified as Muslims from the analysis ( $n = 16$ ). Applying these criteria resulted in an effective sample size of  $N = 558$ . A sensitivity power analysis conducted with the GPower software (Faul et al., 2007) for two-tailed paired sample  $t$ -tests suggested a minimum detectable effect size of  $d = .12$  given  $\alpha = .005$ ;  $\beta = .80$ . Table 1 provides an overview of the sample's characteristics. As shown in the table, the sample is diverse in terms of age, gender, and occupation and includes participants from all regions of France.

### Material

Unless otherwise indicated, responses were given on 5-point scales ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). Note that while we only provide item examples in the material section, a full list of items in French and English can be found in Appendix S1 in the online supporting information.

<sup>2</sup>Other parts of the data were used in Wollast, R., Lüders, A., Nugier, A., Khamzina, K., de la Sablonnière, R., & Guimond, S. (2023). Social dominance and anti-immigrant prejudice: A cross-national and prospective test of the mediating role of assimilation, multiculturalism, colour blindness, and interculturalism. *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 53, 167–182. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ejsp.2895>

**TABLE 2** Two factors extracted based on an oblimin-rotated principal component analysis and eigenvalues >1.

Items	Factor loadings (before attacks)		Factor loadings (after attacks)	
	Historical Laïcité	Neo-Laïcité	Historical Laïcité	Neo-Laïcité
“First and foremost, our society is made up of citizens, not communities.”	.89	–	.87	–
“Recognizing the equality of all citizens regardless of origin or religion is an important principle.”	.89	–	.89	–
“I think it's normal that visible religious signs are banned from public schools.”	–	.88	–	.91
“As far as possible, religious practices should be private rather than public.”	–	.87	–	.90

Note: The amount of explained variance in Laïcité support of both factors were 77.95% (pre-attacks) and 79.49% (post-attacks), respectively.

## Support for Laïcité

To measure lay interpretations of Laïcité, we asked participants to indicate their agreement to a set of items used in previous research (e.g., Kamiejski et al., 2012). Note that in the post-attacks survey, the scales were shortened to reduce processing time. In one case, a new item was introduced. To ensure equality between measurements for both time points, we only included items that were consistent across both survey waves. Repeating the analysis with the full set of items, however, provided similar results (cf. Appendix S2.2.1 in the online supporting information). The main analysis included four items of which two assessed participants' endorsement of Historical Laïcité. “*First and foremost, our society is made up of citizens, not communities*”; “*Recognising the equality of all citizens regardless of origin or religion is an important principle.*” Another two items assessed endorsement of Neo-Laïcité. “*As far as possible, religious practices should be private rather than public*”; “*I think it's normal to ban visible religious signs from public schools.*”

Table 2 shows the results of an oblimin-rotated principal component analysis supporting the proposed two-dimensional distinction for both time points. Mean-based composite indicators showed acceptable internal consistency for both scales before and after the attacks  $\alpha_{\text{Historical Laïcité, W1}} = .74, r = .59, p < .001$ ;  $\alpha_{\text{Historical Laïcité, W2}} = .71, r = .55, p < .001$ ;  $\alpha_{\text{Neo-Laïcité, W1}} = .69, r = .53, p < .001$ ;  $\alpha_{\text{Neo-Laïcité, W2}} = .77, r = .63, p < .001$ .

## Perception of minorities

Participants were asked to indicate their perception of different majority and minority groups on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (*very negative*) to 5 (*very positive*). For our key measure, we averaged participants' perceptions of three contextually relevant minorities, namely Arabs, Muslims, and Maghrebians. An oblimin-rotated principal component analyses supported the proposed unidimensional structure in both waves (Item-loadings >.80, explained variance >87%). Cronbach alpha scores indicated good reliability for the obtained composite score,  $\alpha_{\text{W1}} = .94$ ;  $\alpha_{\text{W2}} = .93$ . Appendix S2.2.3 in the online supporting information reports the results for the complete list of groups.

