Allow Extremist Participation in the Policy-Making Process

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ABSTRACT

In recent years a great number of scholars have been seeking to understand under the conditions that lead political groups to use terror to pursue their goals. Much discussion has focused on the importance of political and economic opportunities for predicting terrorist activity. Other studies focus on the willingness of certain actors to use violence and terrorism against the state in pursuit of policy goals. In this article we consider the role of strain in the policy process on political terrorist violence. We first discuss the current climate that seems to be amenable to extreme right wing violence in the US. After we discuss some of the theories that might explain this possible rise in violence, we review some of the empirical findings. We argue that increasing political participation of extremists and allowing them access to the policymaking process will lead to a reduction in terrorist violence. In the conclusion, we identify some of the current actions of the US administration that can impact terrorist violence and suggest some strategies that can damper aggrieved individual’s likelihood of turning to terrorism in the US as well as in the rest of the world.
INTRODUCTION

At 7:05 A.M. on Saturday, April 4, 2009 Pittsburgh police Officers Paul Sciullo II and Stephen Mayhle responded to a call on a domestic dispute between a woman and her son in Pittsburgh’s Stanton Heights neighborhood. As the officers reached the doorway, Richard Poplawski shot each in the head; and a third officer was shot as he pulled up to the scene. This scene turned into a four hour standoff, with hundreds of rounds of ammunition exchanged between SWAT officers and Poplawski who, while wearing a bullet proof vest, was heavily armed with an AK-47 and several handguns. The standoff ended at 11:00 A.M. when Poplawski surrendered—not long after the utility crews cut off power to his house (Fuoco 2009). While friends of Poplawski were shocked by these events, they also knew that he was upset over the election of Barack Obama and feared that his right to own weapons was going to be taken away (Fuoco 2009). Later it was discovered that Poplawski was active on the white supremacist Web site, Stormfront, where he posted at length a prediction that the U.S. faces an economic collapse that is being engineered by a Jewish conspiracy (Roddy 2009b). He was convinced this cabal will use the military to enslave U.S. citizens, eradicate free speech, and take away his firearms (Roddy 2009a).

While this attack denotes only one incident of violence the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) recently released an unclassified report to law enforcement warning of more to come. It claims that the current economic and political climate is expanding the potential for rightwing extremists to recruit and radicalize others, setting the stage for increased violence (DHS 2009). In essence the report explains that the conditions that led to the growth of rightwing terrorism in the 1990s are once again present today, but are
much more pronounced, likely extending the pool of potential recruits even further. Economic conditions are worse today, and rightwing internet chatter is exploiting the loss of U.S. jobs and home foreclosures while attributing these losses to a conspiracy of Jewish elites to draw in recruits like Poplawski (DHS 2009). Policies such as free trade and a perceived tolerance of illegal immigration—both contributing to the loss of jobs for U.S. workers—are being used to rally the disgruntled into action. Also, with the election of Barack Obama, the political climate has shifted to the left, raising the concern that gun control legislation will become more restrictive. In fact, reports show an increased hording of weapons and ammunition stockpiles as well as paramilitary training by rightwing extremists (DHS 2009). The election also fueled recruitment for the extreme rightwing who have exploited racial prejudices and galvanizing fear over electing an African American President. In fact, authorities have uncovered at least two plots to kill then Senator Obama in August and October of 2008 (Healy 2008; Lichtblau 2008). The two men arrested in October also planned to kill black children at school while claiming allegiance to Aryan ideology (Lichtblau 2008).

The DHS report raises other concerns that the dangerous extreme rightwing paranoia of the 1990s that interpreted the dissolution of the Soviet Union as a threat to the United States’ global position might be reawakened today by the rise in power of China, India, and Russia (DHS 2009). Furthermore, extremists in the 1990s were able to recruit or influence a small percentage of well trained military veterans returning from Operation Desert Shield, including Timothy McVeigh, to exploit their skills and combat experience to further their cause. Evidence not only shows that this pattern continues today as military veterans return from Iraq, but a large number of rightwing extremists have joined
the U.S. military and are returning home trained in the art of warfare (DHS 2009). In fact, Richard Poplawski was trained by the Marines before being discharged for assaulting his superior (Roddy 2009a).

A final concern raised in the report is that since the 1990s internet technologies have significantly advanced, giving extremists greater access to information on weapons, training, tactics, and targets (DHS 2009). Groups now openly exploit the Internet to raise funds, recruit members, disseminate ideological messages, plan attacks, and publicize the results of these attacks (Weimann, 2006). Further, with ongoing advances in technology, terrorist capabilities continue to expand. For example, a report by the Army's 304 Military Intelligence Battalion Open Source Intelligence Team (2008) describes how mobile technology and the social networking site Twitter can be used strategically with Google Maps by terrorists for counter-surveillance, command, and control of tactical operations.

