“How the Public Defines Terrorism:” Replication and Extension

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Abstract

In "How the Public Defines Terrorism," Connor Huff and Joshua Kertzer explore one of the most pressing and controversial issues in International Relations—terrorism. The New Oxford American Dictionary defines terrorism as "the unlawful use of violence and intimidation, especially against civilians, in the pursuit of political aims." However, details surrounding acts of violence are often nuanced and leave substantial room for subjective interpretation. Thus, debates often arise among scholars, politicians, and the public about whether violent incidents should be considered acts of terrorism or not. In this paper, Huff and Kertzer investigate how the public understands terrorism through manipulating various characteristics of an act of violence, such as the method and the motivation behind it. They combine analyses of the media's impact on public perception and results from a survey experiment to determine how ordinary people define terrorism. I aim to extend their analyses by examining how various characteristics of the *respondents* influence their perception of terrorism to supplement the findings of which characteristics of an *act* lead or dissuade respondents from seeing an event as terrorism.

Introduction

Connor Huff, a PhD Candidate in the Department of Government at Harvard University, and Joshua Kertzer, the Paul Sack Associate Professor of Political Economy in the Department of Government at Harvard University, enter the extensive scholarly dialogue on terrorism through the lens of the public eye. Acts of terrorism prompt personal, emotional, and political responses, especially among Americans, so understanding the criteria through which citizens define terrorism is of paramount importance (Huff and Kertzer 55). The authors do not attempt to tackle public reactions to large, heinous acts of violence. For example, atrocities like 9/11 are obviously carried out by terrorists and often claimed by terrorist organizations, thus, it is my

understanding that gauging public responses in such cases would tie into the politics of the situation rather than the definition of it. Huff and Kertzer, therefore, seek to differentiate between "small" acts of violence and terrorism, as people do not usually have as clear-cut, visceral reactions to less severe cases. In order to determine which characteristics of a violent incident are salient, Huff and Kertzer design a conjoint experiment in which they manipulate seven different characteristics of an event—tactics, casualties, target, location, actor, categorization of actor, and motivation—and ask respondents to classify the event as terrorism or not. Of course, details of the event matter; however, I want to explore if a respondent's background influences how they classify small acts of violence. Thus, in the spirit of Ryan Enos' work on exclusionary attitudes, I aim to look at demographic characteristics of respondents and how they affect their attitudes towards an act (Enos). Because some attributes of an act are more nuanced than others, such as the difference in casualties, examining the characteristics of the respondents can provide a glimpse into how demographic differences affect the public's understanding of terrorism.

The Experiment and Data

The authors used Amazon's Mechanical Turk (MTurk) to field their survey on 1,400 adults (Huff and Kertzer 62). The data gathered from this experiment centers around one main variable: the terror binary. The terror binary is the dependent variable of the entire experiment, as it measures whether the respondent believes an incident should be considered terrorism or not. Because samples recruited from MTurk are generally biased, towards men for example, the authors use entropy balancing to show the robustness of their findings (Huff and Kertzer 62). Huff and Kertzer analyze tactics, casualties, target, location, actor, categorization, and motivation individually throughout the paper. Each participant classifies seven incidents, so the analyses are based on 9,800 randomly generated scenarios with clustered, bootstrapped standard

errors at the participant level (62). They plot the results on probability scales, each of which are replicated in the Appendix. Of the seven characteristics, the authors find that the tactics used in an event and the motivation driving it have the greatest impact in determining the likelihood that the event is identified as terrorism or not. Social categorization of the actor, the severity of the violence, and the political purposiveness of the perpetrator are only slightly significant as indicators, while the target and location have virtually no effect.

Extension: Demographic Analysis

When a notable act of violence occurs on American soil, there is always a looming possibility that it was an act of terrorism, and a political debate usually ensues. People dividing along party lines in the wake of violence is unsurprising. In this extension, I want to explore the role that demographics, particularly ideology and education, play in influencing how people actually define terrorism. In most cases, the public has the opportunity to voice beliefs about policy dealing with terrorism and how lawmakers should combat it. However, it is important to understand what characteristics of a person affects their beliefs about terrorism. As Huff and Kertzer note, "understanding what ordinary citizens think terrorism is is a crucial prerequisite to understanding how they react to it" (55). It is no surprise that a person's political alignment affects how they conceptualize foreign affairs, but this analysis is unique for two reasons. First, it deals with the context of small acts of violence. No one doubts that 9/11 was a blatant and egregious act of terrorism, but less extreme actions leave more room for speculation and personal inference. Second, I want to investigate part of a cyclical relationship that exists between political ideology and terrorism to extend Huff and Kertzer's analysis. Acts of terrorism inform political ideologies, and I want to determine to what degree political ideologies inform responses to terrorism.

