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Is It Terrorism?: Public Perceptions, Media, and Labeling the Las Vegas Shooting

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ABSTRACT

When a mass casualty event occurs, why do some people label it terrorism while others do not? People are more likely to consider an attack to be terrorism when the perpetrator is Muslim, yet it is unclear what other factors influence perceptions of mass violence. Using data collected from a national sample of U.S. adults shortly after the 2017 Las Vegas shooting, we examine how media consumption and social identity influence views of the attack. Media consumption and individual-level factors—Islamophobia, political ideology, and other participant demographics—influence how people view the attack and how confident people are in their assessments.

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On 1 October 2017, a gunman opened fire on the crowd of a country music festival in Las Vegas. During the course of 11 minutes, Stephen Paddock fired over one thousand rounds of ammunition into the crowd below, killing 58 people and injuring another 851.[1] This attack was, no doubt, *terrifying*. But, do members of the public consider it to be *terrorism*? In the days, weeks, and months following the shooting, debate ensued about whether or not we should refer to the attack as terrorism and Paddock as a terrorist.[2] Beyond the Las Vegas shooting, the public, media, and politicians have debated whether or not to consider some mass violence as *terrorism* in cases including Dylann Roof's 2015 attack in Charleston[3] and James Alex Fields Jr.'s attack in Charlottesville.[4] In contrast, the label of *terrorism* was quickly applied to other cases, including Omar Mateen's 2016 attack in Orlando[5] and Sayfullo Habibullaevic Saipov's 2017 attack in New York City.[6] We are interested in why some members of the public would consider a recent attack to be terrorism while others would not. Importantly, our focus in the present study is on the public's response to an event. That is, we utilize the lack of a stated motive to focus on the factors that members of the public consider in determining whether or not to call an event *terrorism*.

The Global Terrorism Database (GTD) defines terrorism as "the threatened or actual use of illegal force and violence by a non-state actor to attain a political, economic, religious, or social goal through fear, coercion, or intimidation."[7] While scholars generally rely on this operational definition of terrorism, there is no definitive conceptual definition of terrorism. Researchers tend to debate specific inclusion or exclusion criteria—

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nonstate actors, for example—but agree on the basic necessary attributes, like a political, economic, religious, or social goal, and the use or threat of violence.[8] Among the public (of which media is a part), however, many have a general idea of what *terrorism* is but public definitions lack nuance, specificity, and consistency.[9] Thus, the public does not have a clear definition of terrorism against which any act of violence can be systematically evaluated. For this reason, we expect that other factors, like media consumption and personal views, will influence how members of the public define a recent violent attack.

Each of the aforementioned attacks is considered terrorism in the GTD. Some individuals, however, disagree with these classifications. Particularly in the aftermath of Paddock's attack in Las Vegas, one public narrative emerged that if Paddock were Muslim then people would be quick to label the attack as terrorism, even in the absence of a clearly stated motive.[10] Indeed, recent scholarship has shown that media disproportionately cover terrorism when the perpetrator is Muslim.[11] Further, this coverage is more likely to describe the incident as terrorism.[12] Similarly, even when all other factors are the same, members of the public are more likely to label a hypothetical attack as terrorism when the perpetrator is Muslim.[13] One limitation of these studies is that they do not address disparities among the public in how people categorize actual violent incidents. Thus, we do not yet understand why some people label a real, recent violent attack as terrorism while others do not.

From an academic perspective, a necessary condition for classifying violence as terrorism is that the perpetrator had a political, religious, economic, or social motive.[14] In the immediate aftermath of the Las Vegas shooting, no clear motive emerged for Paddock's actions. Over a year later, the Federal Bureau of Investigation investigation concluded that they could not identify a motive for the attack.[15] Still, there is debate among experts on whether or not we should consider the shooting to be *terrorism*. The GTD includes the shooting among its attacks and cites evidence of a far-right-wing motivation.[16] Other experts, such as Mark Pitcavage[17] and John Horgan,[18] disagree with this categorization and argue that the evidence of a far-right connection is too weak. In short, while some attacks clearly are or are not terrorism, the Las Vegas shooting is not such a case and thus there is not an absolutely correct answer to whether or not it should be considered *terrorism*. Our aim here is not to delve into this debate. Rather, we are interested in how members of the public view the attack. The ambiguity surrounding how to categorize the Las Vegas shooting allows us to explore what factors push members of the public to classify it as terrorism or not, particularly in the immediate aftermath of the attack.

