“How the Public Defines Terrorism:” Replication and Extension

Connor Huff and Joshua Kertzer

Keeley MacAfee

Gov 1006: Models

Final Paper

10 May 2019

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. 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 their 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, and they reach three main conclusions. First, the way people define terrorism mainly depends on two elements of the event: the extremity of the violent tactics used and the motivation behind the actions. Second, the media plays a large part in influencing how people categorize violent events. Lastly, there is a disparity between how the law and how the public define terrorism. I aim to extend Huff and Kertzer's analyses by examining how various characteristics of the *respondents* influence their perception of terrorism to supplement the findings of which characteristics of the *act* lead or dissuade respondents from seeing an event as terrorism.

Introduction

The New Oxford American Dictionary defines terrorism as "the unlawful use of violence and intimidation, especially against civilians, in the pursuit of political aims." 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 intense emotional and political responses, especially among Americans, so understanding the criteria through which citizens define terrorism is of paramount importance (Huff and Kertzer 55). For the scope of their analyses, 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. They do not attempt to tackle public reactions to large, heinous acts of violence. For example, atrocities like 9/11 are unmistakably carried out by terrorists and often claimed by terrorist organizations. Therefore, 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.

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. The authors used Amazon's Mechanical Turk (MTurk) to field a survey on 1,400 American adults, which asks them to classify incidents with randomly generated characteristics as terrorism or not (Huff and Kertzer 62). Huff and Kertzer plot their results on probability scales, each of which are replicated in the Appendix. They individually visualize the effect each of the seven observed characteristics has. Of the

seven characteristics, the authors find that, based on their probability analysis, 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. 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.

