

Rethinking Democracy and Terrorism: A quantitative analysis of attitudes to democratic politics and support for terrorism in the UK

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Abstract

The relationship between democracy and terrorism remains a source of significant debate, with academic evidence suggesting that democracy both inhibits, and encourages, acts of terrorism and political violence. Accepting this apparent contradiction, this paper argues that a more nuanced approach to understanding political systems, focussing on the subjective perceptions of individual actors, may allow these differences to be reconciled.

Using regression analysis undertaken with UK data from the European Values Study, the results shows how attitudes to politics may frame assessments of the intrinsic valence – or attractiveness – of political participation, support for terrorism, and the implications this may have for both counter terrorism and counter extremism policy.

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Introduction

The first decades of the twenty first century have been characterised by a number of significant changes in Western counter terrorism policy. To counter the emergence of new security threats – most notably those exemplified in the attacks of 9/11 - a broad range of security measures have been adopted to strengthen the efficacy of Western state responses, from the introduction of bulk electronic surveillance and

the tightening of airline security, to economic sanctions against hostile foreign powers and, in some cases, direct military intervention.

The enthusiastic embrace of 'liberal interventionism' post-9/11 (Parmar, 2009) and the US-led invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan in support of regime change are, perhaps, the most striking – and contested – legacy of this period. Indeed, the underlying assumption – that terrorism almost always originates in the politics of autocratic and despotic states – is clearly visible in Western foreign policy in this period, with enforced democratisation posited as a logical and effective way of eliminating the terror threat and creating new allies that were "...free, proud, and fighting terror" (Bush, 2003).

However, with the explosive growth in both domestic and international security threats since the invasion of Iraq, such an argument can no longer be unproblematically embraced. Rather, the exact nature of the relationship between democracy and terrorism is likely to be more opaque – and non-linear - than popular political discourse would suggest.

This paper is an attempt to deconstruct this relationship, offering analysis of UK survey data on political attitudes to explore how specific characteristics of the domestic political environment may shape attitudes to – and thus, engagement in – acts of terrorism and political violence.

Democracy and Terrorism: A Review of the Literature

The nature of the relationship between democracy and terrorism has been subject to significant academic interest over the last 16 years, with a search of the literature identifying over 1,000 academic papers that address this subject¹.

Of these, a significant number can be placed within one of two broad approaches: those that argue that democratic systems increase the incidence of terrorism – termed the Strategic School – and those that argue that democracy inhibits terrorism – termed the Political Access School (Eyermann, 1998). Both are implicitly shaped by the assumptions of economic rationality embedded in rational actor theory, with the former arguing that the openness of democratic societies and their inability to retaliate against threats may increase the threat of terrorism, and the latter arguing that the provision of alternate pathways to political engagement in democracies may lower the occurrence of terrorism (Eyerman, 1998).

Empirical studies seeking to test these approaches are divided in their results, with papers finding evidence both for and against both schools. Indeed, analysis by Wade and Reiter (2007) found no link between regime type and the occurrence of suicide terrorism, while Piazza (2007) found that democratic and politically liberal nations experienced a higher rate of terrorism, and Li (2005) found that transnational terrorism was more likely in less democratic states.

The picture is further complicated by the results of studies showing a more complex relationship between regime type and the incidence of terrorism, with some showing that highly democratic and highly authoritarian regimes experience less terrorism than countries in the 'intermediate range' on both indicators (Abadie, 2004), and

¹ Google Scholar search, 30th August 2016

others suggesting that the longevity and 'newness' of the regime may be the most potent indicators of terror risk (Piazza, 2013).

A potential explanation for these significant variations may lie in the limitations, methodologically, of much of the extant work – most notably in respect of its characterisation of political systems. Indeed, as Piazza (2013) rightly notes, democracies are not immutable, and shift and evolve over time. More than this, as Abadie (2004) notes, 'democracy' and 'authoritarianism' are not absolute binaries, but rather points on a continuum on which most political systems may be placed. As a result, attempts to draw links between political systems and terrorism that fail to account for these variations are doomed to fail.