How the public perceives and categorizes violence can influence the range of both policy and legal responses that are deemed acceptable or appropriate. For example, when violence is perceived as *terrorism*, people are more supportive of harsh treatment including torture.[19] Higher perceived terrorism threats are also linked with greater willingness to give up civil liberties.[20] Further, in the United States there are a number of additional legal penalties when a criminal act is classified as terrorism, and this may be differentially applied based on perpetrator identity.[21] In short, how a violent act is classified influences public opinion, as well as social and legal responses.

This project therefore addresses the question: When the motive is ambiguous, why do some people consider a recent violent incident to be terrorism while others do not?

We argue that there are two main drivers that can explain why some U.S. adults consider the Las Vegas shooting to be terrorism while others do not: media framing and individual views—including political ideology, race, and Islamophobia. Our article is organized as follows: first, we outline the literature on perceptions and misperceptions of terrorism and how this informs our understanding of terrorism. Next, we detail our methodology to examine why some people considered the Las Vegas shooting to be terrorism while others did not in a survey conducted a few weeks after the attack. Finally, we discuss our findings, their limitations and avenues for future research, and the implications of our results.

Background

Media and perceptions of terrorism

Media provide people with much of the information that they receive about the world around them.[22] The nature and extent of media coverage amplify some topics while ignoring others. In turn, these media frames influence to what people pay attention and to what positions or perspectives people are exposed.[23] Particularly when someone has not personally experienced something, media is critical to framing how the person perceives that issue, place, or thing.[24] There is ample evidence that media coverage influences public perceptions on issues ranging from mental health to national security.[25] In the context of crime and justice broadly, a growing body of evidence shows that media depictions influence how the public view issues of security, safety, and threats.[26]

Media depictions of an issue are particularly impactful when people do not have personal experience with it.[27] In the context of terrorism, this is almost certainly the case since the vast majority of people in the United States (thankfully) lack direct, personal experience with this type of violence. In the aftermath of a terrorist attack, people receive most of their information—and thus frames—about the incident from media.[28] Terrorist attacks serve as focusing events—rare, attention-grabbing situations that are easily politicized.[29] Focusing events like terrorist attacks garner a large amount of media attention and spark debates about the issue and how to address it.[30] Focusing events also allow for information—true and false—to spread rapidly, particularly as members of the public are able both receive media frames and to share those perspectives among themselves[31]—which may exacerbate politically driven narratives on terrorism and hate.[32] While media frames may not dictate public perceptions and debate on a topic, they do influence what issues the public discuss and how that debate takes shape.[33] Further, views on terrorism may be robust to new framing effects.[34] People who rate news to be more important to them should be more influenced by media frames and focusing events.[35] Specifically, we expect that:

> **H1:** People who view news media as more important will be more likely to consider a real, violent attack to be terrorism.

Media organizations are, of course, not homogenous. Politics influence media representations of the world.[36] Media provide disproportionate coverage to attacks when the perpetrator is Muslim—and this over-coverage is drastically more prevalent in national sources as compared to local ones.[37] Further, this coverage is more likely to describe

the incident as terrorism as opposed to crime or due to mental illness.[38] Looking at crime coverage more broadly, cable news outlets are more likely to exaggerate racial disparities in criminal activity than network news outlets.[39] Across the political spectrum, cable news reporting rarely includes actual academic experts to discuss violence[40] and regularly engages in outrage tactics, including overgeneralizations and misrepresentations.[41] Further, cable news broadcasts around the clock, which provides substantially more content than either local television news or print media. Thus, people who receive their information from different media sources may view the world in incongruent ways. In short, we expect that media consumption will influence whether or not a person considers a recent, violent attack to be terrorism. From this discussion, we derive the following hypothesis:

H2: People who consume more cable news will be more likely to consider a real violent attack to be terrorism.

Social identity and perceptions of terrorism

Social identity theory posits that people tend to have more positive views of people who are more similar to themselves—their in-group—and hold more negative views of people who they perceive as dissimilar from themselves—their out-group.[42] A wide body of literature supports that people show an affinity for members of their in-group over members of an out-group.[43] Across the literature, in-groups and out-groups are conceptualized in a number of ways, including on the basis of ethnicity, political ideology, and religion.[44] Sometimes multiple identities—say, race and political ideology—overlap but they are conceptually distinct and should uniquely influence views of the respective out-groups.[45] Regardless of the nature of the group-based identity, in the context of terrorism and counterterrorism, people consistently view out-group members as more likely to perpetrate violence[46] and more deserving of harsher punishments for their crimes.[47] When a White person perpetrates mass violence in the United States, the discussion often focuses on mental illness as opposed to terrorism.[48] Thus, among the White population in the United States, it may be difficult to rectify that a member of their in-group—a fellow White person—is capable of engaging in terrorism. From this, we expect that:

H3: White people will be less likely than non-White people to consider a really violent attack to be terrorism when the perpetrator is White.