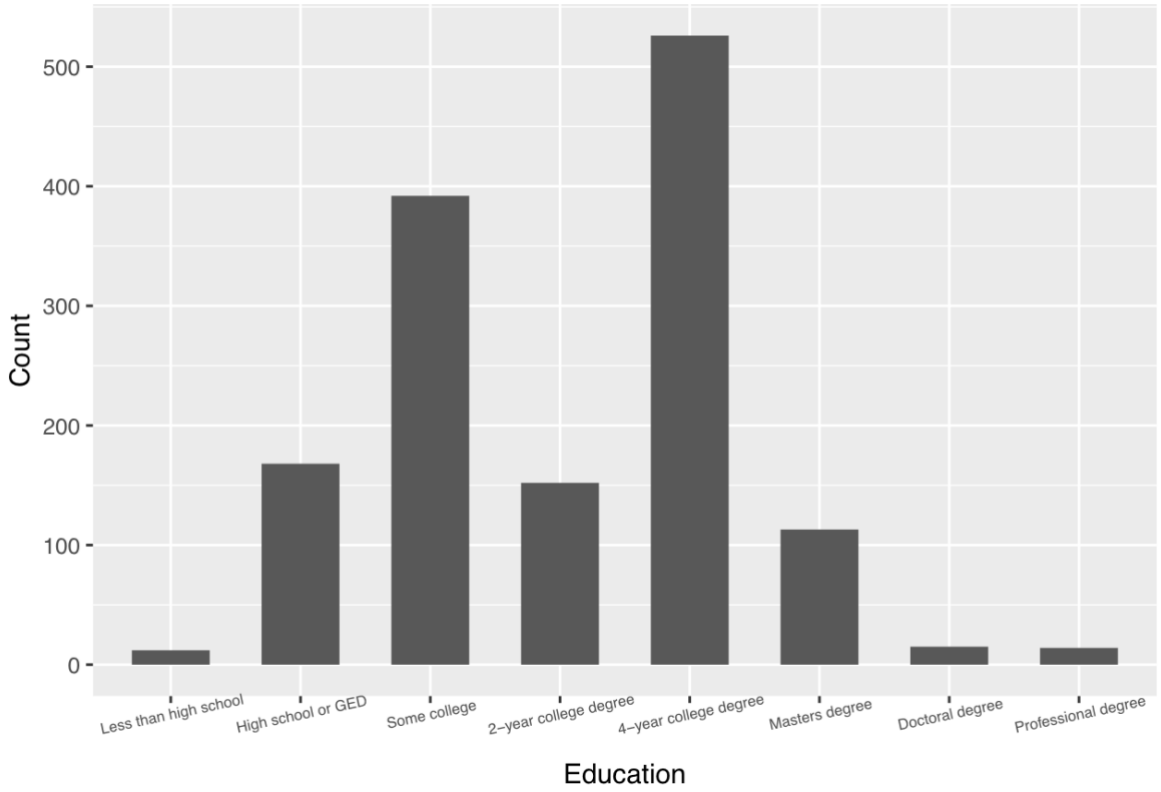
The Data

The data gathered from this experiment centers around one main variable: the terror binary. The terror binary is the dependent variable of the entire study, as it indicates whether a respondent believes the whether or not the incident he/she was presented with should be considered terrorism. Huff and Kertzer analyze tactics, casualties, target, location, actor, categorization, and motivation individually throughout the paper using results they aggregated from an MTurk survey which yielded responses from 1,400 people. 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). They acknowledge that MTurk samples are fairly diverse, yet they are not necessarily representative of the general American

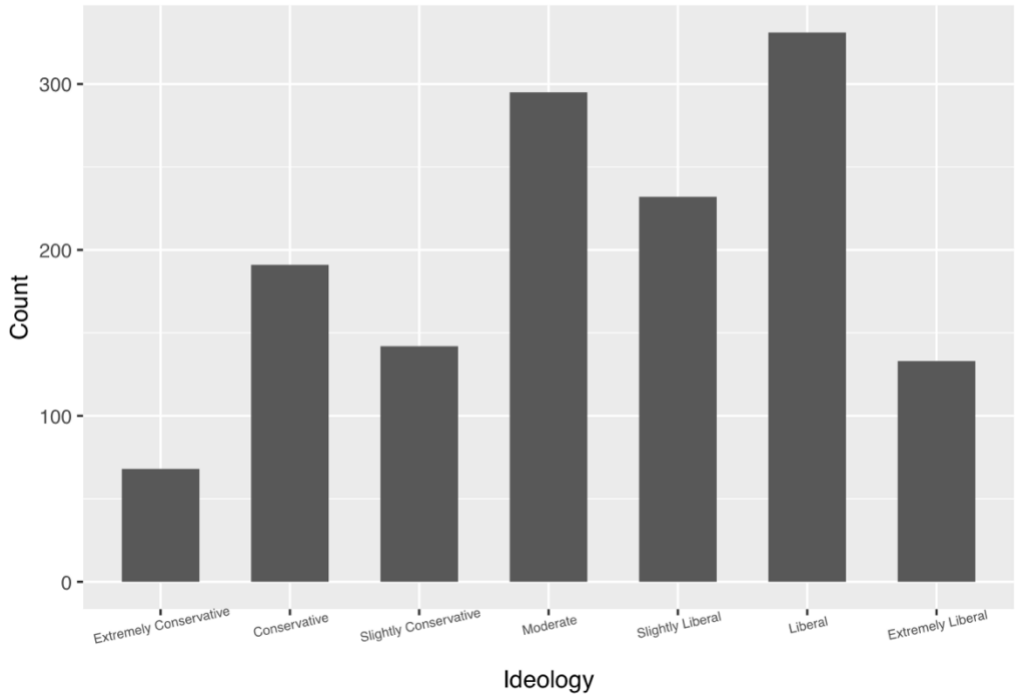
population (Huff and Kertzer 62). Therefore, they essentially weight the responses so underrepresented respondents count more and vice versa.

Each respondent is identified by a participant ID number in the data, and each ID number appears eight times, representing the eight rounds in which respondents judge incidents. This presents one tension between the data and the analysis. In the paper, the authors note that 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 (Huff and Kertzer 62). It is not clear, however, what the difference may be between the eight rounds presented in the data and the seven incidents presented to respondents as discussed in the paper. In my analysis, I elect to use the data the authors collected, which uses eight rounds.

Because I am interested in exploring how demographics impact respondents' classifications of terrorism, it is important to first understand the makeup of the sample. In the data, ideology is coded on a 1-7 scale ranging from "extremely conservative" to "extremely liberal." Similarly, education is measured on a 1-8 scale ranging from "less than high school" to "professional degree." Gender is slightly different in that it is a dummy variable for males with 0 representing females and 1 representing males. The plots below display the distribution of respondents by levels of education, political ideology, and gender.