In addition, any account that seeks to explain the relationship between terrorism and political system should be able to account for the role of individual perceptions of the political process, accommodating the significant variations that exist within and between countries, communities and individuals in terms of attitudes to political processes.

Indeed, the extent to which political systems may be characterised as democratic or authoritarian varies enormously from person to person. More than this, it has long been recognised that individual perceptions play a significant role in shaping recourse to violence, with both Crenshaw (1981) and Wintrobe (2005) noting that individuals are more likely to endorse violence if they believe there to be no viable alternatives. This aligns with work by Piazza (2007) that links failed states and violence, and work by Corrado and Evans (1988) that explores radical leftist terrorism, arguing that organisations chose violent means precisely because of the perceived deficiencies of democratic engagement

On a more quantitative level, work by Nasir, Ali and Rehman (2011) suggests a link between terrorism and social repression or the restriction of civil and political rights, suggesting that terrorism is more likely amongst those who have few alternatives, while Morse' (2006) work on selectorate theory² and support for terrorism showed a positive correlation between the size of a governing party's electoral majority and support for violence by non-state actors. Cherney and Povey's (2013) study of support for violence in majority Sunni Muslim countries adds further weight to this view, finding that membership of the Shia Muslim minority correlated with support for violence, while Morgenstern (2009) found that Muslims were less supportive of terrorism if they lived in a functioning democracy, highlighting the importance of asymmetrical power relationship³ in determining the strategic calculus that underlies engagement in – and support for – violence.

A revised approach

As both Wintrobe (2005) and Eyerman (1998) acknowledge, the existence of alternative political strategies should reduce the likelihood of an individual endorsing violence. Given Hudson's (1999) work asserting the rationality of terrorists, it seems fair to suggest that the choice of strategy will be made on the basis of an individual's assessment as to which approach represents the best balancing of costs and benefits. As such, support for violence should depend not merely on the presence of alternative options, but on the influences that shape how these alternatives are

² With roots in the work of Bueno de Mesquita et al. (2003) selectorate theory argues that political leaders aim principally to stay in power, and that to this end make decisions principally to appeal to those whose support makes the difference between retaining and losing power (the winning coalition) rather than benefiting either the broader community contributing to the selection process (the real selectorate) or those eligible but non-contributing (the nominal selectorate).

³ That is to say, the strategic calculus is shaped by the comparative weakness of the attacker, and the comparative strength of the state.

perceived. In the context of democratic political engagement – perhaps the most obvious alternative to violence (at least in the developed world) – this would comprise the factors that shape how mainstream politics is perceived, most obviously trust in political institutions, trust in politicians, and trust in executive actors.

Similarly as the literature suggests that certain organizations may be ideologically hostile to democracy, membership of these groups may dictate the adherent's willingness to consider democratic engagement as a strategy (most notably the assertion by some radical Islamic clerics that democracy is haram (forbidden) – see Saalih al-Munajjid, 2014). In such circumstances, even if democratic alternatives to violence were accessible, and were seen to be effective, their adoption would be unlikely.

Considering these factors together provides a basis for approximating an individual's perception of the attractiveness of democracy as a strategy for pursuing their political goals – hereafter 'Democratic Valence'. I argue that these attitudes may predict support for terrorism and political violence more effectively than macro-level categorisations of the political system.

[Figure 1 about here]

Method

To test this theory, this paper employed logistic regression analysis, using weighted data from the 4th wave of the European Values Study⁴. A binary dependent variable, Support for Terrorism, was used alongside control measures for Age (scale), Democratic Valence (scale), Gender (binary), Marital Status (binary), Employment

⁴ The European Values Study is a major population representative survey exploring ideas, beliefs, preferences, attitudes, values and opinions of citizens from 47 European states. Further information can be found online at the EVS website: <http://www.europeanvaluesstudy.eu/>

Status (binary), Post-Secondary Education (binary) and Employment Type (categorical). Significance was calculated at the 10% level⁵.

