

Do Terrorist Attacks Always Affect Political Attitudes and Participation?

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MS oversaw data quantitative collection; performed all interviews, literature review and statistical analyses; and wrote the paper. WM provided technical guidance for the statistical analysis, prepared the original data set, wrote part of the code, and edited. MN designed survey instrumentation, provided conceptual feedback, arranged interviews, managed institutional relationships, and edited. DL designed survey instrumentation, provided conceptual feedback and managed funding, personnel, and human subjects approval.

Abstract: Terrorists target an audience beyond their victims, and many scholars claim that terrorism often succeeds in shifting public opinion and behavior. People exposed to violence are said to exhibit a backlash against the perpetrator's identity group, a rightward political shift, and heightened political engagement. We test these theories through a mixed-methods analysis of a natural experiment: during a multiyear panel survey on young Americans' political opinions and behavior, a subset of respondents experienced a terrorist attack in their community. Difference-in-differences estimates show no meaningful causal effects on terror-exposed respondents. Furthermore, field interviews suggest that these individuals did not interpret this emotionally-jarring attack through a political lens, despite their own interest in politics and political leaders framing the attack in a highly politicized way. Our results call into question the scope of existing theories, suggesting that even close encounters with terrorism can fail to sway public opinion.

Keywords: terrorism; political violence; public opinion; political behavior; immigration; natural experiment; difference-in-differences

Terrorists target their victims, but they also target an audience. Often, they seek to provoke a reaction on a broader scale (Kydd and Walter 2006). In democracies, provoking such a reaction typically requires a shift in public opinion, yet we face major impediments to studying whether and under what conditions attacks really cause such shifts. Experiments cannot simulate the emotional impact of an actual terror attack, while observational studies almost always lack a control group or pre-exposure outcome measurements. Even well-designed natural experiments may be too broad in scope to draw conclusions about the population most directly affected. As a result, while conflict and security scholars have made considerable theoretical advances toward understanding the attitudinal impacts of terrorism, we need better tests to validate those models.

In November 2016, a terrorist attack struck one of 14 U.S. universities where we had been conducting a multiyear panel study on political attitudes, upending students' lives days before the start of our next survey wave. The attacker, a Muslim immigrant and himself a student at the university, drove a car through a crowd assembled on a campus quad and then chased students and faculty with a butcher knife, injuring 13 (Honig 2017). Students we interviewed phoned loved ones and barricaded themselves in bathrooms as police descended on the campus. Although the incident made national headlines and prompted a visit from President-elect Donald Trump, the story was rapidly eclipsed by other news in the national media. This localizing process minimized the likelihood that students on other campuses would be affected, setting up a clear control population. We also observe both control and exposed students over time. To our knowledge, this is the first study of a terrorist attack to use a difference-in-differences (DiD) approach and one of the few causally-identified studies of an actual terror attack.

We group the existing literature on terrorism into three broad hypotheses: 1) a **nativist backlash** against immigrants, Muslims, and diversity; 2) a **rightward shift** towards conservative or authoritarian preferences; and 3) **heightened political engagement**. Contrary to our expectations, our data do not support any of these hypotheses. While our interviewees confirm that the attack was shocking and remained salient throughout the survey window, students exposed to terrorism show little difference in their responses. Our interviewees confirm that while the attack was widely discussed in the following days and weeks, no rightward political shift or nativist backlash was apparent. In fact, both the interviews and survey data suggest that, if anything, students reacted with cosmopolitanism rather than nativism, shifting toward tolerance and away from the support of the president-elect.

Hypotheses

Nativist Backlash. Prior evidence suggests that people exposed to terrorism tend to become more hostile toward immigrants and minorities (e.g., Canetti-Nisim et al. 2009). Echebarria-Echabe and Fernández-Guede (2006) find that the 2004 Madrid train bombings increased antipathy not only towards Arabs but towards other minorities. Thus, although the terror attack we examine was committed by a Somali Muslim refugee, we might expect a backlash against immigration more broadly (see Skitka et al. 2006). In our study, we use a DiD approach to measure changes in three variables related to nativism: how big a problem the respondent perceives illegal immigration to be nationally (*illegal immigration problem in the US*), how big a problem they perceive it to be in their community (*illegal immigration problem in my community*), and whether the limits on legal immigration

should be changed (*restrict legal immigration limit*). To address Ferrín, Mancosu, and Cappiali (2020)'s finding that left-leaning individuals experience a greater anti-immigrant shift, we interact party identification (*party ID*) and *ideology* with exposure. We also added several questions to the survey post-exposure: whether the country's increasing diversity has been detrimental (*anti-diversity*) and support for Trump's Muslim travel ban and border wall proposals (*Muslim ban* and *wall*). Since we do not have pre-exposure measures of these three outcomes, we compare exposed to non-exposed students using ordinary least squares (OLS) to adjust for appropriate covariates.