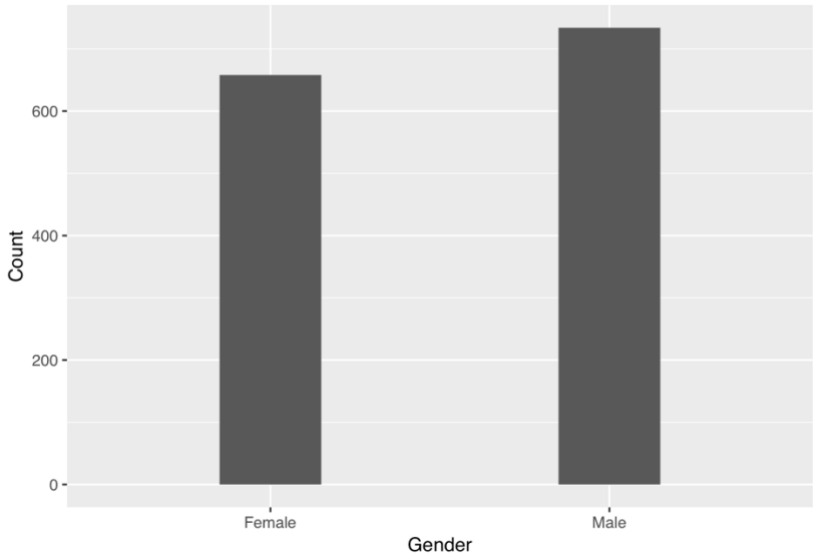


Unsurprisingly, respondents generally fall in the middle of the education spectrum. The majority of respondents have at least a high school degree or GED but no degree higher than that which they received at a 4-year college. Few respondents fall on both extreme ends, with categories "less than a high school education," "doctoral degree," and "professional degree" having less than 50 respondents each.



This sample is skewed towards being liberal with the majority of respondents indicating that they are at least "Slightly Liberal." I will discuss the implications this bias has for my results in a later section.

In terms of gender, the sample is relatively balanced. There are only approximately 100 more males than there are females.



Extension: Demographic Analysis

As Huff and Kertzer note, 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, but I seek to add to the discussion of how people actually define terrorism, and more importantly why they define it the way they do, in an effort to better understand how violence is politicized. In this extension, I want to explore the role that demographics, particularly ideology, education, and gender, play in influencing how people define and understand terrorism. A person's political alignment will certainly affect how they conceptualize foreign affairs, but this analysis is unique for two reasons. First, it is situated in the context of small acts of violence. To reference an example used earlier, 9/11 was a blatant and egregious act of terrorism, but less extreme actions, such as shootings with less than ten casualties, 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.

In most cases, when the public voices certain beliefs about policy surrounding terrorism, lawmakers are prompted to act, or at the very least prompted to listen. However, it is important to understand which characteristics of a person affect 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). If politicians and lawmakers can better understand what makes their constituents distinguish between terrorism and violence, and why they do so, they will be more adequately equipped to develop policy and laws that reflect public sentiment.

Methods

In order to determine which demographic attributes impact how people view violence, I begin by running three separate regressions with the terror binary as the dependent variable in each. Education, ideology, and gender are the respective independent variables, each of which are measured on a continuous scale. In the final portion of my analysis, I seek to observe how demographics impact perceptions of terrorism when controlling for the tactic and motivation of the violent scenario. Different circumstances prompt various emotional and political responses. One particularly interesting result Huff and Kertzer identify in their analyses is the response survey participants had to acts motivated by hatred. People were more likely than not to identify such acts as terrorism. I further explore this motivation as it interacts with violent tactics in the context of varying political ideologies.

Results

In this context, demographics have little impact on how respondents interpret violence as terrorism. Across demographic categories, the results indicate that the effects are overwhelmingly minimal, and surprisingly so. When running these analyses, my expectation was that education and political ideology would significantly impact how respondents perceive violence. I expected that as education increased, for example, the likelihood to classify violence as terrorism would decrease. Because small scale violence involves nuanced details, more educated people may be more inclined to discern between facts and emotional responses. This is not the case, however, according to the results of the models. The analyses of each model follow.