Further, social identity on the basis of political ideology may also influence whether or not someone considers an attack to be terrorism based on the perpetrator's identity. Over the last few years, there has been an emerging discussion about media reticence to use the words *terrorism* and *terrorist* to describe attacks when the perpetrator is White.[49] Despite attacks like Dylann Roof's 2015 attack in Charleston and James Alex Fields Jr.'s 2017 attack in Charlottesville that clearly meet the academic definition of terrorism, public consensus has not been to describe these incidents as such. There are notable differences in how terrorism is framed across the political spectrum.[50] On one hand, the conservative narrative tends to focus on so-called radical Islamist terrorism as the only—or at least the primary—terrorism threat in the United States.[51] Thus,

conservative-leaning people may only consider a violent attack to be terrorism when the perpetrator is Muslim. On the other hand, the liberal narrative sometimes argues that mass violence by White people should be called terrorism because the same attack would be considered such if the perpetrator were Muslim—and this argument is made irrespective of the perpetrator's motive.[52] Thus, more liberal-leaning people may be inclined to label all mass violence as terrorism, even when the motive is unknown. Supporting this notion, experimental research shows that more conservative people are more likely to view both hypothetical and real attacks as terrorism when the perpetrator is Muslim.[53] In contrast, more conservative people should be less likely to consider an attack to be terrorism if the perpetrator is not Muslim. Relatedly, the discussion on calling all mass violence terrorism—regardless of motive—is more prominent on the political left.[54] From this, we expect that:

H4: People who are more conservative will be less likely to consider a real violent attack to be terrorism when the perpetrator is not Muslim.

Across news and entertainment media in the United States, Muslim or Arab actors are more likely to play the terrorist or villain, which feeds into this stereotyped notion of terrorism.[55] Media frames terrorism as a threat stemming primarily from Muslims. Among some in the population, this frame activates identity cues,[56] which helps explain why some people make an implicit association between terrorism and Islam[57] and consider Muslims to be a national security threat.[58] In contrast, data show that Muslims perpetrate a small portion of recent terrorist attacks in the United States.[59] Still, some hold anti-Muslim views. People who are more Islamophobic should have a strong association between terrorism and Muslims. From this, we expect:

H5: People who are more Islamophobic will be less likely to consider a real violent attack to be terrorism when the perpetrator is not Muslim.

Method

Data

Data for this project come from an online sample of U.S. adults that was administered by Survey Sampling International. A total of 1,082 U.S. adults participated in the study between 23 and 25 October 2017—roughly 3 to 3.5 weeks after the 2017 Las Vegas shooting.

Design

For this project, we are interested in factors that influence whether or not a person considered the 2017 Las Vegas shooting to be terrorism. At the time data were collected, there was a broader debate in media and among the public about how to classify this event.[60] At the point of data collection, the public knew the perpetrator's name and background demographics, but no motive had been identified and verified.[61] During this time, public debate ensued over whether or not to consider this shooting as terrorism. This provided us with a unique opportunity to examine what factors influence whether or not a very recent, violent event should be considered terrorism. The survey was laid out as follows: participants were first asked to answer basic demographic

questions. Participants answered a series of questions about news consumption, trust in media, perceived Islamophobia, and trust in science.[62] Participants then answered questions about the Las Vegas shooting. Finally, participants answered additional, potentially sensitive demographic questions.[63]

Variables

Dependent variables

We are interested in factors that influence whether or not a person considered the 2017 Las Vegas shooting to be terrorism. Our main outcome of interest is whether or not participants indicated that the Las Vegas shooting should be labeled as *terrorism*. Of the 1,081 participants who answered this question, nearly two thirds (64.8 percent) consider the shooting to be *terrorism* while 35.3 percent do not.

Beyond how participants categorize the shooting, we are also interested in how confident they are in their categorizations, although this is exploratory. We next asked how confident participants were in their assessment of whether or not the shooting should be considered terrorism. Confidence in assessment was measured on a 4-point scale from *Not confident at all* to *Very confident*. Table 1 presents a summary of descriptive statistics for key variables.

Independent variables

The key predictors in our study are measured, participant-level variables: how important news media is to the person, where the person gets their news, the person's race, political views, and level of Islamophobia.[64] To measure *importance of news*, we asked

Table 1. Demographics and descriptive variables.