## General prejudice

We measured general prejudice with six items borrowed from previous research (e.g., Damburn & Guimond, 2004). The items included statement such as “*Today, there are too many immigrants living in France*” and “*If the unemployment rate is high, it is usually because immigrants are taking away the jobs from the French.*” Composite indicators based on mean scores indicated good internal consistency of  $\alpha_{W1} = .84$ ;  $\alpha_{W2} = .81$ .

## Ideological self-placement

We measured ideological self-placement with a one-item measure asking participants to self-locate on a continuum ranging from 0 (*far left*) to 10 (*far right*).

# RESULTS

## Analytical strategy

All analyses were conducted via IBM SPSS v25. We estimated pre- versus post-attacks mean differences via paired-sample *t*-tests and within-subject indirect effects with the MEMORE SPSS plugin v2.1 (Montoya & Hayes, 2017). Table 3 shows zero-order correlation coefficients and descriptives for the reported variables.

## Did the attacks cause changes in the perception of minorities?

Yes, results of a paired sample *t*-test suggested an inclusionary shift in response to the attacks,  $t(557) = -3.31$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $d = -.14$ , 95% CI [-.22; -.06]. The findings therefore support Hypothesis 1 which predicted a more favorable perception of minorities among majority members in response to the attacks (Table 3). Consequently, the results reject Hypothesis 2 which predicted a conservative shift. The reported effects concerned majority members' perception of North Africans, Arabs, and Muslims. However, supplementary analyses indicated that the observed pattern extended to minorities in general (Appendix S2.2.2 in the online supporting information). Conversely, no evidence was found for shifts in ingroup perceptions.

## Did the attacks cause changes in general prejudice?

No, contrary to the above results, reported level of general prejudice did not significantly differ before and after the attacks,  $p = .466$ . The findings hence limit the applicability of Hypothesis 1 to more general perceptions of minorities but reject H1 for prejudice.

## Did participants change their support of Laïcité after the attacks?

Yes, paired-sample *t*-test results indicated that the attacks had caused a significant increase in participants' support for both, Neo-Laïcité,  $t(557) = -3.01$ ,  $p = .001$ ,  $d = -.13$ , 95% CI [-.21; -.04], and, Historical Laïcité,  $t(557) = -2.81$ ,  $p = .003$ ,  $d = -.12$ , 95% CI [-.20; -.04] (Table 3).

TABLE 3 Descriptives and zero-order correlations of reported variables.

	Before attacks				After attacks					
	Neo-Laïcité	Historical Laïcité	Minority perception	Prejudice	Ideology	Neo-Laïcité	Historical Laïcité	Minority perception	Prejudice	Ideology
NL		.20***	-.12**	.07	-.07	NL	.25***	-.11**	.07	-.03
HL			.41***	-.48***	-.23***	HL		.37***	-.42***	-.25***
MP				-.68***	-.30***	MP			-.62***	-.28***
Prej.					.44***	Prej.				.48***
Mean	4.18**	3.89**	2.62***	3.11	5.05*	Mean	4.29**	2.73***	3.13	5.20*
SD	.80	.92	.98	.87	2.63	s.d.	.82	.93	.83	2.59

Note: Significant correlations and within-subject mean differences between both survey waves (two-sided) indicated as \*\*\* $p < .001$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \* $p < .05$ .

## Did changes in support for Laïcité explain changes in the perception of minorities?

Yes, in accordance with Hypothesis 1b, a within-subject indirect effect model (Montoya & Hayes, 2017) suggested that changes in the endorsement of Historical Laïcité significantly accounted for the observed inclusionary shift.

In the applied within-subject multiple mediator model, the relative change in the perception of minorities from time one to time two represents the total effect,  $b = -.11$ ,  $SE = .03$ ,  $p < .001$  95% CI  $[-.18; -.05]$ . Indirect effects were calculated as the product of an observed change in a mediator “M” and the average effect of that same mediator on a dependent variable “Y” at both time points. Qualitatively speaking, an indirect effect reflects the amount of change in “Y” (i.e., perception of minorities) that is explained by one mediator “M1” (e.g., change in Historical Laïcité) while controlling for a second mediator “M2” (e.g., change in Neo-Laïcité). Significance testing for indirect effects was achieved through bootstrap resampling. We considered an indirect effect to be significant if an obtained 95% bootstrap interval from 10,000 bootstrap samples did not contain zero.