Education and Terrorism

Table 1 presents the results from the education model, which shows the minimal impact education level plays in affecting how people classify terrorism. Because education level is largely inconsequential, this may imply that people are more likely to rely on emotional intuition rather than IQ when interpreting the details of a violent situation.

Table 1: Education

	Dependent variable:
	TerrorBinary
Education	−0.006*
	(0.003)
Constant	0.597***
	(0.015)
Observations	11,136
Log Likelihood	−7,961.700
Akaike Inf. Crit.	15,927.400
Note:	*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Ideology and Terrorism

Table 2 displays the results of the political ideology model. I had expected political ideology to have the largest impact of the three demographics in consideration, and although none of the demographics have a substantial effect, ideology has the smallest effect of the three. As previously mentioned, the data is skewed towards liberals, which could have impacted the results of the model. Additionally, perhaps political ideology is more important in the retrospective interpretation of real-life scenarios rather than classifying hypothetical incidents.

Table 2: Political Ideology

	Dependent variable:
	TerrorBinary
Ideorate	0.002
	(0.003)
Constant	0.566***
	(0.013)
Observations	11,136
Log Likelihood	−7,962.953
Akaike Inf. Crit.	15,929.910
Note:	*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Gender and Terrorism

Table 3 displays the results of the gender model, which explains that there is little difference between the way males and females classify violence as terrorism. Of the three models, this result was the least surprising.

Table 3: Gender

	Dependent variable:
	TerrorBinary
Male	0.012
	(0.009)
Constant	0.567***
	(0.007)
Observations	11,136
Log Likelihood	−7,962.282
Akaike Inf. Crit.	15,928.560
Note:	*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Motivation, Tactics, and Demographics

Lastly, I sought to determine if a specific situation viewed through the lens of ideology would evoke a significant response. Building on Huff and Kertzer's discussion of hatred as a motivation for violence, I aim to investigate if political beliefs had any bearing on the interpretation of an apolitical motivation. They find that respondents are likely to determine hatred as a driver of terrorism, not just violence. Moreover, I aim to determine how the interaction between hatred and the four tactics Huff and Kertzer examine—protest, hostage taking, shooting, and bombing—impact respondents' perceptions, if at all. I controlled for the interaction between motivation and tactic and modeled it with ideology as the independent variable. As a method of comparison between a political and a seemingly apolitical motive, I ran the same model while controlling for government overthrow as the motivation. The results of both models are insignificant effects for each tactic motivated either by hatred or government overthrow, as displayed in Table 4 and Table 5.

In each table, Model 1 represents the motivation interacted with protest, Model 2 represents the interaction with hostage taking, Model 3 represents the interaction with shooting, and Model 4 represents the interaction with bombing.

Table 4: Hatred

	Dependent variable:			
	TerrorBinary			
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Ideorate	−0.018*	−0.006	0.009	0.002
	(0.011)	(0.010)	(0.011)	(0.009)
Constant	0.282***	0.719***	0.595***	0.806***
	(0.051)	(0.049)	(0.049)	(0.041)
Observations	488	700	686	665
Log Likelihood	−245.564	−453.400	−472.318	−315.433
Akaike Inf. Crit.	495.127	910.800	948.635	634.865
Note:				*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Table 5: Government Overthrow

	Dependent variable:			
	TerrorBinary			
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Ideorate	−0.014	0.032***	0.018	0.013
	(0.011)	(0.010)	(0.011)	(0.009)
Constant	0.260***	0.666***	0.703***	0.819***
	(0.052)	(0.048)	(0.053)	(0.041)
Observations	416	511	499	489
Log Likelihood	−208.942	−246.882	−265.022	−148.769
Akaike Inf. Crit.	421.883	497.763	534.044	301.539
Note:				*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Discussion

Terrorism has the ability to affect a nation and its citizens 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. In this context, demographics do not have a large effect on how people interpret violence. In the realm of political ideology, the insignificance could be, in part, due to the data's skewedness towards liberal respondents. The insignificant results across demographics may also be a product of the remarkability of terrorism. When classifying more benign political issues, such as healthcare, people may be more inclined to rely on their educational background and gender to inform their ideological preferences, and thus their stance on the topic.