In sum, the DHS report demonstrates our vulnerability to terrorist violence when the economic and political climate is perceived as contributing to the grievances of the disenfranchised. This group of disenfranchised individuals is being targeted by extremist organizations to participate in their violent agenda. We propose targeting the same group of disenfranchised persons to engage in the policy process, making them active stakeholders and reducing their vulnerability to radical rhetoric. We expect that by allowing those who are directly affected by policy—such as the economically disenfranchised, returning veterans, and single-issue constituencies—to be represented in the policy process, the option to violently express grievances become less appealing. Research evidence described below suggests that countries with policy processes that are
more amenable to a broad range of perspectives experience less terrorism. By considering this evidence and the need for terrorist organizations to effectively recruit and maintain a loyal constituency, we confidently conclude that those nations that allow extremists to participate in their policy-making process will experience less terrorist violence.

**REDUCING THE WILLINGNESS TO PARTICIPATE IN VIOLENCE**

In this essay, we consider the role that strain plays in increasing a country’s vulnerability to terrorist violence. Strain can be thought of as the pressure felt by disadvantaged members of the community due to actual or perceived barriers to success imposed by the actions or policies of others. Without legitimate options, strained individuals experience negative affect (e.g., become angry and sanctimonious), pressuring them to resort to illegal alternatives such as criminal violence or terrorism (Agnew 1992). LaFree and Dugan (2009) show that a broad range of well-documented theoretical concepts link strain to political violence including relative deprivation (Gurr 1970), social disorganization (Davies 1962), breakdown (Tilly, Tilly and Tilly 1975); tension (Lodhi and Tilly 1973), and anomie (Merton 1938; Rosenfeld 2004). Following LaFree and Dugan (2009), we consider all of these concepts as a form of grievance, which is defined by Gurr and Moore (1997, p. 1081) as “widely shared dissatisfaction among group members about their cultural, political and/or economic standing vis-a-vis dominant groups.” Most importantly, this sort of strain incentivizes individuals to organize outside of institutional politics and to develop social movements to address these grievances (Weinberg, Pedahzur, and Perlinger 2009).
While the DHS report describes a large set of political and economic conditions in the U.S. that are instrumental to producing grievance, we must recognize that these conditions are global, and likely producing strain for individuals throughout the world—many of whom are vulnerable to recruitment by violent social movements such as terrorist organizations. Research by Cioffi-Revilla and Starr (1995) explains that one of the necessary conditions for political violence is a set of actors who are willing to use this tactic (see also Starr 1978). While there are likely aggrieved people in all societies, opportunity is also necessary for producing political violence. Democracies often provide opportunity by allowing freedom of speech, movement, and association (see Eubank and Weinberg 1994, 1998, 2001). In contrast, democracies damper violence, especially terrorist attacks, by allowing participation and access to the policy making process (Li 2005, Young and Dugan 2008). While reducing opportunities for violence is one strategy for eliminating terrorism, the cost is often civil liberties and citizen rights. Another option is to try and reduce willingness to join violent groups. Crenshaw (2001) explains that terrorist organizations must maintain a strong membership in order to survive. Thus without a viable recruitment pool terrorist violence will likely weaken.

Furthermore, terrorist organizations generally cannot remain active without the support of their surrounding populations or sympathetic constituencies (Cronin, 2006). Some terrorists feel that it is their duty to take up arms to defend their people; and indeed, members of the community often join the terrorist organization (Horgan, 2005). This dynamic is especially relevant for terrorist organizations that have explicitly sought independent states for their constituencies, such as Basque Fatherland and Freedom (ETA) for the Basques, Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) for the Kurds, the Irish
Republican Army (IRA) for the people of Northern Ireland, and Hamas for the Palestinians. Group dependence on the community is also more apparent when you consider groups such as the IRA who have multiple generations of the same family as members. Consider also the case of the West Bank and Gaza strip where many terrorist organizations are held in high social regard and involvement can bring respect to families (Berko and Erez, 2005).