Dependent variables	Frequency	Mean	*SD*	Median	Range
1: Las Vegas shooting is terrorism: Yes	64.75%	—	—	—	—
No	35.25%	—	—	—	—
2. How confident it is terrorism?	—	1.55	0.67	1	1-4
3. How confident it is not terrorism?	—	1.93	0.77	2	1-4
Independent variables	Frequency	Mean	*SD*	Variance	α
Importance of News	—	3.22	0.78	0.62	—
News consumption: ABC	34.6%	—	—	—	—
News consumption: CBS	19.9%	—	—	—	—
News consumption: NBC	18.2%	—	—	—	—
News consumption: *Huffington Post*	14.2%	—	—	—	—
News consumption: *New York Times*	14.1%	—	—	—	—
News consumption: *Washington Post*	11.7%	—	—	—	—
News consumption: CNN	28.1%	—	—	—	—
News consumption: Fox News	26.1%	—	—	—	—
News consumption: MSNBC	11.9%	—	—	—	—
Political ideology: Very liberal	10.9%	—	—	—	—
Political ideology: Liberal	19.6%	—	—	—	—
Political ideology: Moderate	44.4%	—	—	—	—
Political ideology: Conservative	17.7%	—	—	—	—
Political ideology: Very conservative	7.4%	—	—	—	—
White	65.8%	—	—	—	—
Islamophobia	—	2.98	0.81	0.65	0.87
Male	34.1%	—	—	—	—
Age	—	41.33	13.48	40	—

Table 2. Principal components analysis for news source.

	Loadings			
News source	Factor 1: Network news	Factor 2: Cable news	Factor 3: Print media	Communality
ABC News	**0.62**	0.05	−0.04	0.39
CBS News	**0.76**	0.07	0.09	0.59
NBC News	**0.74**	0.05	0.06	0.55
CNN News	0.19	**0.55**	0.37	0.48
MSNBC News	0.30	**0.39**	0.36	0.37
Fox News	−0.03	**0.86**	−0.15	0.75
NYT News	0.00	0.15	**0.75**	0.59
Washington Post	0.04	−0.02	**0.69**	0.48
Huffington Post	0.04	0.01	**0.81**	0.65
Eigenvalue	1.64	1.22	1.99	
Percent of variance	18.21%	13.51%	22.20%	
Total variance			53.92%	

Note: Bold indicates that news sources grouped together by factor loading.

participants the following: "Many people do not find news to be important in their daily life. How important is following the news to you?" Responses were measured on a 4-point scale where higher scores indicate greater importance ($N = 1{,}082$; $M = 3.22$; $SD = 0.78$).

To measure *where the person gets their news*, we followed norms in the communications literature and provided participants with a list of nine popular news sources that span both the ideological spectrum and type of media (*ABC, CBS, CNN, Fox News, Huffington Post, MSNBC, New York Times, NBC, Washington Post*).[65] Participants were asked to indicate which source(s) they got their news from in the last 48 hours ($N = 1{,}082$; $M = 1.79$; $SD = 1.75$). From this, we then conducted a principal components analysis with orthogonal rotation (varimax) in order to assess any underlying factors. The results, seen in Table 2, suggested a three-factor model accounting for about 54 percent of the variation in how participants got their news. The first factor was named Network News because it was composed of loading on questions regarding consumption from the three major news networks (ABC, CBS, and NBC). This factor accounted for 18.21 percent of the variance in respondents. The second factor, which explained 13.51 percent of the variance, was labeled Cable News as it was composed of questions about getting one's news from CNN, Fox News, or MSNBC. Finally, the third factor, which accounted for 22.20 percent of the variance, was made up of questions about reading *Huffington Post*, the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, and as such was labeled Print Media. Overall these factors are sufficiently related and showed a good fit with the data. All but two of the communalities among these items indicated that the variables shared 50 percent or more of their variance with the rest of the questions. Additionally, the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin was 0.71 and the Barlett's test of Sphericity was 1161.37; both indicated that the data were appropriately related for the use of Principal Component Analysis.[66]

We measure social identity in two ways. First, we create a binary variable to indicate whether or not the participant is *White*. A little under two thirds of the sample (65.8 percent) identify as White. Second, we measure participants' *political ideology* on a 5-point scale from very liberal to very conservative ($N = 1{,}082$; $M = 2.91$; $SD = 1.05$). The plurality of participants (44.4 percent) identified as moderate, followed by liberal (19.6 percent), conservative (17.7 percent), very liberal (10.9 percent), and very conservative (7.4 percent).