Reflecting the multi-dimensional nature of the political attitudes under examination, the dependent variable – Democratic Valence - was a factor formed from measures of Democratic Satisfaction, Trust in Parliament, Trust in Political Parties, and Trust in the Police. Quartimax Rotated Principal Axis Factoring was used to increase the likelihood of components loading onto a single factor, with outputs saved as simple regression coefficients to facilitate easy analysis. A detailed breakdown of the component loadings is displayed in Table 1, below.

[Table 1 about here]

⁵ The decision to calculate significance at the 10% level was taken due to small overall sample size and the preliminary nature of the test. While the 5% level is most commonly used in social science research, the 10% level is frequently employed in studies with small data sets or in cases where the risk of identifying a false positive is outweighed by the consequences of type II error – see Gerber and Malhotra (2008). While it is accepted that this doubles the chance that of analysis returning a false result, it is submitted that without repeat testing of the relationship with additional data sets a single test will be no more likely to provide a reliable even if working to a more conventional alpha level – see Rosnow and Rosenthal (1989).

Variables were introduced in two blocks: the first introducing the control measures, and the second adding the factor approximating Democratic Valence. The model Chi-square for the first block was 14.327, with 8 degrees of freedom ($p = .074$). The Hosmer-Lemeshow test returned a chi-square statistic of 7.359 with 8 degrees of freedom ($p = .498$). Nagelkerke's pseudo- R^2 confirmed moderate but adequate goodness of fit ($R^2 = .027$).

Only gender ($OR = 1.584$, $p = .042$) and marital status ($OR = 0.584$, $p = .022$) were found significant in the first block, with male respondents showing an increased propensity to support terrorism relative to female respondents. Being married was also shown to negatively associate with support for terrorism, with all other variables non-significant at the 10% level. This, alongside the modest Nagelkerke values, may be taken to indicate that demographic factors alone are poor predictors of support for terrorism, a possibility discussed at length in much of the existing quantitative literature on support for terrorism.

[Table 2 about here]

Outputs for the second block of variables, introducing the factor approximating democratic valence, are displayed in Table 2. The overall model chi-square rose to 17.605 with 9 degrees of freedom ($p = .040$) as a result of a block contribution of 3.278 with 1 degree of freedom ($p = .070$). The Nagelkerke pseudo- R^2 increased slightly to $R^2 = .033$, showing that the addition of democratic valence improves the overall fit of the model. The Hosmer-Lemeshow statistic remained insignificant (Chi-square of 12.620 with 8 degrees of freedom, $p = .126$), indicating that the model continued to predict the observed data well.

Of those variables retained from the first model both gender ($OR = 1.573$, $p = .046$) and marital status ($OR = 0.593$, $p = .026$) remained significant, with males and the

unmarried again showing elevated levels of support for terrorism at a level consistent with the scale and direction of effect shown in the first block. The measure for democratic valence attained significance at the 10% level (OR = 0.802, $p = .074$), with the odds ratio suggesting that increases in the favourability of perceptions of the political system decrease the likelihood of supporting terrorism

Discussion

In showing that democratic valence is a correlate of support for terrorism, these results may be taken to support the centrality of individual perceptions of the political process in determining the relationship between democracy and terrorism. While it is important to be circumspect in the absence of further corroboratory evidence, there are nevertheless several important implications raised by these results.

In particular, by showing that levels of support for terrorism are inversely correlated with the perceived attractiveness of democratic political strategies, these results may be taken to highlight the role played by the individual's weighing of the costs and benefits of different courses of political action, suggesting that they are a significant predictor of support for terrorism. In this the results may be argued to be consistent with research positing that terrorism is a rational choice made by desperate individuals in pursuit of political goals (Wintrobe, 2005).

In addition to its challenging of macro-level analyses, this represents a significant challenge to much of the qualitative work on the causes of terrorism, and in particular to those suggesting that violence largely results from ideological and moral imperatives rather than strategic considerations. While the models in this paper did not control for the impact of religious ideology or perceptions of moral imperatives, in showing that practical considerations of efficacy correlate with support for terrorism

the results logically challenge arguments that focus on the importance of ideology. Indeed, it seems unlikely on the basis of these findings that violence could be endorsed for the desire to appease moral principles or ideological beliefs alone; if ideology were the most important cause of violence, one would expect the impact of democratic valence to be non-significant. While it remains possible for the model to account for the effects of ideology through its impact on the individual's perceptions of the democratic process, further research would be necessary to explore this. Despite this, both anecdotal evidence and work on the impact of extreme religious adherence on social and political trust (Schoenfeld, 1978; La Porta et al, 1997; Welch et al, 2004; Berggren and Jordahl, 2006; Uslaner, 2008, 2011) offer grounds for speculation, suggesting that some ideologies may negatively impact elements of democratic valence, reducing the favourability of perceptions of democratic engagement and thus increasing the relative attractiveness of violence.