This evidence demonstrates how strong ties to a constituency would increase the terrorist threat. However, in all of the above examples, the terrorist organization openly contributes to the well-being of the constituency, remaining in its favor. For example, even before its members were elected into office, Hamas ran networks of hospitals, schools, and other charitable organizations (Mitnick, 2006). Yet, evidence also demonstrates that, in some cases, when the constituency withdrew its popular support from the organization, its strength declined (Cronin, 2006; United States Institute for Peace, 1999; Dugan, Huang McCauley, and LaFree, 2009). In fact, some in the Basque region have been trying to separate themselves from ETA, strongly disagreeing with the need to use violence to address political problems (Funes, 1998). After the 1983 bombing of Orly Airport that killed many innocent civilians, the Armenian Diaspora withdrew public support from the Armenian Secret Army for the Liberation of Armenia (ASALA), possibly leading to its dissolution (Dugan. al., 2009). After the Real Irish Republican Army (RIRA) committed a series of attacks in 1998 that resulted in civilian casualties, the Northern Irish community responded with outrage, leading the group to declare a cease-fire (Cronin, 2006). Ross and Gurr (1989) explain that one of the leading reasons that the terrorist organization Front de Libération du Québec (FLQ) lost political
strength was because a similar, yet non-violent political party gained electoral power, providing an alternative to the violence for the constituency. Taken together, these cases strongly suggest that terrorist organizations that lose the support of their constituency might substantially weaken, highlighting the importance of encouraging these constituencies to participate in legitimate policy dialog.

Terrorists are well-aware of the importance of maintaining constituency support. One strategy they use to preserve the loyalty of their constituency and to expand their pool of recruits is to sabotage the legitimacy of the target that they are opposing (LaFree and Dugan 2009). Hence, much of the terrorist strategy is to manipulate perceptions by undermining the government’s legitimacy resulting in increased popular support for their cause. One of the worst situations for governments opposing terrorism is to face multiple groups that are competing for the loyalty of a sympathetic population. As Bloom (2005) shows, this can result in a ratcheting up of violence and lead to such tactics as suicide bombing. The increasing popularity of ASALA to the Armenian Diaspora likely led to the formation of a second terrorist organization, Justice Commandos of the Armenian Genocide (JCAG), as a strategy to draw that support back to the Armenian Revolutionary Federation (ARF), a non-violent political organization (Dugan, et. al. 2009).

While governments might also be well aware of the need to preserve legitimacy, this is often overlooked in the aftermath of terrorist violence. Taking advantage of this, terrorists often rely on the overly repressive responses to terrorism by government to win the sympathies of would-be supporters (Crenshaw 1983; Lake 2002; Higson-Smith 2002). It appears that a partial motivation for the September 11th attacks in the U.S. was to elicit a harsh response from the administration of George W. Bush according to a
November 2004 videotape by bin Laden who bragged that al-Qaeda found it “easy for us to provoke the administration” (Kydd and Walter 2006, p. 71). Consequently, aggressive counterterrorism strategies can sometimes do more to increase terrorism rather than end it (LaFree and Dugan 2009). While these actions may reduce the opportunities for violence, they likely stoke the willingness of others to participate. In fact, research that models the effects of interventions by the British government attempting to reduce republican terrorist violence in the U.K. suggests that most efforts led to more terrorism, not less (LaFree, Dugan, and Korte 2009). Once again, these findings highlight the importance of engaging at-risk constituencies in the policy process. Their participation can help preserve government legitimacy, directly weakening the terrorists’ case for violence.

**EMPIRICAL FINDINGS**

In this section, we provide an overview of empirical support suggesting that the more amenable the government’s policy process is to accommodating a broad range of perspectives, the less terrorism that nation will experience. The initial empirical evidence gathered by Eubank and Weinberg (1994, 1998, 2001) finds that democracies tend to promote terrorism. Research by Eyerman (1998), which uses more sophisticated quantitative methods, however, shows that compared to autocracies, democracies experience less terrorism. Eyerman (1998) does find that new democracies are especially prone to terrorist violence.

Li (2005) acknowledges these contradictory findings and argues that different aspects of democracy have competing effects. Similar to the above claims about opportunity and willingness, Li (2005) finds that participation in institutional politics, or
a reduction in willingness, tends to reduce terrorism. Executive constraints or an increase in opportunity leads to more terrorism. While Li (2005) is by far the most sophisticated study theoretically and methodologically, there are still some problems with the conclusions. First, Li uses data on transnational terrorism while the argument seems related to all types of terrorism and especially domestic terrorism. Next, few states in his data exhibit less terrorism after a reduction in executive constraints. In fact, reductions in executive constraints seem to correlate with increases in terrorism suggesting that states with fewer executive constraints may be the targets of terror but reducing them further does not have the desired effect.

Like Li (2005), Young and Dugan (2008) look at different aspects of political regimes to help explain the resort to terrorist violence. Young and Dugan (2008) argue that the more veto players, or the number of actors who can block policy change, present in a political system, the more likely the system is to experience deadlock. Given the inability of societal actors to change policies through nonviolent and institutional participation, these regimes will have a greater likelihood of experiencing terror events. They improve on Li (2005)’s study by modeling international and domestic terrorist violence world-wide from 1970 to 1997 using data from the Global Terrorism Database (GTD) and, indeed, find that countries with more veto players are more likely to experience terrorism. These countries are also more likely to experience a higher number of attacks compared to those with less restrictions in the policy process. This again suggests that states that increase opportunities for meaningful political participation can reduce terrorist violence without unintentionally creating more willing violent actors.
Ongoing research re-estimates and extends the Young and Dugan (2008) model up to 2008 removing all known attacks by foreign perpetrators.