Methods

In order to determine which variables impact how people view violence, I begin by running two separate regressions with the terror binary as the dependent variable and education and ideology as the respective independent variables. In the data, ideology is coded on a 1-7 scale from "extremely conservative" to "extremely liberal." Similarly, education is on a 1-8 scale from "less than high school" to "professional degree." To remain consistent with Huff and Kertzer's analyses, I wanted to observe probabilities in addition to regressions. Thus, I created a function to convert regression coefficients into odds and odds into probabilities ("Convert Logit to Probability"). In addition, using probabilities in my analysis bolsters the regression results.

Results

My expectations for the results centered around extremes. In terms of education, I expected less educated people to have the most intense reactions to violence, and I expected more educated people to have less of a reaction to violent events. Because the events at hand occur on a small scale and vary only slightly from one another, I expected more educated people to be able to account for all subtleties and make an informed decision on their perception rather than relying on a more instinctual reaction. Similarly, I expected that extremely ideological people, on either end of the political spectrum, would be more likely to have intense reactions, regardless of the nature of the reaction.

Regression: Education and Terrorism

Table 1 presents the results from the education regression. Each level of education has a positive effect on the terror binary outcome, meaning education positively impacts the likelihood that the respondents classify violent events as terrorism. The majority of the coefficients are similar in magnitude, with the exception of "less than high school," which has a much larger

effect—almost three times the next closest value. These findings are not exactly in line with what I expected, but they are close. The least educated people in this sample have the most extreme reactions. However, the coefficient values seem to flat line beginning at "high school or GED." This shows that even having some education affects a person's perception of terrorism.

Table 1: Education

	Dependent variable:
	Terror Binary
High school or GED	0.128**
	(0.052)
Some college	0.137***
	(0.051)
2-year college degree	0.089*
	(0.052)
4-year college degree	0.103**
	(0.051)
Master's degree	0.126**
	(0.053)
Doctoral degree	0.108
	(0.068)
Professional degree	0.086
	(0.069)
Less than high school	0.458***
	(0.050)
Observations	11,136
Log Likelihood	−7,953.508
Akaike Inf. Crit.	15,923.020
Note:	*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Regression: Ideology and Terrorism

Table 2 displays the results of the regression on political ideology. The regression coefficients for the levels of political ideology are not as homogenous as those of education. Two main conclusions may be derived from this model. First, every ideological identity, except for "extremely conservative," negatively impacts the likelihood that respondents will classify events as terrorism. Second, the "extremely conservative" coefficient extraordinarily larger than the others. This deduction partially aligns with what I had expected, as one of the two extreme ideologies in this context has the strongest impact in the regression. Moreover, it is the only level positively affects the terror binary.

Table 2: Political Ideology

	Dependent variable:
	Terror Binary
Conservative	−0.036
	(0.025)
Slightly conservative	−0.037
	(0.026)
Moderate	−0.017
	(0.024)
Slightly liberal	−0.060**
	(0.024)
Liberal	−0.008
	(0.023)
Extremely liberal	−0.020
	(0.026)
Extremely conservative	0.599***
	(0.021)
Observations	11,136
Log Likelihood	−7,955.191
Akaike Inf. Crit.	15,924.380
Note:	*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Probabilities

Since the authors utilized analysis of probabilities, I wanted to do the same. Using the logit conversion function, I found the probabilities of a certain individual perceiving an event as terrorism. The probabilities associated with each level of education and political ideology are not extremely distinct. For the different levels of education, individuals with less than high school education are the most likely, about 61%, to classify violent events as terrorism. The remaining seven levels float around 50% likelihood. In the same way, extremely conservative respondents are the most likely, about 65%, to classify events as terrorism, while the remaining levels hover right below 50%. These probabilities show that having a lower level of education increases the chances that an individual defines a violent event as an act of terrorism by about 10% and being extremely conservative increases such likelihood by about 15%. While the magnitude of this effect may be small, the difference is still notable. The purpose of calculating the probabilities is to have another lens through which the impact of demographics on perception of violence can be analyzed.

