MEETING THE CHALLENGES OF EMPIRICALLY MEASURING PUBLIC VIEWS AROUND SECURITY, TERRORISM AND COUNTER-TERRORISM: A CANADIAN CASE STUDY

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ABSTRACT

The essay discusses the challenges of empirically measuring public perceptions around the threat of terrorism, concerns over security and opinions about counter-terrorism. Observations are made based principally on two very detailed surveys amongst Canadians that examined a wide range of potential factors shaping opinion on the issues. It is contended that long-term trends in opinion are difficult to establish due to the impact of major events or incidents on attitudes towards security, terrorism and counter-terrorism. Trend analysis needs to compare opinion to measure inside the time-frame where a major incident occurs and ideally outside that period to properly determine the impact on the public's perspective. The essay stresses the high importance that needs to be assigned in the formulation of questions around security, terrorism and counterterrorism.

RÉSUMÉ

Cet article examine les défis liés à la tentative de mesurer empiriquement les perceptions du public à propos de la menace du terrorisme, des inquiétudes liées à la sécurité et des opinions sur la lutte contre le terrorisme. Je vais discuter de deux sondages très détaillés qui ont été réalisés auprès de la population canadienne qui examinent une vaste gamme de facteurs ayant une influence potentielle sur les opinions du public sur ces sujets. Il est souvent soutenu qu'il est difficile d'établir des tendances à long terme à propos des opinions du public à cause de l'impact que des évènements ou des incidents imprévus majeurs ont sur les attitudes du public envers la sécurité, le terrorisme et le contre-terrorisme. L'analyse des tendances en matière d'opinions publiques doit idéalement pouvoir comparer les opinions au moment qu'un incident majeur se produit aux opinions prévalant avant ou après ce moment afin d'être en mesure de mieux déterminer les effets qu'un tel incident peut avoir les attitudes du public. Cet article met l'accent sur l'attention particulière qui doit être accordée lors de la construction de questions sur la sécurité, le terrorisme et le contre-terrorisme.

The importance of analyzing public perceptions regarding national security cannot be underestimated in the development of approaches to combat terrorism. Understanding such perceptions requires a careful assessment of the factors that underlie those concerns held by the population. There is a sort of dialectic between the policy community's assessment of national security and the one made by an individual or group. When the respective assessments are in sync, effective responses to threats of terrorism are more likely to emerge.

Policy-makers increasingly wish to convey the message that protecting national security is a shared responsibility between the state and its citizens. Not surprisingly therefore, policy-makers seek cooperation with civil society around security issues and view outreach to communities as a key element in combating terrorism. Policy-makers legitimately wish to influence public attitudes and behaviour when responding to threats around national security. Therefore, it is important that a Government's assessment of the level of threat be regarded as credible by the public. In the United States, the National Terrorism Advisory System, or NTAS, communicates timely information about terrorist threats to the public, government agencies, first responders, airports and other transportation hubs, as well as to the private sector. It is vital to the process that the public view the NTAS assessment as credible. But achieving such credibility requires that policy-makers understand the considerations that inform public perceptions when it comes to national security and the threat of terrorism.

Monitoring attitudes about the threat of terrorism is no simple task. For one thing, opinion about the nature and level of threats can shift depending on the time and place that relevant information is gathered. Opinions can change sharply around the time of a major incident and the degree to which public attention is directed towards an incident can severely modify perceptions about security needs. The measurement of opinion in the midst of a crisis presents a challenge in the effort to establish patterns over time. In the aftermath of a crisis, policy and program may represent a quick response to the perception of an immediate security need. How the measures introduced are viewed by the public is also subject to change when the crisis subsides. The response to an immediate security need when expressed by an important segment of the population may have an impact on the public's confidence in those institutions that are tasked with the population's security needs. Assessments of opinion around security in the absence of any threat may result in insufficient focus on the part of the public relative to the security situation. This too makes for a serious challenge in the effort to design a set of measurable indicators to follow changes in opinion across time when it comes to questions about national security and the threat of terrorism.