Alongside this the findings also have significance in terms of their contribution to the literature on the demographics of supporters of terrorism. While a small but growing body of evidence has explored the demography of Muslim supporters of political violence (Fair and Shepherd, 2006; Cherney and Povey, 2013), few papers have attempted to show the effect of demographic characteristics on support for terrorism in the general population. In showing that men and the unmarried were more likely to support violence than women and the unmarried, the results of this paper highlight a significant difference compared to studies of Muslim supporters of violence, adding further weight to research suggesting that there is, in general, no single extremist 'profile' (Williams, 2016). This accords with the work of Hudson (1999), and has significant implications for policy responses to extremism and terrorism.

Policy Implications

The findings of this analysis also have a number of implications for counter-extremism and counter-terrorism policy, both at the general level and in the context of the UK-government's PREVENT programme. By showing that attitudes to democratic politics predict support for political violence, it can be argued that a core component of the PREVENT strategy has been validated, endorsing the identification in both government rhetoric and the Channel guidance (Home Office, 2011) of attitudes to democracy and government as indicators of extremist risk. Given the paucity of research and publicly available evaluation activity that addresses the PREVENT strategy (Lamb, 2013; Thomas, 2010), such a finding is significant in and of itself. However, by showing a link between democratic valence and support for violence that is consistent with the theoretical model advanced in this paper, the results also raise several more specific issues.

In particular, the PREVENT strategy carries an implicit assumption that attitudes to government, extreme religious views, and regular contact with known extremists are symptoms, rather than causes, of radicalisation, leaving the root reasons for individual engagement with extreme and violent organisations and causes opaque. While further research is necessary to definitively determine whether the relationship highlighted in this paper is causal, the results presented here may be taken to challenge the automatic assumption of direction present in Channel's framing of attitudes to government.

If further research were to corroborate the existence of a causal relationship, then a different approach to counter-extremism would be desirable, with interventions focussed not on delegitimizing the cause or goals that violence is employed to

support (as suggested by the current iteration of the Channel guidance) but on attacking the structural factors that underpin the decision calculus through which violence is endorsed as the primary strategic tool.

Such a shift could be accommodated in the current delivery model, with the use of multi-stakeholder partnerships and early intervention likely to remain key. Particularly in respect of the young, opportunities exist for youth and religious leaders, parents, and social and community workers to engage in the promotion of democratic governance and political engagement as a foil to extremist risk. Such an approach would have obvious merits, both in terms of a reduction in violence – in line with the broader aims of the CONTEST strategy – and by fostering a less hostile and more trusting political environment.

These findings also suggest that educators could play a greater role in countering extremism by granting the study of government and politics greater prominence in schools. As research evidence suggests that many young people fail to understand the political system (Henn, Weinstein and Forrest, 2009), are suspicious of its efficacy, and distrust the probity and the motivation of those engaged in its delivery (Bartlett and Miller, 2010), such an approach would have obvious merit. More than this, as the young are less likely to be engaged in traditional modes of political participation (Henn, Weinstein and Forrest, 2005) than earlier generations, it is unlikely that they would have opportunities to gain sufficient exposure to mainstream politics to challenge their negative preconceptions without proactive efforts on the part of educators. By making the study of government and politics a core part of the national curriculum (perhaps as part of an enlarged citizenship programme) the government could do much to achieve this goal, with the study of parliamentary process, political history, and contemporary political issues offering the young not

only a better understanding of our political system, but a basis for holding the improved perceptions of fairness, accessibility and probity that are key to increasing democratic valence and decreasing the risk of violence.