We measured *Islamophobia* using Kunst, Sam, and Ulleberg's 12-item scale.[67] Each item was measured on a 6-point scale where higher scores suggest greater Islamophobia. We then averaged scores to create a composite score for *Islamophobia* for each participant. Scores ranged from 1 to 5.08 ($N = 1{,}063$; $M = 2.98$; $SD = 0.81$, $\alpha = 0.87$).

We also include two control variables—gender and age—that may influence perceptions of violence. The sample is 34.1 percent male. Because women are overrepresented in the present dataset, we weighted the data by gender to correct this for analyses and improve generalizability of our results. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 65 ($N = 1{,}082$; $M = 41.33$; $SD = 13.48$).

Exploratory variables

As an exploratory measure, we asked participants what would need to be different about the event for them to change their classification of the Las Vegas shooting as terrorism or not. We gave each participant a list of non-mutually exclusive options that were presented in a randomized order. All participants were given the following options: Use of a different weapon or method of attack; Different political affiliation of the perpetrator; Different religious affiliation of the perpetrator; Different motive for the attack; Something else {text box to add answer}.[68] People who thought the attack should be labeled as terrorism were also given the following options for what would make them say it was not terrorism: A smaller scale attack; Fewer victims in the attack. In contrast, people who thought the attack should not be labeled as terrorism were also given the following options for what would make them say it was not terrorism: A larger scale attack; More victims in the attack.

Results

Is the Las Vegas shooting terrorism?

We are interested in what factors impact whether or not someone considered the Las Vegas attack to be terrorism a few weeks after the event. As shown in Table 3, our first outcome measures this directly by asking participants whether or not the Las Vegas attack is terrorism. Since the dependent variable is binary, we estimated a logistic regression model (Model 1). To ease interpretability, we report odds ratios for each independent variable where a ratio greater than one indicates a positive relationship between the independent and dependent variable and a ratio less than one indicates a negative relationship. Supporting H2, we see that a one-unit increase in consuming cable television news is associated with a 25 percent increase in the odds of calling the Las Vegas attack terrorism. As expected in H4, conservative participants are significantly less likely to think the attack is terrorism—specifically, a one-unit increase toward conservative views is associated with a 22 percent decrease in odds of calling the attack terrorism. Supporting H5, people who are more Islamophobic are less likely to consider the Las Vegas shooting terrorism—specifically, a one-unit increase in Islamophobia is associated with an 18 percent decrease in odds of calling the attack terrorism. Contrary to what we had hypothesized, the importance of news media (H1) and participant's race

Table 3. Should the attack in Las Vegas be labeled as "terrorism"?

	Model 1: Yes, it is terrorism	Model 2: Overall confidence	Model 3: It is terrorism: Confidence	Model 4: It is not terrorism: Confidence
Importance of news	1.05 (0.10)	**0.75**** **(0.07)**	**0.73*** **(0.09)**	0.81 (0.13)
News consumption: Paper	1.05 (0.11)	0.88 (0.08)	0.86 (0.10)	0.97 (0.15)
News consumption: Network TV news	0.95 (0.08)	1.03 (0.08)	1.12 (0.11)	0.92 (0.11)
News consumption: Cable TV news	**1.25*** **(0.12)**	0.85† (0.07)	0.87 (0.09)	0.82 (0.12)
Political ideology	**0.78***** **(0.05)**	1.08 (0.07)	1.02 (0.09)	1.12 (0.13)
White	0.90 (0.14)	1.03 (0.14)	1.07 (0.18)	0.92 (0.22)
Islamophobia	**0.82*** **(0.07)**	1.15 (0.10)	**1.25*** **(0.12)**	0.94 (0.16)
Male	0.98 (0.14)	**0.72*** **(0.09)**	0.88 (0.14)	**0.51**** **(0.12)**
Age	**0.98**** **(0.01)**	**1.01*** **(0.01)**	1.01† (0.01)	1.00 (0.01)
Observations	1,058	1,055	687	368

Note: Bold indicates statistical significance.

Model 1. DV: "Should the attack in Las Vegas be labeled as 'terrorism'?" Response options: yes (1) and no (0). Logistic regression model. Odds ratios presented with robust standard errors in parentheses.

Model 2, 3, and 4. Questions depending on response to how the attack should be labeled: "How confident are you that the attack in Las Vegas should be labeled as 'terrorism'?" or "How confident are you that the attack in Las Vegas should not be labeled as 'terrorism'?" Response options: not confident at all (1); not too confident (2); somewhat confident (3); and very confident (4).

Ordered logistic regression models. Odds ratios presented with robust standard errors in parentheses.