Discussion

Terrorism has the ability to affect a nation on every level. When people suffer at the hands of senseless violence, politics, emotions, and relationships are damaged. However, it is nearly impossible to understand people's reactions to events if we cannot understand why they perceive the event the way they do in the first place. Because terrorism is such a unique topic with countless factors to account for, it is difficult to decisively say what explains how people define it. Huff and Kertzer explore the different elements of the violent act and how each affects the way people perceive it. The aim of my extension is to move one more degree further away

from the interpretation of the incident and look at the characteristics of respondents, which play a part in leading them to consider certain elements of an event terroristic or not.

Conclusion

Education and political ideology impact the chances that a person will classify a small event of violence of terrorism. Huff and Kertzer note that defining terrorism has major implications for response, policymaking, and interpersonal relationship development. Because public opinion influences policy, leaders ought to have criteria to help them identify trends in what people are classifying as terrorism and why. Huff and Kertzer address the "what" and I am to address the "why." Why do people classify violence as terrorism or not? For example, do conservatives tend to jump to the conclusion of terrorism more than liberals? My model suggests that they do. Perhaps, then, it would not matter to an extreme conservative if two people were killed as opposed to one, but rather they would be more fixated on the social categorization of the perpetrator. Of course, definitely making these claims would require more extensive analysis, but inferences may still be derived from the extension. Regardless of the mechanism, Huff and Kertzer are absolutely correct in noting that defining terrorism through the eyes of the public is a crucial first step for fighting it.

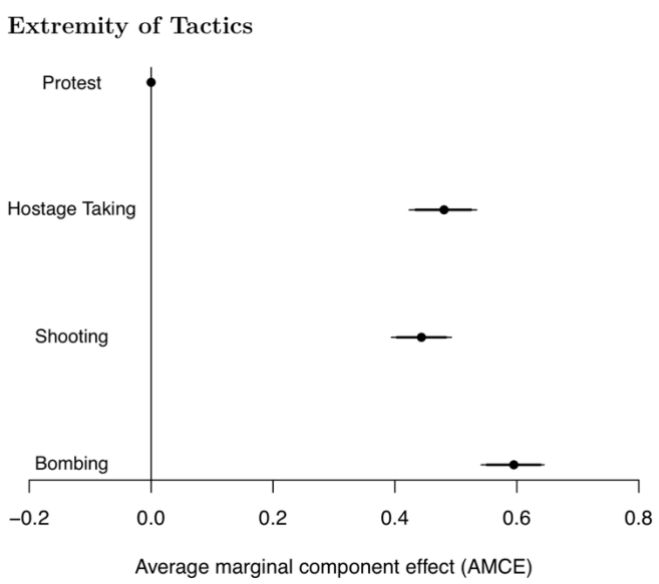
References

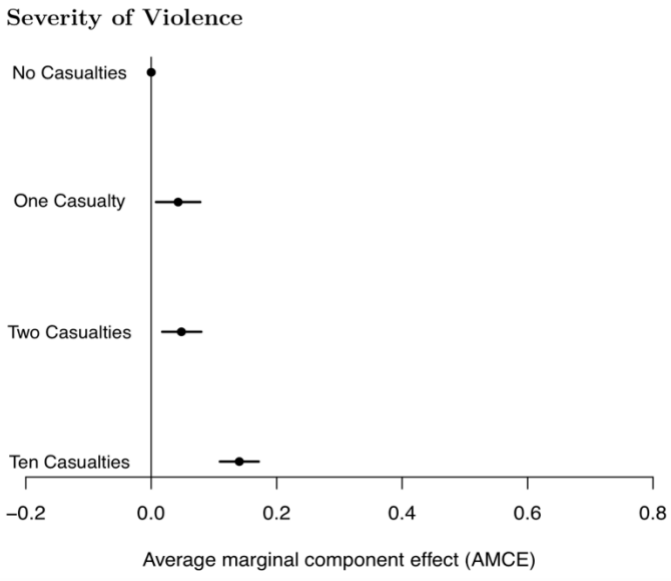
"Convert Logit to Probability." *Sebastian Sauer Stats Blog*, sebastiansauer.github.io/convert_logit2prob/.

