PUBLIC ATTITUDES TOWARDS TERRORISM AND COUNTER-TERRORISM: AN OPINION RESEARCH AGENDA

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the literature on public attitudes about terrorism and counter-terrorism. It suggests three areas for further research on public opinion: support for levels of spending, tolerance for reduced civil liberties in order to reduce terrorism, and the intersection between attitudes about Muslims and attitudes about terrorism and counter-terrorism.

RÉSUMÉ

Cet article passe en revue les écrits à propos des attitudes du public sur le terrorisme et le contre-terrorisme. Nous évaluons qu'il existe trois domaines où une recherche plus approfondie sur l'opinion du public est nécessaire : le soutien du public face au degré d'investissement dans les mesures visant à contrer le terrorisme, la tolérance du public envers des restrictions imposées sur des libertés civiles afin de combattre le terrorisme, et le point de convergence entre les attitudes envers les Musulmans et les attitudes envers le terrorisme et l'anti-terrorisme.

The last decade has seen an upward shift in Canadians' (and Canadian survey researchers') attention to foreign affairs. The discussion is in some ways very different than it was pre-9/11. First, there is more of it. But the new debate also focuses on themes that were less salient in previous years, including terrorism and counter-terrorism. The salience and central themes of the foreign affairs debate have changed.

The same can be said of the framing of terrorism and counter-terrorism, of course. Pre-9/11, these issues were seen predominantly (but not exclusively) as foreign affairs issues. Post-9/11, they are more clearly thought of as issues of domestic public safety as well. Modern survey researchers interested in foreign affairs, public safety, terrorism and counter-terrorism are, in sum, analyzing quite a different policy environment than they were in the 1990s.

That said, there are other ways in which the study of public attitudes on these issues is still similar to the pre-9/11 era. For instance, Canadians continue to weigh the costs and benefits of (increasingly dangerous) peacekeeping missions (see Martin and Fortmann 1995). And survey researchers continue to work with a remarkably small body of work on Canadian attitudes on both foreign affairs and public safety issues.

There is still, in short, relatively little research exploring the structure of Canadians' attitudes on foreign affairs and public safety, and particularly little on new issues in terrorism and counter-terrorism. The sections that follow thus try to set an agenda for those interested in public opinion surveys on these issues. The paper begins with a review of what we already know, with a focus in particular on attitudes on foreign affairs. Themes in the broader literature on public opinion on this theme may be useful as we build a literature on terrorism and counter-terrorism, after all, and there is growing US literature on terrorism attitudes that may be helpful for Canadian researchers as well. I then turn to a discussion of three survey questions — a partial agenda, perhaps, for researchers interested in understanding the structure of Canadian attitudes towards terrorism and counter-terrorism.

PUBLIC ATTITUDES ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS: A CHANGE IN CONTEXT

Writing in the mid-1980s, Nevitte and Gibbons (1986) argued that the lack of public debate on foreign affairs was not a product of a disinterested or ignorant public; nor was it a function of a public that had reached a consensus on foreign affairs issues. The lack of public debate was, in their

view, a consequence of political parties not having organized around the issue. Parties did not mobilize preferences on foreign affairs. Foreign affairs thus played a relatively small role in Canadian politics.

The situation is now somewhat different. Parties are starting to stake claims on issues of foreign affairs, and on the foreign/domestic issues relating to terrorism and counter-terrorism as well. 2007 saw major debates on laws related to arresting and detaining suspects without a warrant, and compelling witnesses to testify in instances related to terrorism. More recently, the Harper Government released their counter-terrorism plan *Building Resilience Against Terrorism.* That plan reflected, among other things, a view apparent in Harper's earlier (September 2011) CBC interview: "the major threat is still Islamicism." Harper's plans, both in 2007 and in 2012, provoked a good deal of debate and discussion within the policy community. Public debate has increased as well.

The public opinion literature has yet to catch up with this resurgence in public attentiveness to issues surrounding terrorism and counter-terrorism. There has been some recent interest in foreign affairs issues by Canadian political behavioralists, to be sure. Fletcher and colleagues have explored the sources of attitudes towards the Canadian mission in Afghanistan (Fletcher *et al.* 2009; Fletcher and Hove 2012); I have, along with some colleagues, explored the impact of photos on public support for military engagement in Afghanistan (Soroka *et al.* 2012). But we are only starting to get a sense for what Canadians' foreign affairs attitudes are in the post-9/11 era. And attitudes towards terrorism and counter-terrorism have received much less attention.

This is less true in the US, where there is a good deal of survey data and analysis on terrorism and counter-terrorism issues, both before and after 9/11. That literature can, in some ways at least, serve as a guide to Canadian researchers. So too can recent polls from the ACS, polls which provide one of the most recent glimpses of Canadians' attitudes on a range of terrorism- and counter-terrorism-related issues.

THREE AREAS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

There are certainly many different areas worthy of further study where public opinion on terrorism and counter-terrorism is concerned. I want to highlight three, drawn from a combination of the existing literature, and the new ACS surveys. Each is illustrated in part by questions fielded by the ACS last year.