The estimated indirect effect of Historical Laïcité was  $b = -.02$ ,  $SE = .01$ ; 95% CI  $[-.03; -.003]$  suggesting that participants' self-reported perceptions of minorities increased by .2 scale units due to an increased support for Historical Laïcité. Conversely, Neo-Laïcité did not prove to be a significant mediator,  $b = .001$ ,  $SE = .004$ ; 95% CI  $[-.01; .01]$ . The direct effect marking opinion shifts without the two mediators was significant,  $b = -.092$ ,  $SE = .033$ ; 95% CI  $[-.16; -.03]$ ,  $p = .006$ .

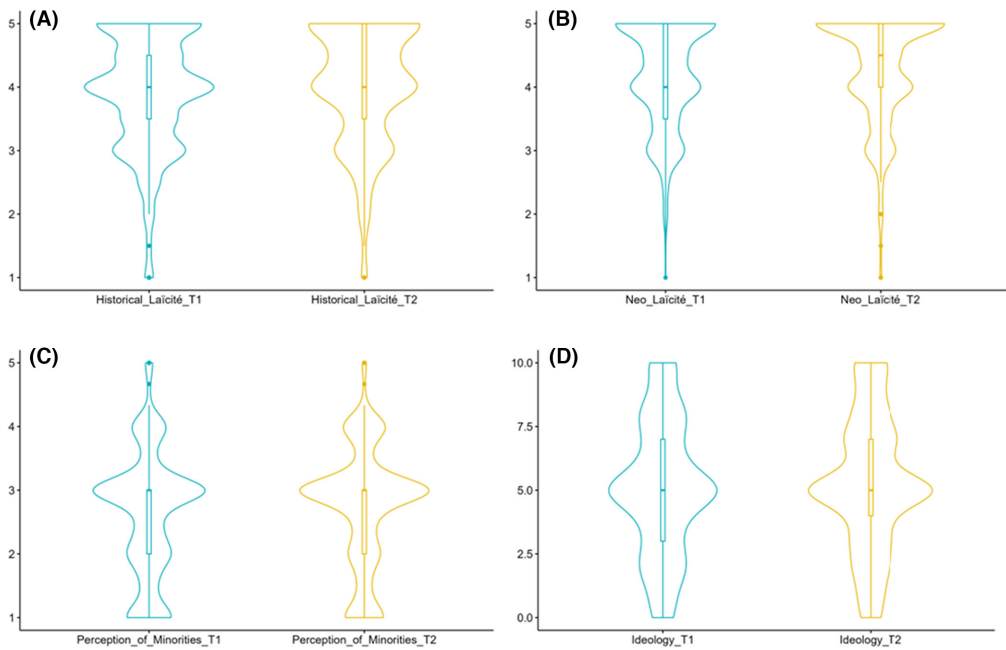
### Robustness tests

We conducted a series of robustness tests to validate the stability of the observed effects (Appendix S2 in the online supporting information). To account for attrition or test–retest effects, we first tested whether the selected longitudinal sample diverged from the full sample at either of the two measurement points. This was not the case. Further robustness tests included a larger set of items of the proposed mediators, and possible variations in the operationalization of the dependent measure “perception of minorities.” The obtained pattern qualified as robust across these variations. We conducted three linear regression analyses that estimated differences between pre- and post-attacks measures of Laïcité and perception of minorities based on ideological self-placement and a set of sociodemographic measures. The results suggested no systematic influences due to these variables.

The data revealed a small but significant shift towards the right on the ideological self-placement scale,  $t(557) = -.147$ ,  $p = .027$ ,  $d = -.09$ , 95% CI  $[-.28; -.02]$ . The effect fell below our minimal detectable effect size. However, since it pointed into the opposite direction than our main results, we reestimated the proposed mediation model with ideology as an additional mediator. Changes in ideological self-placement did not account for changes in the perception of minorities, nor did including ideology in the model change our interpretation regarding the role of Laïcité. In sum, ideology was insignificant to the model.