Rightward Shift: A sizable body of scholarship predicts an embrace of authoritarian values and rightwing political parties in response to security threats. Bonanno and Jost (2006) find that eyewitnesses to the collapse of the World Trade Center self-reported a rightward shift in their political ideology. Nail and McGregor (2009) report increased support for President George W. Bush and military spending following 9/11. Landau et al. (2004) and Willer (2006) find that merely reminding people of a salient threat can increase conservative and authoritarian views. Conservatism and authoritarianism are not synonymous, but they do overlap substantially in the context of the 2016 U.S. Presidential election. We therefore look at all of these measures together as part of a single 'rightward shift' hypothesis. In our DiD regressions, we examine *party ID*, *ideology*, and approval of President Barack Obama (*Obama approve*). We also estimate OLS regressions on 10 emotional reactions toward Trump, approval of Trump (*Trump approve*), and support for Trump's initially bellicose approach toward *Syria*. We also ask two questions designed to measure authoritarian values: whether the country needs a *strong leader* to bypass Congress and/or 'a stiff dose

of *law and order*' rather than more civil rights (from Altemeyer and Hunsberger (1992)'s rightwing authoritarian scale). We also examine whether there are interaction effects for *party ID* and *ideology* on exposure (cf. Berrebi and Klor 2008).

Heightened Political Engagement: Evidence from the terrorism, criminal violence, and civil war literatures suggests that people become more politically engaged in response to violence. What is less clear is how much exposure to violence is required. Balcells and Torrats-Espinoso (2018) find that Spanish citizens expressed an increased intent to vote in upcoming elections following a terrorist attack, although they did not show a rightward shift. Bellows and Miguel (2009), Blattman (2009), and Shewfelt (2009) document increased political participation among former combatants and victims of civil war, while Bateson (2012) and Dorff (2017) find similar effects among crime victims. Using a DiD approach, we test whether *political participation* and *political interest* increase in the wake of terrorism, and we use OLS to test whether terror-exposed respondents are more likely to identify as a *political person*.

Methods

Members of a residential scholarship program from chapters at 14 universities were surveyed biannually in September and November from 2008 to 2016, with a final wave in April 2017. Participation in this online survey was generally over 90%. The November 2016 wave opened four days after the attack and lasted two weeks. All outcomes were measured at that time except for *Syria*, *Muslim ban*, and *wall* which were added in April

2017 after Trump had taken office. Interviews were conducted during the following academic year.

For our primary analysis, we retain all 866 students who responded during the 2016-7 school year. We performed a block bootstrap selecting students within each chapter with replacement and retaining all waves of observations for each student. For each of the 1000 bootstrap replications we ran five imputations using Amelia II to fill in missing values (Honaker, King, and Blackwell 2011; Schomaker and Heumann 2018). See Appendix B for details. DiD estimates were executed using two-way fixed effects for student and wave, while OLS estimates incorporated all relevant pre-exposure control variables from the survey (Appendix C). For each of the 1000 replicates, we averaged the estimates from the 5 imputed datasets, yielding 1000 estimates for each outcome. We then used these estimates to construct bootstrapped confidence intervals. Post-exposure observations were limited to November 2016, except for *Syria*, *Muslim ban*, and *wall*. We also ran seven robustness tests: (1) we dropped missing observations instead of imputing, (2) we restricted the control group to students in the same state as the exposed, (3) we limited pre-exposure observations to the 2016-7 school year, (4) we included both November 2016 and April 2017 in post-exposure observations to increase power, (5) we replaced November 2016 with April 2017 observations to see if effects attenuated, (6) we interacted *exposure* with being a conservative or Republican pre-exposure, and (7) we interacted *exposure* with being neurotic or anxious pre-exposure. Point estimates from robustness checks 1-5 are included, where applicable, in Figure 1. For confidence intervals, explanations, and plots of interaction effects, see Appendix D.

To demonstrate the absence of any substantial effects, it is not sufficient to simply show that a confidence interval crosses zero. Instead, one must reject two alternative hypotheses— H_{A1} = substantial positive effect and H_{A2} = substantial negative effect—in order to show support for H_0 = no substantial effects. Following Rainey (2014), we construct 90% confidence intervals around our estimates, thus allowing us to reject both alternative hypotheses with 95% confidence. Rather than picking an arbitrary cutoff for how big an effect qualifies as ‘substantial,’ we show in Figure 1 the largest positive and negative effect that we fail to reject for each outcome.