Beyond the challenge arising from the context or circumstances within which the measurement of public opinion occurs is the critical matter of selecting the best questions to ask when it comes to security and counter-terrorism. Any effort to do successful trend analysis regarding public perceptions requires a set of questions that carefully considers the proposed strategies and desired objectives of policy-makers in what is widely seen as a highly sensitive area of inquiry. In short, it is necessary to first establish what it is that we wish to know about national security and counter-terrorism in order to select the right questions.

The formulation of the question is also critical as it is vital to avoid suggesting an answer to the prospective respondent. An essential element in the construction of a questionnaire is to include themes where connections can be established between the responses. For example, understanding the relationship between the salience of identity, the range of anxieties around security and the perceived threat of terrorism require that some assumptions be made about where causal relationships between them will likely arise.

It is with the above considerations in mind that a very wide range of questions were selected for inclusion in the surveys designed by the Association for Canadian Studies to provide useful insights into public perceptions amongst Canadians around security, terrorism and counter-terrorism. The ultimate objective of the ACS surveys was to establish a set of questions that could form the basis for monitoring/tracking perceptions over time so as to provide researchers, policy-makers and community leaders with an ability to periodically assess such issues as individual and group concerns over national security, perceptions about the threat of terrorism both in Canada and abroad, trust in communities and institutions, perceptions of the state of intergroup relations, perceived justification for terrorism, the degree of readiness to report suspicious activity, and the perceived effectiveness of various legal and educational responses to terrorism. The data sets compiled in two web-based surveys respectively conducted over the periods of March and November 2012 by the firm Leger Marketing enabled us to look more in-depth at where there was convergence/divergence across the selected areas of inquiry. For example, we looked at the significance of various concerns underlying those most and least worried about terrorism.

The large representative national samples in both surveys also provided opportunities to examine various demographic differences (i.e. age, gender, region, income, etc.) in opinions around security, terrorism and counter-terrorism. The age of the respondents was by far the most significant consideration in diverging views over the issues.

The March 2012 survey was characterized by a substantial number of closed questions broaching the themes previously identified. Analysis of the results of the March 2012 survey highlighted the need to ask a set of open questions to test assumptions made about the public's level of knowledge about the issues. Therefore, in November 2012, a set of open questions invited respondents to define the notion of terrorism and to identify initiatives aimed at combating the phenomenon. An additional closed question was added which focused on the perceived root causes of terrorism.

Rather than summarizing the vast amount of survey data generated thus far, in the section below, we attempt to summarize key findings by raising several of the questions that informed the survey and offering brief responses that arise from the results.

Q.1 How do Canadians define Terrorism?
A. One in three Canadians said they didn't know or simply refused to respond. Amongst those who did respond, most referred to the use of force or violence to support political or religious ideologies, or a particular set of values.

Q.2 Are Canadians worried about terrorism?
A. The surveys reveal that Canadians are evenly divided over the issue, but there is a considerable difference on the basis of age with two-thirds of the youngest group (18-24) not being worried compared to four in ten over the age of 65 who are not worried.

Q.3 Do Canadians believe that over the last decade terrorism has declined in the world?
A. No. Some two in three Canadians do not agree that terrorism has declined in the world over the past decade.

Q.4 Do Canadians believe that international efforts to combat terrorism are working well?
A. More Canadians agree (45%) than disagree (39%) that international efforts to combat terrorism are working well. The rest said that they didn't know.

Q.5 Are Canadians worried about the possibility of a terrorist attack in Canada?
A. Some 44% are worried about the possibility of a terrorist attack in the country (52% are not worried). Concerns are stronger amongst persons over the age of 65 (50%) compared to those between the ages of 18 and 24 (30%).