### Exploratory moderator analyses

We conducted further exploratory analyses to examine the so-called *extremity* or *polarization hypothesis* which predicts people to sway towards more extreme positions in response to threats (Jonas et al., 2014). We used Model 2 of the MEMORE Plugin (Montoya & Hayes, 2017) to test whether changes in the perception of minorities before and after the Charlie Hebdo attacks depended on participants' support of Historical Laïcité at baseline. The plugin produces similar results as a mixed ANOVA, however, with the advantage that it also produces simple slope tests.



**FIGURE 1** Within-person changes following the Charlie Hebdo terrorist attacks. The violin plots indicate peaks in the distribution of the variables “Historical Laïcité” (A), “Neo-Laïcité” (B), “Perception of minorities” (C), and “Ideological self-placement” (D) before and after the attacks.

Although the results suggested a significant moderation effect, the obtained pattern did not support the extremity hypothesis. On the contrary, the results suggested a .12 unit decrease in attitude change which each unit increase in the expressed support for Historical Laïcité at time one,  $t(556) = 3.19$ ,  $b = .12$ ,<sup>3</sup>  $SE = .04$ ,  $p = .002$ , 95% CI [.05; .19]. Simple slope testing revealed that participants who initially expressed low ( $b = -22$ ,  $SE = .05$ ,  $p < .001$ , 95% CI [-31; -13]) or average support for Historical Laïcité ( $b = -11$ ,  $SE = .03$ ,  $p < .001$ , 95% CI [-18; -05]) developed more positive perceptions of minorities after the attacks. Conversely, no attitude change was observed for participants who strongly endorsed Historical Laïcité at baseline ( $p = .916$ ). However, given the strong support for Laïcité, the terms “low” to “average” are somewhat misleading in light of the underlying distribution (cf. Figure 1). To get a better understanding of the range of the observed moderation effect, we estimated the Johnson-Newman interval. The extracted cut-off value for the conditional effect was 4.25 (on a 5-point scale) and covered 64% of the observed data.

Further exploratory moderator tests suggested no variation in attitude change depending on baseline support of Neo-Laïcité ( $p = .909$ ). A marginal effect ( $p = .051$ ) of ideology coded as a dummy variable suggested that right leaners were more likely to shift their perceptions of minorities than left leaners (Appendix S2.3 in the online supporting information).

## DISCUSSION

In her foreword of a report on the European terrorism situation, Europol executive director Catherine de Bolle stated that “In Europe, the feeling of insecurity that terrorists try to create must be of the greatest concern to us because it has the potential to undermine the cohesion

<sup>3</sup>A positive coefficient indicates less change with increasing levels of Laïcité support.

of our societies” (EUROPOL, 2019, p. 5). The statement stresses the importance of gaining a scientific understanding of the effects of terrorism on citizens' attitudes and behaviors. A large body of research has supported the conservative shift hypothesis, according to which terrorist experiences sway societies towards authoritarian and antiegalitarian interpretations of society. To understand the processes and mechanisms involved in such dynamics, it can be useful to find out more about cases that diverge from these patterns, prompting us to reappraise and refine our understanding of the social psychological consequences of terrorism. Paradoxically, the current evidence showed that the effect of the 2015 Charlie Hebdo attacks in Paris was to improve attitudes slightly but significantly towards North Africans, Arabs, and Muslims. Even if the effect was statistically small, it clearly moves in the opposite direction of what the conservative shift hypothesis would suggest. Given that previous data conducted in the same context pointed in a similar direction (Savelkoul et al., 2022; Solheim, 2021), it seems unlikely that the presented findings merely present sample or methodological artifacts. Moreover, since the observed increase in attitudes concerned only minorities but not majorities, this is not a random change in attitudes towards social groups in general. Rather, one of our main contrasting hypotheses was supported: The observed attitude shift reflected at least in part the level of support for an inclusive and historic dimension of the French secularism policy.