Constants not reported.

$^{\dagger}p < .10$. $^{*}p < .05$. $^{**}p < .01$. $^{***}p < .001$.

(H4) did not influence how people label the Las Vegas shooting. Results also show that a one-year increase in age is associated with a 2 percent decrease in odds of calling the attack terrorism. Overall, we find mixed results for our expectations about why some people call the Las Vegas shooting "terrorism" while others do not.

Given the public debate on how to label the Las Vegas attack, we are also interested in how confident people are in their assessments. An independent samples *t*-test shows that people who said that the shooting should be considered terrorism are significantly less confident in their assessment ($M = 1.55$) than those who said it should not be ($M = 1.83$), $t(1076) = 8.42$, $p < .001$.

We next conduct exploratory analyses to examine whether the independent variables influence confidence in assessments for the full sample (Model 2) and break this out by those who said it was terrorism (Model 3) and that it was not terrorism (Model 4). As Model 2 shows, overall people who think news is more important and men are less confident in their label of the attack, whereas older people are more confident. Among the subsample who said that the attack is terrorism (Model 3), people who think news is more important are less confident in their assessment, whereas people who are more Islamophobic are more confident. Finally, among the subsample who said that the attack was not terrorism (Model 4), men are less confident in their assessments but no other factors have an influence.

What would change your mind?

Research shows that public views on what is or is not terrorism are context dependent.[69] We asked participants what would change their mind and provided a list of non-mutually exclusive choices: different weapon, different political ideology, different

Table 4. What would change your mind

	Yes, it should be labeled terrorism	No, it shouldn't be labeled terrorism
Use of a different weapon or method of attack	11.84%	2.88%
Different political affiliation of the perpetrator	7.85%	14.66%
Different religious affiliation of the perpetrator	7.28%	26.18%
Different motive for the attack	27.67%	56.54%
A smaller-scale attack	25.68%	—
A larger-scale attack	—	6.02%
Fewer victims in the attack	23.25%	—
More victims in the attack	—	4.97%
Something else	22.84%	5.09%
Nothing	5.71%	0.26%

Table 5. What would change your mind to say it is not terrorism?

	Model 5: Different weapon	Model 6: Different political affiliation	Model 7: Different religious affiliation	Model 8: Different motive	Model 9: Smaller-scale attack	Model 10: Fewer victims
Importance of news	0.92	0.95	**0.60***	1.02	0.91	1.22
	(0.17)	(0.19)	**(0.13)**	(0.13)	(0.12)	(0.16)
News consumption: Paper	1.02	0.73	0.91	1.02	1.08	0.83
	(0.14)	(0.18)	(0.23)	(0.13)	(0.14)	(0.11)
News consumption: Network TV news	**1.38***	1.30	1.35	0.90	1.06	1.05
	(0.18)	(0.25)	(0.25)	(0.10)	(0.12)	(0.11)
News consumption: Cable TV news	0.99	1.19	1.33	0.97	0.92	0.90
	(0.15)	(0.22)	(0.24)	(0.12)	(0.12)	(0.11)
Political ideology	**0.76***	0.84	1.00	1.03	1.18†	0.93
	(0.10)	(0.11)	(0.14)	(0.10)	(0.11)	(0.09)
White	0.62†	1.05	1.95†	0.91	0.87	0.99
	(0.16)	(0.33)	(0.73)	(0.17)	(0.17)	(0.20)
Islamophobia	1.07	0.72†	0.83	1.14	1.10	1.09
	(0.14)	(0.12)	(0.17)	(0.12)	(0.13)	(0.14)
Male	0.82	1.11	1.07	**1.45***	0.76	0.82
	(0.21)	(0.35)	(0.34)	**(0.27)**	(0.15)	(0.16)
Age	1.00	0.99	0.99	0.99	0.99	0.99
	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)
Observations	688	688	688	688	688	688

Note: Bold indicates statistical significance.
Question: "What would need to be different about the event for it NOT to be labeled as a terrorist attack?"
Six Non-Mutually Exclusive Response Options Turned into Binary Dependent Variables: Use of a different weapon or method of attack; Different political affiliation of the perpetrator; Different religious affiliation of the perpetrator; Different motive for the attack; A smaller-scale attack; Fewer victims in the attack.
Logistic regression models. Odds ratios presented with robust standard errors in parentheses.
Constants not reported.
†$p < .10$. *$p < .05$. $p < .01$. $p < .001$.