Quantitative Results

As shown in Figure 1, only a handful of results are significant at a $p < 0.05$ or even $p < 0.10$ level. If anything, students exposed to terrorism are less supportive of Trump’s *Muslim ban* and his April 2017 military assault on *Syria* and express greater anxiety and contempt toward him. All these results are contrary to what their respective hypotheses predict. While exposed students are marginally more likely to see illegal immigration as a serious problem nationwide, this effect is only significant at the $p < 0.10$ level and all other estimates for the nativist backlash variables are close to zero or negative. On the rightward shift hypothesis, conservatism (both *party ID* and *ideology*) and pro-Trump emotions see a tiny increase, but the anti-Trump emotions go both directions. Even at the extreme end of their confidence intervals, these effects are rarely more than a third of a standard deviation.¹ Focusing on the point estimate for *ideology*, treating all observations would

¹Two conservative power analyses—first, treating the pre/post outcomes for the exposed group as a paired *t*-test, and second, treating the treatment and control group post-exposure outcomes as

have shifted the mean outcome from 4.02 to 4.11 on the unstandardized 7-point scale, a nearly imperceptible slide from ‘neutral’ (4) toward ‘slightly conservative’ (5). Robustness checks nearly all fall within the bootstrapped confidence intervals of the main results or contradict the hypotheses. The only notable exceptions are robustness check (2) (triangles in Figure 1) for *wall* and *political person*, but they are not statistically significant at $p < 0.05$ (see Appendix D). In both cases this robustness check produces an outlier in the opposite direction for other variables in the same hypotheses. Interaction effects with *ideology*, *party ID*, *stress*, and *neuroticism* were neither statistically nor substantively significant (see Appendix D).

independent samples—indicate that we should be able to pick up effects of this magnitude at 80% power. Power should be even greater when controlling for fixed effects (DiD) or other predictors (OLS).