The present data therefore provides evidence that embracing the inclusionary vision which is incorporated in the concept of Historical Laïcité offers a potential pathway that can counteract the frequently observed right-wing shifts after experiences with jihadist terrorism. Conversely, there was no evidence that Neo-Laïcité, a more restrictive orientation with regards to religious expression, was psychologically effective as a collective coping response. Furthermore, controlling for the political ideology of the participants did not change these results even though a slight shift towards the right on the ideological measure was observed. While these results may seem puzzling at first sight, an analysis by Brouard et al. (2018) may provide a plausible answer. The authors combined two large multiwave datasets from France from 2015 to 2016 (a period that encompassed three major terrorist attacks). The research team found a right-wing shift tendency among left leaners and centrists that was restricted to security issues only and did not expand to immigration, moral, and socioeconomic issues. Consistent with this explanation, a visual inspection of the [Figure 1D](#) suggests a slight decrease on the left side of the ideological spectrum and a peaking at the midpoint.

In sum, the main contributions deriving from the presented findings are twofold: First, based on a longitudinal and nearly representative dataset the results corroborate a proclaimed functionality of Historical Laïcité as a potential collective coping framework, consistent with data from experiments conducted at the time of the Charlie Hebdo attacks (e.g., Anier et al., 2019; Nugier & Guimond, 2016). Second, by introducing support for Historical Laïcité as a mediator for public opinion, we present one piece for the puzzle surrounding the question how the Charlie Hebdo attacks could have swayed public opinion towards minority inclusion.

## Towards a contextualized interpretation

Research that studied peoples' responses to terrorism frequently refers to two competing hypotheses: the conservative shift hypothesis (Jost et al., 2003), claiming that threat leads individuals to embrace conservatism, and the extremity hypothesis (Jonas et al., 2014) which suggests that individuals polarize towards any self-relevant ideological meaning framework. Rather than engaging into this debate, we propose another line of thought that has been articulated by the social identity approach (Turner & Oakes, 1986). The social identity approach stresses the importance of social interaction as a critical element for the construction of social realities. Other than in most social psychological experiments, people “in the wild” are rarely experiencing and navigating threats as isolated individuals but negotiate the characteristics

and demands of an issue interactively and in different social settings. Through these lenses, whether individuals sway towards inclusion or exclusion becomes as much a matter of collective sense making than of intraindividual threat regulation.

Researchers who previously discussed inclusionary responses to the Charlie Hebdo attacks in France suggested that the social dynamics surrounding the #JeSuisCharlie campaign and its physical transition into nationwide republican marches have been critical for public opinion as they highlighted the republican values of equality, tolerance, and Laïcité (Mayer & Tiberj, 2016; Savelkoul et al., 2022; Solheim, 2021). Although our data does not capture these dynamics to the full, the presented findings provide an empirical link between support for Historical laïcité and a positive change in minority perceptions after the attacks. We assume that the unifying symbolism of the #JeSuisCharlie campaign and the fact that leaders and members of different societal groups walked side by side in solidarity against a common enemy could have facilitated an inclusionary construction of “we-ness” as embraced by the concept of Historical Laïcité.

By stressing the relevance of social-contextual specificities that surround events like the Charlie Hebdo attacks, we are not aiming to diminish the importance of intraindividual factors. On the contrary, we believe that models that incorporate different analysis level will be best suited to explain the empirical controversies that exist in the research on psychological responses to (jihadist) terrorism. For instance, a contribution by Brandt et al. (2021) that reports noticeable variation in threat-ideology relationships within different countries and for different kind of threats demonstrates the potential of models that inductively explore interplays between different analysis level. Another contribution by Brandt and Bakker (2022) questions the assumption of monocausality between threat experiences and (right-wing) policy preferences. Instead, the authors suggest a recursive causality system in which individual ideological preferences and threat perceptions constitute each other. According to their proposed model, people do not only experience different threats differently because of political and ideological preferences but also evaluate political strategies differently depending on the specific threats that are haunting them. Adding such an amount of complexity seems perfectly reasonable and particularly relevant to multifaceted threats that can undermine several aspects of people's lives.