religion, different motive, different scale, and different lethality. Table 4 shows the percentage of participants who indicated that each of the aforementioned factors would lead them to change their mind about how they categorize the attack. First, we used independent samples *t*-tests with unequal variance to compare the frequency of indicating each choice between those who said that the Las Vegas shooting is terrorism and those who did not. People who said that the Las Vegas shooting is terrorism are more likely to indicate that a different weapon ($t(1076.77) = -6.00$, $p < .001$), scale of the attack ($t(1079) = -9.57$, $p < .001$), or number of victims ($t(1076.22) = -9.38$, $p < .001$) would change their mind and were less likely to say that a perpetrator with a different political ideology ($t(622.66) = 3.29$, $p < .001$), religious view ($t(527.53) = 7.70$, $p < .001$), or motivation ($t(715.37) = 9.49$, $p < .001$) would change their mind.

Table 6. What would change your mind to say it is terrorism?

	Model 11: Different weapon	Model 12: Different political affiliation	Model 13: Different religious affiliation	Model 14: Different motive	Model 15: Larger-scale attack	Model 16: More victims
Importance of news	1.87	1.01	1.41†	0.91	0.98	1.27
	(0.73)	(0.21)	(0.21)	(0.14)	(0.34)	(0.30)
News consumption: Paper	1.49	**0.45***	1.00	1.07	1.41	0.94
	(0.93)	**(0.15)**	(0.20)	(0.19)	(0.39)	(0.43)
News consumption: Network TV news	1.61†	1.16	1.01	1.00	1.05	0.80
	(0.45)	(0.18)	(0.13)	(0.12)	(0.20)	(0.21)
News consumption: Cable TV news	0.37	1.39	1.06	1.11	1.16	0.82
	(0.29)	(0.29)	(0.14)	(0.19)	(0.43)	(0.32)
Political ideology	1.02	0.85	1.06	0.87	1.10	1.14
	(0.32)	(0.13)	(0.14)	(0.11)	(0.23)	(0.25)
White	**0.10****	0.85	0.76	**2.19****	2.22	**0.30***
	(0.08)	(0.33)	(0.23)	**(0.59)**	(1.37)	**(0.16)**
Islamophobia	1.05	1.16	0.86	0.98	1.17	1.11
	(0.63)	(0.23)	(0.14)	(0.13)	(0.43)	(0.35)
Male	0.31†	0.63	0.99	1.00	1.32	1.53
	(0.22)	(0.22)	(0.24)	(0.23)	(0.64)	(0.79)
Age	1.05	1.02	1.01	1.01	0.97	0.96
	(0.03)	(0.02)	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.02)	(0.02)
Observations	372	372	372	372	372	372

Question: "What would need to be different about the event for it to be labeled as a terrorist attack?".
Six Non-Mutually Exclusive Response Options Turned into Binary Dependent Variables: Use of a different weapon or method of attack; Different political affiliation of the perpetrator; Different religious affiliation of the perpetrator; Different motive for the attack; A larger-scale attack; More victims in the attack.
Logistic regression models. Odds ratios presented with robust standard errors in parentheses.
Constants not reported.
†$p < .10$. *$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. $p < .001$.

Next, we examine this further by estimating a series of logistic regression models to explore whether any of our independent variables influence what would make someone change their mind about how they label the Las Vegas shooting. As shown in Tables 5 and 6, few of our independent variables are related to reasons that someone said they would change their mind about how to label the Las Vegas attack. Across these models, there is not a consistent result or story. In short, people who think that the attack was terrorism would change their minds for different reasons than those who think that it was not terrorism, but other factors examined here do not clearly explain what reasons people say would change their minds about how to label a recent violent attack.

Discussion

This research was aimed at addressing why some people consider a violent incident to be terrorism while others do not. We expected that views would come from two places: media framing of the incident and the person's own beliefs that fill in the gaps. Our results suggest that media consumption and Islamophobia are at the center of public perceptions about what constitutes terrorism. This finding supports prior research that shows a strong association between Muslims and terrorism in both media and public perceptions.[70] However, our results also suggest a fair amount of ambiguity in public understanding. When asked what would change their minds about how to view a violent incident, respondents provided a wide range of answers. As a result, while this

study cannot isolate a single causal story, it does add to our understanding of how media consumption influences public views of a recent terrorist attack.