CONCLUSIONS

Opportunity for violence combined with the willingness of individuals to partake in these activities is the volatile mix that can produce terrorism in any society. Theories of terrorism expect that states that allow participation of individuals and groups in formal politics will reduce grievances or strain and thus willingness to use terrorism as a political tactic. While the empirical evidence also suggests involving extremists in the policymaking process to reduce terrorism, how can this be accomplished?

Irvin (1999) argues that terrorist groups who lay down their weapons and participate in institutional politics are explicitly acknowledging the legitimacy of the institutions. As Weinberg, Pedahzur, and Perlinger (2008, 142) claim “a group’s willingness to...participate in the electoral process represents a significant concession.” Unless this group can gain something in the policy making process, a return to violence is always possible.

In the US context, the new administration has been making efforts to engage a diverse range of perspectives in the relevant policy processes. One improvement over past administrations is the redesigning of the whitehouse.gov website to encourage all to participate in the dialog on important issues. For example, in March 2009, whitehouse.gov hosted an online town hall inviting questions for the president. More than 92,000 participants submitted over 100,000 questions, which received more than 3.5 million votes. President Obama answered those questions that received the most votes including one that asked about legalizing marijuana (Vargas 2009). In addition to
keeping readers informed on legislative progress and the White House’s stance on important issues, the website includes a blog that posts videos and reports on the status of White House initiatives. In fact, the blog sometimes streams live video of working groups, encouraging listeners to post suggestions. Finally, the White House does not rely exclusively on those who directly access their website. President Obama now has a presence on the social networking sites of Facebook, MySpace, and Twitter, soliciting feedback from a broader audience.¹

Another strategy by the new administration is to focus more on common ground when addressing controversial topics. For example, when President Obama was asked about signing the Freedom of Choice Act after delivering his First 100 Days speech, he explained that he wants to reduce the number of unwanted pregnancies, a goal that is widely agreed upon by all parties. To do this he has established a task force within the Domestic Policy Council of the West Wing that is working with pro-choice and pro-life groups to arrive at a consensus (Obama 2009). This task force is only one of many efforts to engage key, yet divergent, stakeholders in regional forums to address important issues. Perhaps the most prominent at this time is the series of White House Forums on Health Reform which bring together republicans, democrats, members of the community and key stakeholders such as businesses, hospitals, insurance companies, pharmaceutical companies, patient advocates, and others.² Throughout March 2009 the forums were held


² http://www.healthreform.gov/forums/whitehouseforums.html
in Washington, DC, California, North Carolina, Iowa, Vermont, and Michigan. On May 13, 2009 President Obama reported the progress of healthcare reform to more than 13 million email addresses, making this the first time that the White House has used email for mass correspondence.

The efforts by the current administration to transparently engage representatives from all viewpoints to shape policy appears especially groundbreaking after the six years of failed efforts to uncover a list of participants from the previous administration’s task force to develop a national energy policy. Spokesperson, Lea Anne McBride explained that the “vice president has respectfully but resolutely maintained the importance of protecting the ability of the president and vice president to receive candid advice on important national policy matters in confidence, a principle affirmed by the Supreme Court,” (Abramowitz and Mufson 2007, p. A01). Unsurprisingly, once released, the task force documents reveal that most of the advisors were representatives from energy-producing industries such as the American Petroleum Institute and Exxon Mobil. In fact, environmental groups were brought in only after an initial draft of the report was complete and President Bush had been briefed on its progress (Abramowitz and Mufson 2007). Lawsuits filed by the liberal Sierra Club and the conservative Judicial Watch to release the names and roles of the participants of the task force demonstrate that the White House’s attempt to appease broad-ranged viewpoints failed (Greenhouse 2004). We expect that it is this type of failure that heightens strain on disadvantaged individuals potentially pushing them toward extremist viewpoints and possible action.

In sum, we recommend that in order to avoid increased strain on extremists, the current administration should attempt to bring those representing the groups’ views into
the policymaking process. Gun rights issues should be addressed by incorporating both advocates for gun control as well as strict adherents of the second amendment. The extreme left also has several groups who use terrorism including the Earth Liberation Front (ELF) and the Animal Liberation Front (ALF). Since these groups operate using a “leaderless resistance” strategy, using force, or reducing opportunity for violence, to stop them is likely to be ineffectual. Instead, reducing the willingness of participants to use terrorism is likely the only means to completely stamp out this so-called eco-terrorism.
REFERENCES


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