1. "We need more security at places like airports and public buildings."

What are Canadians' attitudes towards spending/policy on the military, and on related counter-terrorism measures at home? The flaw with existing data is that we do not have measures of general policy support — for spending, for security, etc. — over time. We cannot as a consequence put current results in comparative context.

Are Canadians greatly concerned about foreign conflicts and terrorism? 20% of Canadians cite these as the "most important global issues" in the 2010 Focus Canada survey conducted by the Environics Institute. This is a sizable proportion. But 57% of Canadians cited those same two issues in the 2002 survey. Clearly, concerns about war and terrorism are decreasing. Over-time comparisons are of fundamental importance. And over-time comparisons are possible when we work with general questions about more or less spending (or levels of security), rather than (or at least alongside) whatever specific policy the most recent debate is about.

2. "In order to curb terrorism in this country, I am ready to give up some civil liberties."

One of the most interesting questions where counter-terrorism is concerned is whether publics are willing to sacrifice civil liberties in order to allow for more effective counter-terrorism measures. There has been a debate in US literature on this topic; a recent paper by Mondak and Hurwitz (2013) suggests that there is no "terror exception": Americans' acceptance of infringements on civil liberties for the sake of counter-terrorism is not markedly larger than it is for the sake of reducing crime. These results, the authors suggest, raise serious questions about a sizable minority of Americans' commitments to civil liberties. It is worth noting, then, that although the questions are slightly different, the distribution of opinion in the US survey does not appear to be very different from what the ACS finds in Canada. Here too, there may be real variance in citizens' concern about civil liberties. But whether there is a special "terror exception" where tolerance for reduced civil liberties is concerned, we do not know.

3. "There is an irreconcilable conflict between Western societies and Muslim societies."

To what extent do Canadians share the Harper Governments' concern about Muslim fundamentalists in particular? The confluence of attitudes about terrorism and attitudes about Muslims is presently a difficulty in most Western societies, but it would seem to be of particular importance in an ethnically diverse country such as Canada. In short, attitudes about Muslims affect not just Canadian governments' interactions with foreign states — they affect Canadians' interactions with each other.

There is certainly a wealth of work on attitudes about immigration and multiculturalism in Canada. And this seems to be an important time to consider the intersection of what we know about Canadians' attitudes towards

diversity and Canadians' attitudes about terrorism. What does the literature on immigration and multiculturalism attitudes tell us so far? There is far too much good work to summarize here, but there are a few recent findings from web-based experiments that point towards some interesting avenues for further work. First, when asked about support for specific immigrants, in contrast with the US, Canadians do *not* appear to systematically penalize Middle Eastern immigrants (Harell *et al.* 2012). Second, Canadians' support for multiculturalism funding is no smaller, and indeed greater, for a hypothetical Turkish-Muslim association than for a Portuguese-Catholic association; but that support decreases when the president of the association appears in a hijab (Stolle *et al.* 2012). Canadian support for multiculturalism is not unconditional, then, but Canadians do not appear to exhibit the same levels of concern about Muslim immigrant as do Americans.

How are attitudes towards immigrants affected by attitudes and policies on terrorism and counter-terrorism? Thus far, we do not really know. The combination of questions on Muslims and terrorism in the ACS surveys is a first step, but there clearly is much more still to be done.

DISCUSSION

There are at least two reasons to study public attitudes on terrorism and counter-terrorism (and, indeed, on most domains of public policy). The first is simply to understand where public opinion comes from, and what it looks like. How do individuals think about foreign affairs? Are their attitudes on foreign affairs issues greatly influenced by media, or by their own personal experiences? Do they draw links between their attitudes on foreign affairs and their attitudes on domestic issues?

The second reason to explore public attitudes on terrorism and counter-terrorism is that these attitudes can matter for the evolution of public policy. Not all foreign affairs policy is highly responsive to public preferences, of course. But existing work shows that Canadian defense spending follows Canadians' spending preferences (Soroka and Wlezien 2005), and there is a sizable body of literature, mainly focused on the US, but comparative as well, suggesting that sustaining military action for any extended period requires public support (e.g., Aldrich *et al.*, 2006; Baum and Groeling, 2010; Berinsky, 2009; Soroka, 2003).

Note that believing public preferences matter for policy makes understanding the structure and sources of those preferences particularly important. Governments respond to publics, and foreign policy is thus at least partly dependent on what the public thinks. It follows that understanding public attitudes about terrorism and counter-terrorism is an important part of understanding the possibilities and pitfalls for policy in this area.

The preceding review suggests several areas are particularly worthy of further study. We need to explore whether Canadians want more or less counter-terrorism policy — whether they are asking for more, or for less, policy right now is not entirely clear. We need to better understand Canadians' attitudes toward sacrificing civil liberties in order to achieve (perhaps) better security. We also need to consider the intersection between attitudes about terrorism and attitudes about immigration and diversity, particularly Muslim immigration and diversity. These are just some of the most significant issues that deserve the attention of survey researchers over the next few years.

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