Q.6 Name one or two actions that Canada has taken over the past five years to combat terrorism?
A. Some 35% prefer not to respond and nearly 10% admit they don't know. The most common responses were enhanced airport security/ new flight restrictions/ a No-fly list and enhanced border security/ stronger border patrol/ prevention of known terrorists from entering Canada.

Q.7 Amongst the most and least worried about terrorism, in which segment of society is the gap largest in terms of levels of trust?
A. Immigrants. Amongst those most worried about terrorism, some 49% don't trust immigrants compared with 31% of those least worried about terrorism.

Q.8 Are there sizeable gaps around various other anxieties amongst the most and least worried about terrorism?
A. Absolutely! 85% of those most worried compared with 35% of the least worried want more security at airports and public buildings. About 61% of those most worried compared with 27% of the least worried believe everyone should be required to carry a national identity card at all times to show to a police officer upon request.

Q.9 Are Canadians most worried about terrorism exposed to more prejudice about religious minorities?
A. No. Those most worried about terrorism report relatively similar rates of exposure to negative comments about Muslims than do those least exposed to such prejudice. But those most worried are far more likely to agree that discrimination against Muslims is their fault (63%) than those least likely to worry about terrorism (30%).

Q.10 Canadians who are most worried about terrorism also more preoccupied by relations between Muslims and non-Muslims and do they hold more negative views of Muslims than those who least fear terrorism?
A. Those who worry most about terrorism are only slightly more inclined to worry about Muslim-non-Muslim relations than those who are least worried. Those who worry most about terrorism hold somewhat more negative views (51%) than those least worried (39%).

Q.11 To what degree are those worried about terrorism also preoccupied by imported conflicts?
A. To a significant degree. About 85% of those most worried about terrorism, compared with 53% of those least worried, agree that they are concerned with the tensions that arise from historic conflicts that originate outside of Canada between certain racial, religious and cultural communities.

Q. 12 Do Canadians think that there is any justification for acts of terrorism?
A. Relatively few Canadians think that there is justification for acts of terrorism; about one in eight believe there can be. However, amongst those between the ages of 18 and 24, some one in four feel there might be a justification for terrorist acts, compared with 7% of Canadians over the age of 65.

Q.13 If they knew a member of their community might commit a serious crime, would Canadians report it to the police?
A. Definitely, some nine in ten Canadians say they would.

Q.14 Amongst three possible choices when asked about the root causes of terrorism to what do Canadians refer?
A. Most Canadians think it's religious fundamentalism (52%), followed by poverty and economic inequality (18%), and Western Foreign Policy (16%). There is however an important difference amongst Canadians between the ages of 18 and 24 who selected the three options to a roughly similar extent.

Q.15 Do Canadians who more frequently follow news about world events offer a different assessment of the threat of terrorism than those who do so with less frequency?
A. Not really. Those who follow world events most often are only somewhat more likely to worry about the possibility of a terrorist attack and to think that terrorism has declined globally over the past decade. Although they appear more worried about the prospect of a terrorist attack in Canada, the difference is attributable to the high percentage of people not following world news saying that they don't know.

Q.16 What do Canadians who more frequently follow news about world events believe is the primary or root cause of terrorism?
A. The more they follow world news the more they think the root cause is religious fundamentalism. Those who follow world news less closely think that it is poverty and economic inequality.

Q.17 Are Canadians prepared to give up civil liberties in order to curb terrorism?
A. Two consecutive surveys revealed that six in ten Canadians do not feel that it is necessary to give up civil liberties to curb terrorism. Seven in ten Canadians also disagree that the Government should have the right to put people suspected of terrorism in prison without a trial.

Q.18 Do Canadians want to learn more about religions other than their own and are they favorable to government supporting dialogue between religious groups?
A. They are divided over the extent to which they want to learn more about religious groups and less inclined to endorse government support for dialogue between religious groups. For the purposes of this study, the key issue is that those most worried about terrorism are least interested in learning more about other religions and least supportive of dialogue. They favour legal remedies to a greater extent and more security in public places is their overall preference.