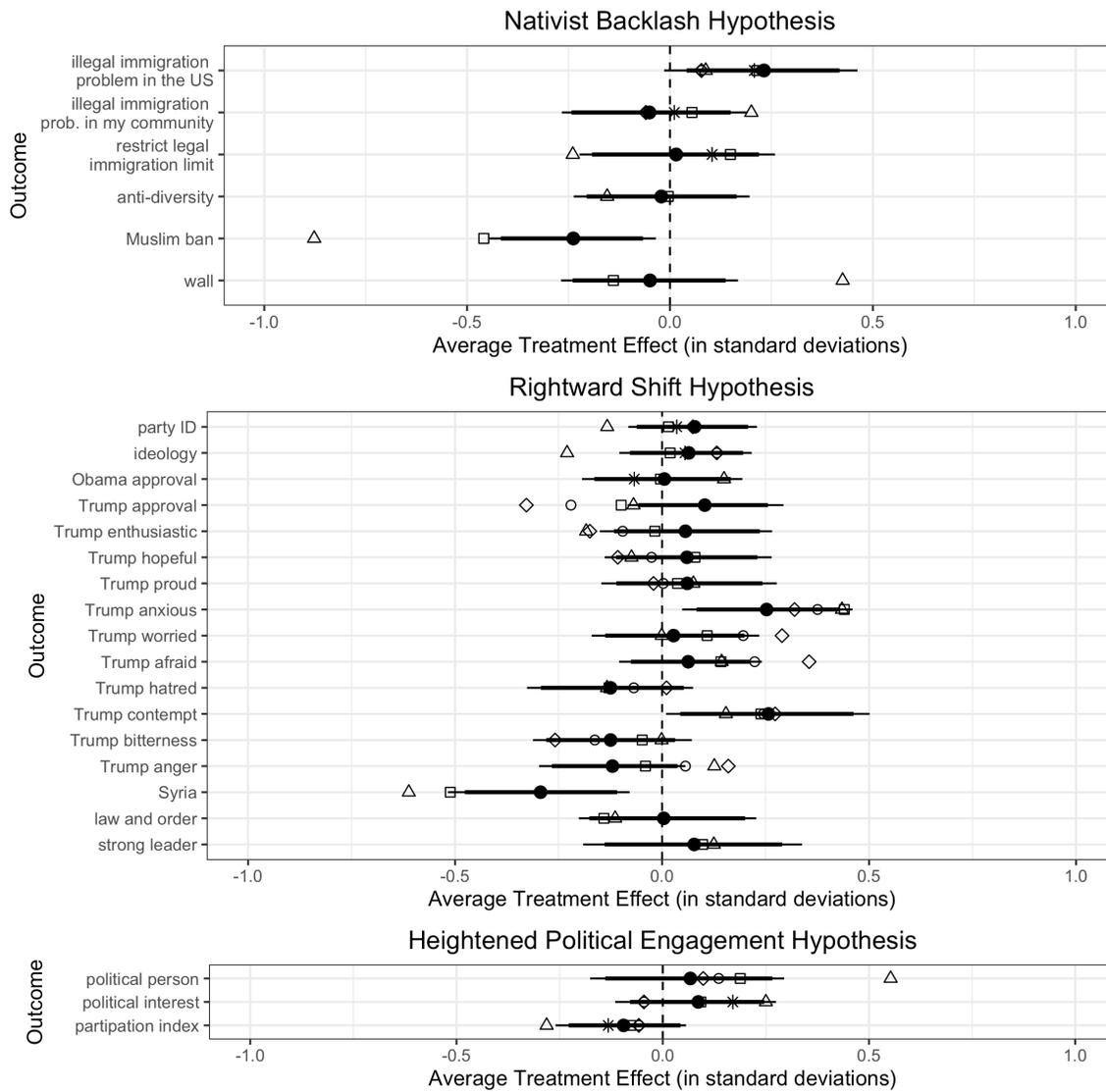


Figure 1: Solid dots indicate the means of bootstrapped imputed estimates, thick lines indicate 90% empirical confidence intervals, and thin lines indicate 95% confidence. Squares show point estimates for robustness check 1 (complete cases), and for DiD estimates, triangles show check 2 (same state only), stars show check 3 (2016-7 school year only), hollow circles show check 4 (both post-exposure waves), and diamonds show check 5 (April post-exposure wave).

Qualitative Results

Firsthand accounts confirm that the exposure was strong, yet effects were minimal. Students received an automated ‘Run, Hide, Fight’ message on their phones, prompting many to barricade themselves in bathrooms and dormitories. ‘Someone knocked on the door and asked to be let in and we said “no,”’ recalled a student who took refuge near the attack. ‘People were definitely freaked out.’ Elsewhere the atmosphere was one of ‘general confusion with sprinklings of fear’ an interviewee told us. ‘We were texting everyone we knew, and one of our friends didn’t respond,’ another reported.

The story briefly made national headlines. The attacker had posted Facebook messages critical of U.S. treatment of Muslims and U.S. foreign policy (Cartwright 2017). ISIS claimed credit for the attacks, and the president-elect denounced the attacker as ‘a Somali refugee who should not have been in our country’ (Roll 2016). Trump visited campus two weeks later, sparking protests (Honig 2016).

Despite the media discourse, the on-campus discourse did not become heavily politicized. ‘We have wide-ranging political views, a spectrum in our house,’ one student recalled. ‘I was hanging with people from both sides. I don’t recall anything political. We were more concerned about everyone’s well-being.’ Another reported that while there had been much talk about the presidential election, students processed the attack apolitically. ‘I don’t remember having too many very political conversations around it,’ he recalled. ‘I didn’t have any of those “So, is the Muslim ban a good idea?” conversations.’ In interviews with newspapers over the following days, students emphasized their shock at the tragedy and the community’s support, rather than the event’s political dimensions (King 2016; Myers 2016; Zachariah, Perry, and Woods 2016).

‘I don’t think it changed my views on terrorism or immigration specifically,’ reported a student who had been in a building overlooking the attack. ‘It did open my mind to how immigrants may feel or religious minorities.’ Neither our interviewees nor the university’s newspaper or radio station reported widespread Islamophobia. ‘You have other minorities and people of majorities telling you that they’re here for you,’ a Muslim student was quoted as saying. ‘They’re not listening to any media talk or stereotypical talk.’ Said another, ‘...since coming here, I’ve never experienced backlash or anything like that’ (Myers 2016). One student we interviewed described the campus culture as ‘inclusive.’ ‘There was so much support on campus and people around me,’ he recalled.

Scope Conditions

We make no claims that our sample of American college students are representative of the U.S. or young Americans. Our findings do not invalidate prior studies such as Böhmelt, Bove, and Nussio (2020) which find widespread effects for terrorism in the general public across multiple countries and years. But they do raise an intriguing puzzle. What is it about the context of an American college campus that undermines terrorism’s effects? In what other populations should we expect witnesses to terrorism to remain politically unmoved? Most importantly, might there be aspects of the local culture or leadership that could prevent backlash to future terror attacks elsewhere?