Conclusion

Huff and Kertzer note that defining terrorism has major implications for political response, lawmaking, 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 aim to address the "why." Why do people classify violence as terrorism or not? Which personal attributes impact citizens' classification mechanisms? My analysis suggests that, in small scale violence, demographic characteristics have little influence on the interpretation of terrorism. Perhaps, it

would not matter to an extreme conservative if two people were killed as opposed to one, or a male may not be more likely to consider hatred as a motivation for terrorism than a female. Of course, definitely making these claims would require more extensive analysis, but 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.

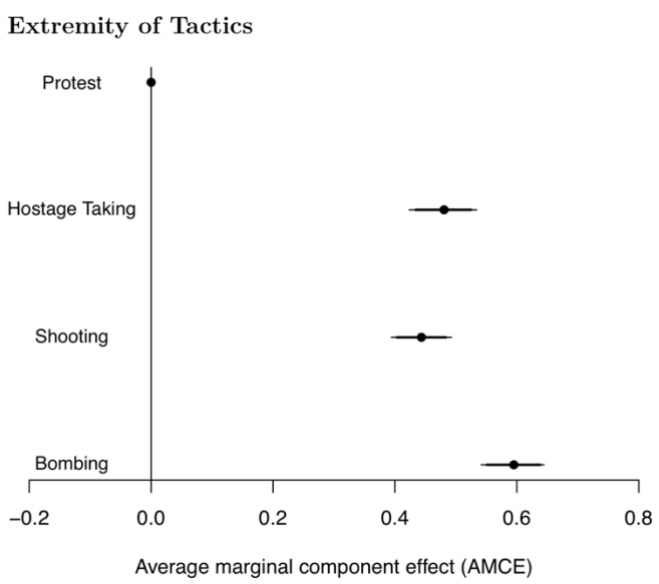
One particularly interesting feature of this survey is a section of statements to which respondents can agree or disagree. The statements primarily frame beliefs regarding practices of Islam and how they interact with politics. Future research could delve deeper into how these beliefs about non-Western ideals impact Americans' perceptions of terrorism. Understanding respondents' pre-existing beliefs may provide further insight into how they classify terrorism. For the analysis at hand, demographics do not seem to significantly inform how people interpret small-scale violence. However, characteristics of the act, particularly motivation and tactics, play an important role in determining how violence is perceived among Americans.