The social-dynamic interpretation we propose here goes a step further and argues that the social negotiation and consensualization processes that underlie major events such as terrorist attacks are not only *informed by* individual perceptions but also *inform them* in ways that purely individualistic models may struggle to capture. In the present dataset, it were not the strong supporters of Historical Laïcité who adopted more favorable perceptions of minorities but those who reported low to average support before the attacks. We believe that the social-contextual reality that followed the events and that construed an inclusive intergroup approach as an effective collective coping response can help explain these effects. At the same time, a common agreement to enhance social security measures in order to prevent future attacks could have swayed left leaners slightly towards the right. While at this point, we need to stick to the realm of speculation, we believe that research that is sensitive to the social-contextual realities as well as to the social creativity that underlies them will be well-equipped to explain such seemingly contradictory findings.

## Moving beyond context

Advocating for a contextual interpretation of the presented findings does not imply that the presented theoretical model does not hold wider implications. Experiences with religiously motivated terrorism almost inevitably trigger debates about the place of religion within secular societies. While in France, these discussions focus on the Laïcité principle, other societies are having similar debates. Differentiating between different secular policies may be useful in these other contexts as well. For instance, data presented by de la Sablonnière et al. (2020) suggested that support for Neo-Laïcité correlated positively with support for assimilation but

negatively with support for multiculturalism (cf. Roebroek & Guimond, 2016). Conversely, in the same dataset Historical Laïcité correlated negatively with assimilation and positively with multiculturalism. Thus, depending on the national context, it should be possible to distinguish between secular viewpoints that tend to favor either egalitarianism or intergroup hierarchies.

## Limitations

While we hope that the presented data will help advancing the understanding of the social psychological consequences of terrorism, several limitations must be considered. A first limitation concerns the fact that the presented data involves only French participants. It would have been valuable to have the same longitudinal sampling with participants from other countries, especially from Ireland and Czech Republic. The analysis of Savelkoul et al. (2022) suggested a conservative shift in these two countries that was triggered by the Charlie Hebdo attacks. It would have been informative to know whether and how different secular policies have been associated with these effects.

Second, having two data points allowed us to test for attitude change, however, without understanding its dynamic development, most notably, in response to impactful collective responses such as the republican marches. This is a major limitation given our interpretation of the results.

A third limitation rests in the fact that we have little evidence to explain why one component of the French political model, Historical Laïcité, played an important role whereas the other component, Neo-Laïcité, did not. Previous research likewise reported null effects when predicting outgroup perceptions following jihadist terror through Neo-Laïcité (Anier et al., 2019; Nugier & Guimond, 2016). One explanation could be that Historical Laïcité is more relevant to the French context than Neo-Laïcité and therefore more influential on public opinions. A look at the mean values in Table 1, however, rejects this view. Another explanation that is backed up by the strength of zero-order correlations is that the concept of Neo-Laïcité is less consistently linked to specific outgroup perceptions than is Historical Laïcité.

A fourth and final limitation concerns the null results on the prejudice measure, despite its strong correlation with the perception of minorities (Table 1). A measurement-specific explanation could be that the perception of minorities measure was more sensitive to capture subtle attitude shifts that occurred in response to the events. Previous work on terrorism-related effects likewise reported inconsistent effects on conceptually related opinion measures (e.g., Brouard et al., 2018), and more quantitative and qualitative work might be needed to explain such differences.

## CONCLUSION

Perhaps due to its specificity to the francophone context, Laïcité did not gain wide spanning international recognition as an ideological framework underlying intergroup policies. Questions related to the integration of religion in secularized societies, however, are upfront when dealing with religiously motivated terrorism. Previous work displayed the complexity of the thematic, demonstrating that Laïcité holds conflictive meanings that might be exploited to transport exclusionary or inclusionary visions towards cultural and religious minorities. By measuring within-person changes before and after the Charlie Hebdo terrorist attacks, the present data suggested an inclusionary shift among the French majority that was partially explained by an increased embracement of Historical Laïcité. We believe that the powerful collective coping responses that emerged in response to the attacks were critical for the observed intraindividual effects. Unfortunately, threats from terrorism remain a pressing issue, and if

the present data holds any practical implications, it is that people do have the power to collectively stand up in solidarity against violence, intolerance, and hate.

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## SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.

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