Given that most of the general public lack any direct experience or expertise in what constitutes terrorism, it is perhaps not surprising that media consumption helped to shape many people's views of how to understand a violent incident. This is particularly interesting given that research demonstrates that there is bias in the media's coverage of such events. This work suggests that media may serve to further both a general sense of Islamophobia and the public's ambiguity about what constitutes terrorism. For example, research finds that—particularly among national sources—there is greater coverage of a terrorist attack when the perpetrator is Muslim.[71] Together with experimental work suggesting that political ideology impacts people's predispositions about how to view violent incidents, media likely constitutes an important force in shaping public opinion.[72] This was evidenced in our finding that more cable news consumption increased the likelihood that an individual would characterize a violent attack as terrorism. Similarly, we also found that both Islamophobia and a conservative political ideology significantly decreased the chances an individual would view the Las Vegas shooting as terrorism. Yet, surprisingly, other aspects of media consumption—such as the importance of news—did not have a meaningful effect on an individual's perceptions, which may help to clarify our understanding of the process by which media shapes perspectives.

Given the uncertainty associated with the Las Vegas attack, we also asked respondents how confident they felt in their classification of the event. In an effort to better understand why it is that some people would or would not characterize an event as terrorism, we then asked respondents what would change their mind. Interestingly, those who indicated that news was more important to them were also generally less confident in their characterization of the attack. This may be suggestive of a broader sense of open-mindedness among these individuals. That is, people who place a higher value on news and an awareness of current events may also be more willing to update their views or to admit they could be wrong. Yet, while some respondents were less confident than others, looking across the sample our results did not suggest what it would take to broadly change people's minds. Those who said the Las Vegas shooting was terrorism were more likely to indicate that they would change their minds if the attack involved a different weapon, a smaller scale of the attack, or fewer victims. However, those who said the attack should not be labeled terrorism focused on other factors. Among these, respondents were most likely to indicate that they would change their minds if the attack involved: a different motive or a perpetrator with a different political or religious affiliation. In spite of these differing sets of considerations, none of the independent variables in this study could predict what would change someone's mind either to or against labeling the shooting as terrorism. Essentially, people appear willing—at least in theory—to change their minds based on situational factors, but it is unclear whether individual-level factors would also contribute to this decision.

In sum, our findings suggest that the lens of media—particularly cable news coverage—and Islamophobia are at the heart of public perceptions about what constitutes a terrorist attack. Yet it remains unclear what is required to change people's minds generally about such events. As a result, this research adds to our understanding on the role

of media consumption in shaping public understanding of terrorism, while also suggesting the need for further research into how people process and understand such events.

Conclusion

One limitation of this research is that it used a single survey collected a few weeks after the shooting in Las Vegas took place. Future research could benefit from the use of a panel design in which the same individuals could be followed over time. This could prove particularly beneficial as media coverage of the event changes, new information comes to light, and individuals' unique understandings are able to develop. Such a design could also help lend insight into the stability of public perceptions, particularly in light of additional developments in the case and as new events take place. For example, it may be that people are more willing to change their characterization when it is reframed in the wake of some new event. In this same way, research using an experimental design could prove useful to directly address what factors cause people to change their minds about what constitutes a terrorist event. For example, being able to experimentally control elements of an event rather than asking respondents to choose what would change their mind could lend insight into how people process these types of events. These types of experiments might also be able to look directly at what factors impact an individual's confidence in their assessment. Importantly, future studies can also directly address the impact of education on how these types of events are viewed. Much of the public lacks any formal education in what constitutes terrorism. As a result, this likely shapes the lack of clear consensus on what would change their minds about how to view events like the Las Vegas shooting. Relatedly, this study uses a single event, the Las Vegas shooting. While this event provided an important opportunity to examine an otherwise undefined incident, future research would likely benefit from asking individuals to assess multiple incidents. This could prove particularly useful in looking at the relative importance individuals place on different elements of the attack, as well of the general stability of those opinions. For instance, comparing different events could examine whether or not an attack of similar scale but with a Muslim perpetrator changes the results found here. Our research suggests a number of future projects are likely needed to better understand the complex process at work in shaping public views of these types of attacks.

The results of this study contribute to a better understand of how media coverage influences public perceptions of terrorism. The consumption of cable news in particular appears central to shaping perceptions, even where the importance a person places on news does not. Relatedly, level of Islamophobia is also central to whether or not a person classifies violence as terrorism. Rarely does cable news have academic researchers on to help inform public understanding.[73] Yet the present study strongly suggests the need for research and empirical evidence to be a central component of media coverage. This is critical for several reasons. Academics provide an important counterbalancing force against the Islamophobic tint of much media coverage. Additionally, much of the public's exposure to and understanding of terrorism comes to them via the media. This is particularly important in a democracy where it is the public's understanding that is likely to influence policy. The label of terrorism may carry increased penalties or other punitive responses.[74] Given all of this, it is paramount that conversation be informed by experts, facts, and data.

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