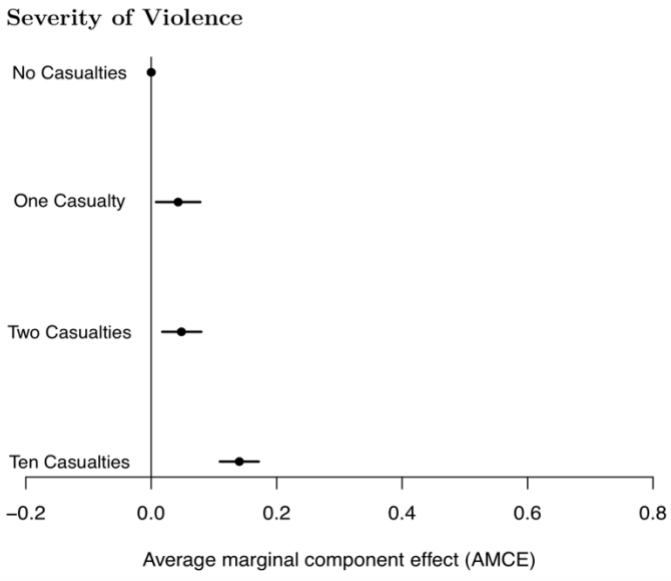
References

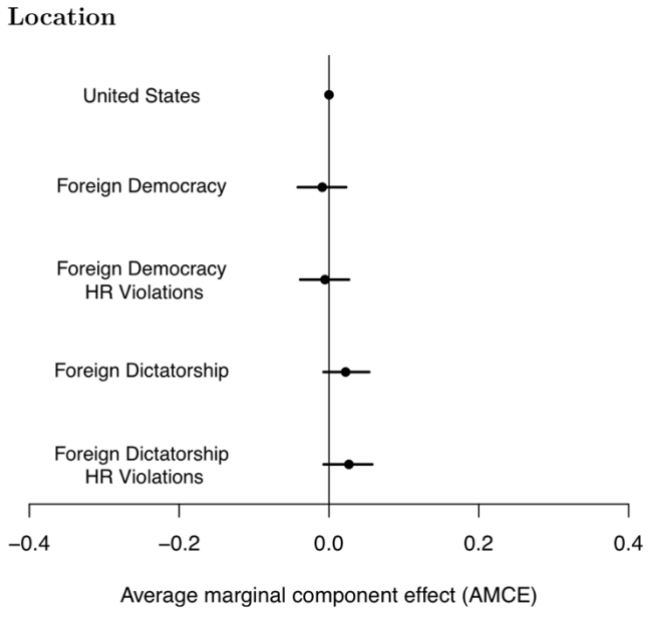
Enos, Ryan D. “Causal Effect of Intergroup Contact on Exclusionary Attitudes.” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, vol. 111, no. 10, 2014, pp. 3699–3704., doi:10.1073/pnas.1317670111.

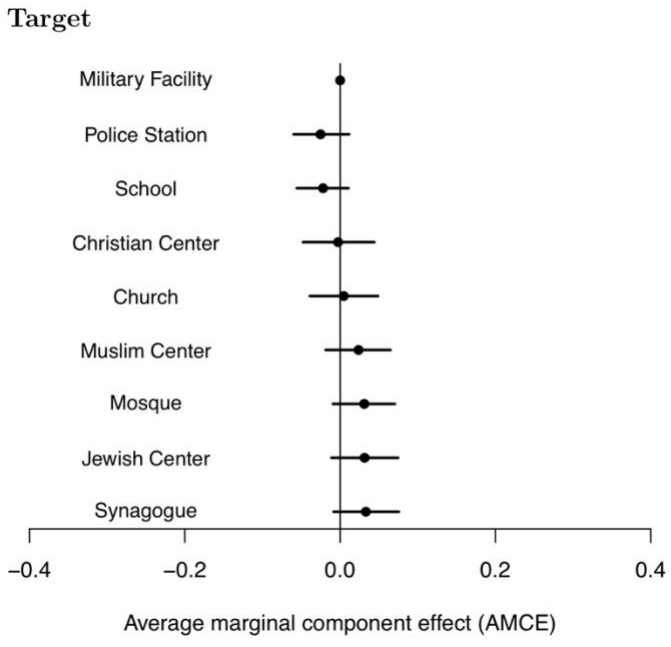
Huff, Connor, and Joshua D. Kertzer. “How the Public Defines Terrorism.” *American Journal of Political Science*, vol. 62, no. 1, 2017, pp. 55–71., doi:10.1111/ajps.12329.

APPENDIX

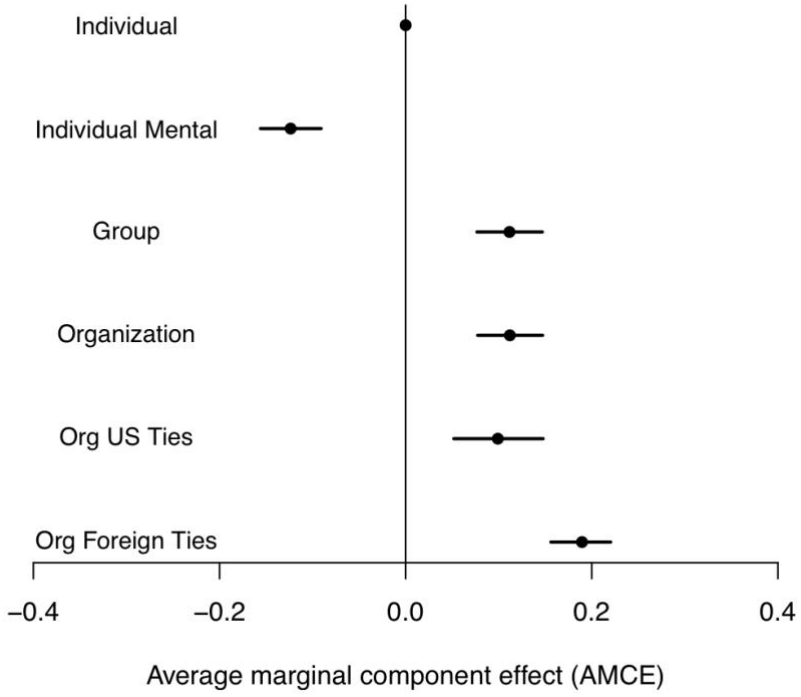

Extremity of Tactics
Protest
Hostage Taking
Shooting
Bombing
−0.2
0.0
0.2
0.4
0.6
0.8
Average marginal component effect (AMCE)