Similarly, the results also raise questions regarding the role of media coverage in shaping support for terrorism. As Flinders (2010) notes, contemporary media coverage of politics is largely characterised by portrayals of politicians as sleazy, corrupt, greedy and ineffective. As research indicates that negative media coverage of politics encourages the public to hold negative views of politics and politicians (Patterson, 1993), and the findings of this paper suggest that these attitudes correlate with support for terrorism, it seems reasonable to assume that media coverage of politics may inadvertently be increasing support for terrorism.

While further research is required to definitively ascertain whether this is the case, this raises the possibility of the media playing a part in reducing support for terrorism. In particular, the adoption by the media of a more positive tone in coverage of political events - focussing on the significant successes delivered by democratic politics (for example, universal free healthcare, public education, etc.) rather than the personal shortcomings of the actors involved in its day-to-day life - may do much to improve perceptions of politics and reduce support for violence. While it is clearly impractical – and, indeed, undesirable – for politicians to mandate positive coverage, greater responsibility on the part of media organisations could do much to address these issues.

Similarly, mainstream parties, and political organisations could do much to improve popular perceptions of politics themselves, with more concerted engagement with the public a good way to challenge the popular view – seen prominently during the

recent EU referendum campaign - that politicians are a scornful elite disinterested in the views and mood of the public outside of election periods (Harris, 2016). A systemic shift in the conduct of British politics, the adoption of a more long-term focus, and engagement with the public as citizens rather than mere voters, could do much to address this, and would seem an essential pre-requisite for lasting change. However outreach work by individual politicians – for example, spending more time in their constituencies, greater involvement in local non-political organizations, and greater use of direct democracy – may also do much address these problems.

Conclusions

This paper has sought to reconcile the seemingly differing results of existing academic analyses of the relationship between democracy and terrorism, highlighting the importance of individual perceptions of politics and political systems as determinants of support for terrorism. As a test of this approach it has offered the results of regression analysis exploring the link between democratic valence – comprising political and executive trust and satisfaction with democracy - and support for terrorism using UK EVS data.

While political attitudes and support for terrorism have been shown to correlate, further research is necessary to validate the existence of the relationship, to establish causation, and to support the making of generalizations outside of the narrow frame employed in this analysis.

In particular, more sophisticated analyses and replication with non-majority population and non-UK data are required if claims to general applicability and causation are to be sustained. Nevertheless, these findings represent an important

first test of the theory outlined in this paper which, if replicated in further analysis, has significant implications for both policy and academic research in this area.

In particular, this paper has highlighted the potential significance of these results in respect of theories of ideological motivation, rational choice approaches to terrorism, and the literature on the demographic traits of terrorists. More than this, it has highlighted a number of areas where the results suggest British counter-extremism policy could usefully be revised - particularly around adopting a focus on fostering pro-democratic attitudes and access to political institutions - and has also identified the impact of media coverage of politics on attitudes to political participation as an area for concern and further research.

Future papers may wish to focus on the areas identified above, as well as exploring the impact of religion on political attitudes and employing more complex analytical procedures and designs in order to provide a more robust basis for making causal inferences.

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Table 1 – Component Loadings for EVS Democratic Valence Measure

Component Loading	
Trust in Parliament	0.887
Trust in Political Parties	0.658
Trust in the Police	0.391
Democratic Satisfaction	0.500

Table 2 – Regression Analysis of Support for Violence, Democratic Valence, and Demographic Control Measures

	B	SE B	OR	P
Age	-.007	.007	.930	.284
Male	.453	.227	1.573	.046**
Married	-.522	.235	.530	.026**
Employed	-.330	.258	.719	.200
Type of Work				
Higher	.085	.285	1.089	.149
Intermediate	.162	.335	1.175	.254
Other/Don't Know	.580	.401	1.785	.372
Post-Secondary Education	.189	.274	1.208	.491
Democratic Valence	-.221	.124	.802	.074*

* $p \geq .100$, ** $p \geq .050$, *** $p \geq .010$

Figure 1 - Schematic Representation of Proposed Rational Choice Model of Support for Terrorism and Political Violence