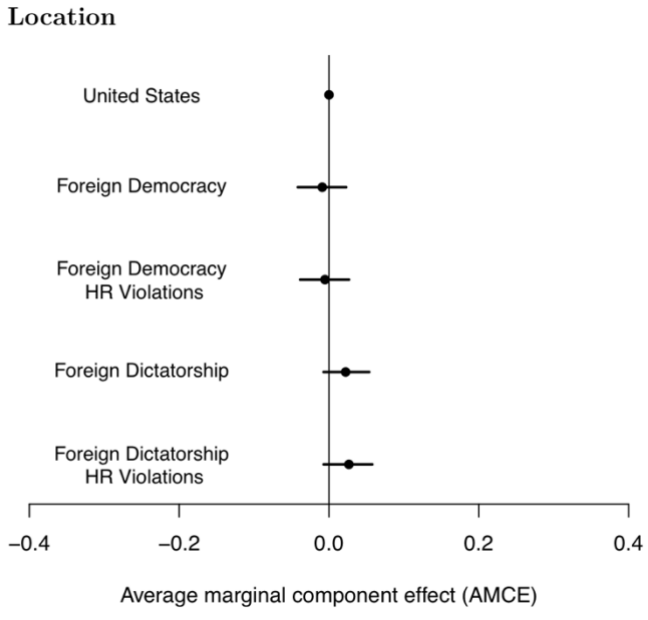
Enos, Ryan D. "Causal Effect of Intergroup Contact on Exclusionary Attitudes." *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, vol. 111, no. 10, 2014, pp. 3699–3704., doi:10.1073/pnas.1317670111.

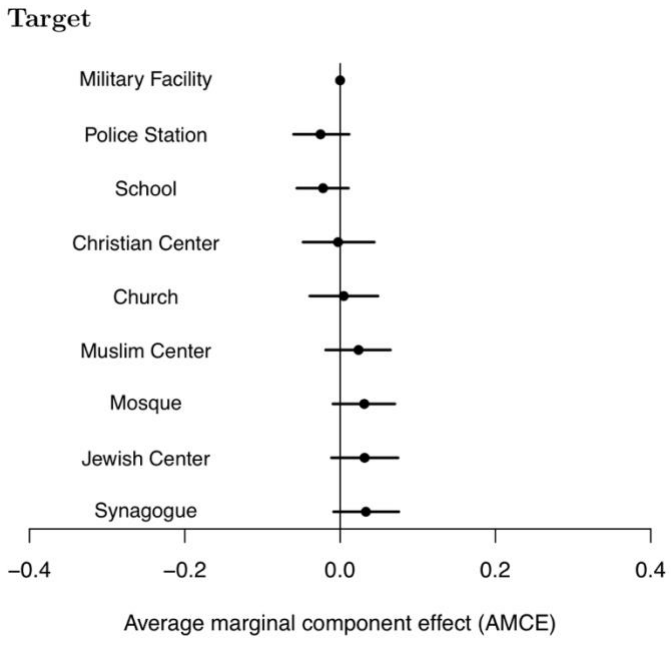
Huff, Connor, and Joshua D. Kertzer. "How the Public Defines Terrorism." *American Journal of Political Science*, vol. 62, no. 1, 2017, pp. 55–71., doi:10.1111/ajps.12329.