Although the attack produced only a dozen casualties, the insular nature of a college campus has the potential to amplify its impact. Students experienced a level of discourse and emotional intensity that only a far bigger attack could trigger on a national scale. Furthermore, those we study were only a friendship or two removed from the victims.

While we do not aim to imply that a larger attack would not have measurable effects, our findings do call into question the scope of existing theories. Unlike a war or a long string of criminal or terrorist attacks, a singular act of terror may be insufficient to shift attitudes and behaviors. Alternatively, an attack on a community with no precedent for terrorist violence may trigger a cosmopolitan response that offsets any rightward shift or nativist backlash. In either case, the threshold for terrorist violence to have meaningful effects on the target population may be far higher than previously assumed.

Discussion

Our findings suggest that political beliefs and behavior may be more stable in the face of political violence than previously believed. While we do not doubt that stronger exposures may have a substantial impact on individuals' attitudes and actions, our evidence suggests that smaller, isolated attacks may not be sufficiently potent to trigger measurable effects. The political impact may be greater on those who were injured, lost loved ones, or saw the attack firsthand, but terrorism by its very nature aims to sway a far larger audience than just victims and eyewitnesses. On the one hand, the heightened political engagement documented in the civil war and criminal violence literature may require more sustained violence than a single terror incident. The lack of a rightwing shift or nativist backlash, however, is more surprising given that previous studies have looked at one-time terrorist attacks. Though it is impossible to determine what made this attack and its audience different, we offer three plausible explanations, each of which points the way to future research.

First, college students may be more inclined to respond with cosmopolitanism due to their education, liberal politics, or exposure to diverse peers. While these students are highly educated, the median student at the exposed school identified as leaning Republican on *party ID*, fell right in the middle on *ideology*, and considered illegal immigration to be a ‘somewhat serious problem.’ The students in our sample were overwhelmingly white and Christian, but they may have been more exposed to other races and religions than many Americans (see Appendix A). The fact that they were young should have made them more open to changing their opinions, not less. ‘For me personally my political identity is something I’m trying to figure out,’ an interviewee told us. Thus, if there is something particular about these individuals that inclined them towards a cosmopolitan response rather than a nativist one, it is most likely their level of education, or possibly their exposure to diversity, rather than their youth or pre-existing politics. The ability to dampen reactions to terrorism through education and diversity would be welcome news for policymakers hoping to prevent nativist backlashes elsewhere, and it demands further research.

Second, although we might expect members of the community where the attack took place to be more affected than the general populace, this may not be the case if the effects we usually see actually stem from how the media and political elites frame the incident. Individuals may be less susceptible to political manipulation and media framing if they have access to the perspectives of victims and witnesses directly or through friends and friend-of-friends. They may instead view the event as a crime or a tragedy akin to a school shooting rather than a political act. Despite politicized elite rhetoric and media coverage—including an attempt by the president-elect to cast the attack as resulting from lax immigration policies—our interviewees and those cited in local news accounts did not

describe the attack in political terms. This apolitical framing does not stem from apathy: over 90% of exposed students expressed an interest in politics at the time of the attack, with over a third saying they were ‘very interested’ (see Appendix A). Thus, even individuals living in a highly politicized environment may not be very susceptible to elite attempts to frame an attack in political terms.

Finally, it’s conceivable that pacifying rhetoric from local leaders and a tolerant campus culture prevented a rightward shift or nativist backlash. In the hours following the attack, the city’s mayor put out a statement saying he was proud that his city was ‘warm and welcoming’ to immigrants and refugees. Likewise, police initially refused to speculate on a motive or label the attacker a terrorist (Zachariah, Perry, and Woods 2016). The university’s president called for solidarity, and a professor who was hit by the attacker’s car and hospitalized emphasized the attacker’s humanity and membership in the community (King 2016). The campus newspaper quotes a Palestinian Muslim student who felt reassured upon reading messages from students written on a banner hung in the student center offering support to Somali and Muslim students (Myers 2016). An intolerant culture and fear-mongering local leaders could have made things worse, of course, and without follow-up studies in other contexts, we cannot determine how much explanatory power this explanation holds. Nevertheless, it offers an intriguing hope for organizations seeking to inoculate communities against the urge for revenge. If this explanation is substantiated, then even in the face of pervasive stereotypes and inflammatory rhetoric in the country at large, local leaders and a tolerant local culture can steer terror-exposed communities away from hatred towards more constructive forms of healing.

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