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)

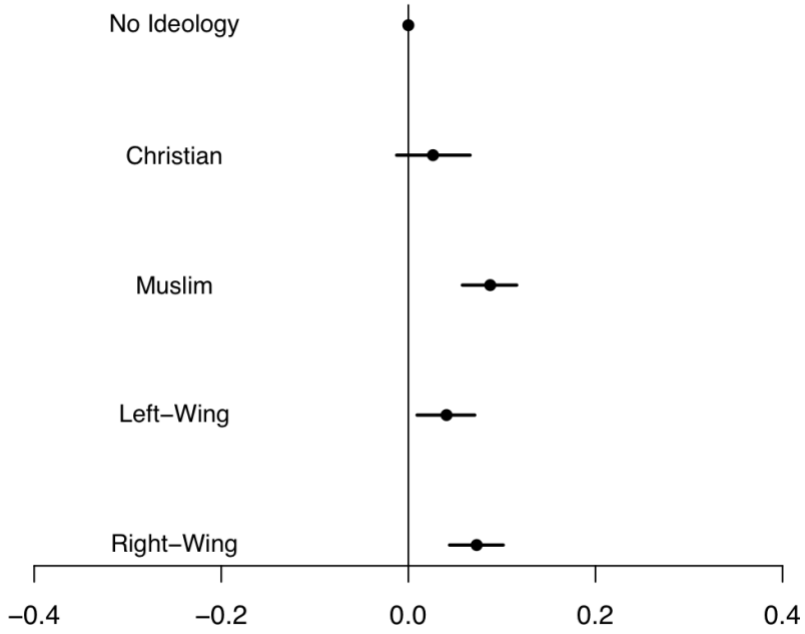

Location
United States
Foreign Democracy
Foreign Democracy
HR Violations
Foreign Dictatorship
Foreign Dictatorship
HR Violations
−0.4
−0.2
0.0
0.2
0.4
Average marginal component effect (AMCE)


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)

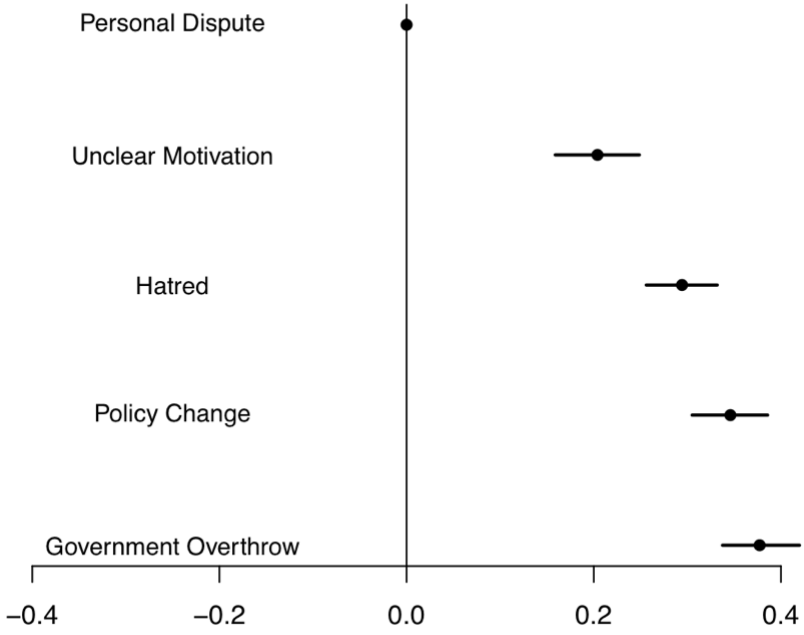
The Political Purposiveness of the Perpetrator



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