APPENDIX

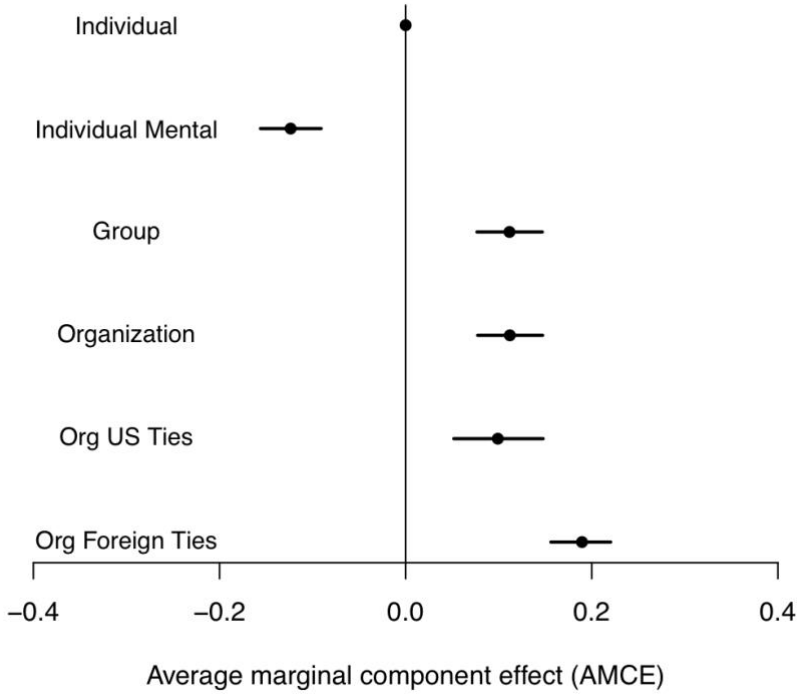

Extremity of Tactics
Protest
Hostage Taking
Shooting
Bombing
−0.2
0.0
0.2
0.4
0.6
0.8
Average marginal component effect (AMCE)


Severity of Violence
No Casualties
One Casualty
Two Casualties
Ten Casualties
−0.2
0.0
0.2
0.4
0.6
0.8
Average marginal component effect (AMCE)

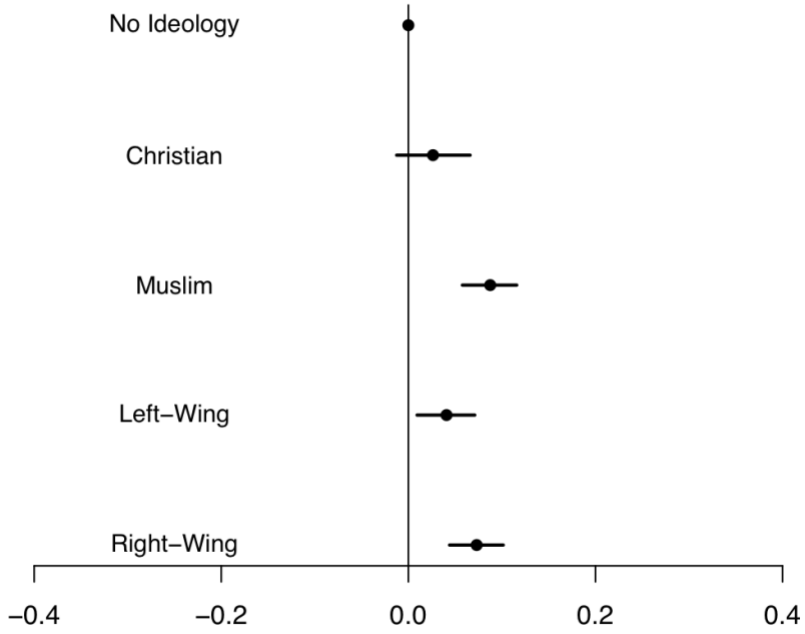

Location
United States
Foreign Democracy
Foreign Democracy
HR Violations
Foreign Dictatorship
Foreign Dictatorship
HR Violations
−0.4
−0.2
0.0
0.2
0.4
Average marginal component effect (AMCE)


Target
Military Facility
Police Station
School
Christian Center
Church
Muslim Center
Mosque
Jewish Center
Synagogue
−0.4
−0.2
0.0
0.2
0.4
Average marginal component effect (AMCE)

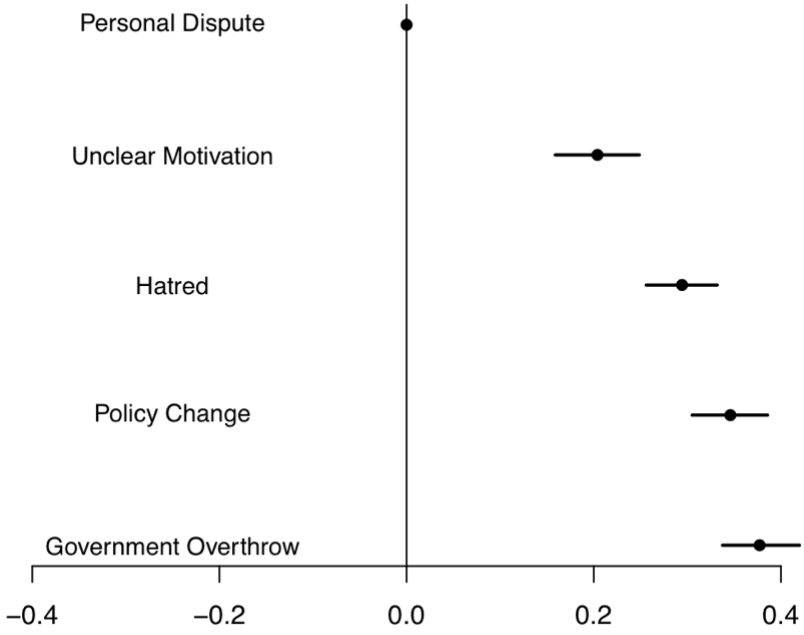
The Political Purposiveness of the Perpetrator



Social Categorization Effects



Motive Attribution Effects



The Predicted Probability a Range of Incidents Are Classified as Terrorism Using a Weighted Support Vector Machine Classifier with Lasso Constraints

% latex table generated in R 3.5.1 by xtable 1.8-3 package % Fri May 3 20:25:14 2019

	V1	V2
1	East Selma Church Shooting (09/20/15)	0.23
2	Dallas Police HQ Shooting (06/13/15)	0.25
3	UCLA Black Lives Matter Protest (10/08/15)	0.28
4	University of California Tuition Hike Protests (03/18/15)	0.31
5	Zvornik Police Station shooting (04/27/15)	0.33
6	Marysville Pilchuck High School shooting (10/24/14)	0.33
7	Rocori High School shooting (09/24/03)	0.33
8	Shooting of Police in Brooklyn (12/20/14)	0.35
9	Islamic Community Center of Phoenix Demonstrations (10/10/15)	0.35
10	Shooting of Police in Oakland (03/21/09)	0.35
11	Pentagon Metro Shooting (03/04/10)	0.36
12	St. Columbanus Church Shooting (11/26/12)	0.39
13	Poe Elementary School Bombing (09/15/59)	0.39
14	Newport Church hostage situation (07/30/06)	0.39
15	Copenhagen Synagogue Shooting (02/14/15)	0.39
16	University of Alabama Huntsville (12/02/10)	0.43
17	Charleston church Shooting (06/17/15)	0.46
18	Camp Shelby Shootings (08/05/15)	0.47
19	Overland Park Jewish Community Center Shooting (04/13/14)	0.47
20	Knoxville Unitarian Universalist Church shooting (07/27/08)	0.48
21	Rosemary Anderson High School shooting (12/13/14)	0.49
22	Shooting of George Tiller (05/31/09)	0.55
23	Bombing of Shiraa village mosque (12/30/2014)	0.55
24	Kehilat Bnei Torah synagogue attack (11/18/14)	0.59
25	KKK Selma Bombing	0.61
26	Seattle Jewish Federation Shooting (07/28/06)	0.62
27	Nag Hammadi massacre (01/07/10)	0.62
28	Contra attack in Quilali (11/11/1987)	0.62
29	ETA Sanguesa car bombing (05/30/03)	0.64
30	Lombard Islamic School bombing (08/12/12)	0.71
31	Hamas attack on IDF in Khan Yunis (12/24/14)	0.71
32	Shebaa Farms incident (01/28/15)	0.72
33	Camp Integrity Suicide bombing (08/07/15)	0.74
34	Porte de Vincennes hostage situation (01/09/15)	0.74
35	Pakistan Army General HQ hostage situation (10/10/09)	0.78
36	Zif School Bombing (09/17/02)	0.84
37	Aksu bombing (08/19/10)	0.85
38	Chattanooga shootings (07/16/15)	0.85
39	Fort Hood Shootings (11/05/09)	0.85