MANAGING CITIZEN FEARS
Public Attitudes toward Urban Terrorism

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The authors examine public attitudes toward urban terrorism, focusing on whether emotion or reason is a more important determinant of how people feel. Using the results of a public opinion survey in a large, northeastern city, the authors find that both emotion and reason affect people's reactions to terrorist attacks. However, this relationship is affected by personal conversation. The more people talk about terrorism, the greater the chance reason rather than fear will dictate reactions. These results have important ramifications for how urban officials deal with homeland security and assuage citizens whose excessive concerns about terrorism have led to costly security expenditures.

Keywords: *urban terrorism; public opinion; conversation; homeland security; urban policy; September 11, 2001; emotion; fear; rationality*

The September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on New York City and Washington, DC, shocked the public and led to soul searching about security. National officials passed new legislation and created institutions such as the Department of Homeland Security. Terrorist threats had major budgetary consequences for local officials as they struggled in the face of pressing social needs to find money to pay for new security requirements. According to a survey of 215 cities and the 50 states undertaken by the U.S. Conference of Mayors (2004), many communities reported problems in receiving federal money to improve urban security. Other research identified concern among local officials regarding biological, chemical, and car bomb attacks but found that these leaders felt general public safety and crime were "more immediately important" to their localities than terrorism (Baldassare, Hoene, and Cohen 2003).

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Unstated in discussions of new government spending on security is the crucial role public opinion plays in setting government priorities and the extent to which emotion conditions the way people feel about terrorism. Fear, anxiety, and anger all factor into how people think about urban security in the post–September 11 period. Up until that date, most Americans expressed little concern about terrorism. For example, it rarely showed up on the list of issues citizens worried about. As made clear in the 2004 presidential campaign, though, terrorism has emerged as a hot-button issue for many people in the United States. People want government to do more to protect security, and public officials have responded by devoting considerable funds to defense and security.

With a few exceptions, past studies have devoted insufficient attention to the role of fear, anger, and anxiety in affecting public opinion. In analyzing how citizens respond to policy issues, early public opinion research examined the degree to which citizen sentiments corresponded with long-term attitudes, such as political party or issue positions, or material factors such as economic interests. The idea was that in a representative democracy, it was desirable for people's judgments to rest on some type of substantive standard. Citizens who voted based on party loyalties or the issues, or who rewarded candidates for good economic performance (or punished them for bad performance), were thought to be acting reasonably and rationally, while those who did not were irrational, unsophisticated, or "unconstrained" in their thinking and behavior (Converse 1964; Fiorina 1981; Page and Shapiro 1992).

In many of these studies, emotion was either ignored as a possible source of citizen reactions or was thought to be dangerous to democratic polities. Politicians who played to citizen emotions were accused of "fear mongering" or being demagogic. Voters who made decisions based on fear or anger were thought to be unreasonable or unfair in their judgments and reacting to "base" and primitive instincts. Indeed, many analysts expressed a clear preference for cognitive over affective reasoning. Reason was thought to rest on stable, long-term judgments of substantive merits, while emotion relied on unreasonable, nonsubstantive, unfair, or arbitrary standards (Kuklinski et al. 1977; Marcus and MacKuen 1993; Nadeau, Niemi, and Amato 1995).

None of these studies, though, take account of the role of personal conversation in affecting emotion and reason in citizen thinking. Conversation is a factor that is relevant for debates over emotion and reason because it can accentuate or amplify particular means of processing information (Ackerman and Fishkin 2004; Price, Cappella, and Nir 2002). Repetition of specific themes in discussion with other people makes people more prone to thinking about those standards. In the language of communications,

frequency of conversation can prime particular modes of thinking or set the agenda for individual thoughts.

Conversation affects the role of emotion and reason by legitimizing specific ways of thinking. As pointed out by Mutz (1998) and Herbst (1993), people who talk frequently provide social acceptability to others. Ackerman and Fishkin (2004) note the general virtue of "deliberation" to democracy. Knowledge of what other people think signals appropriateness to other individuals. It is a way to sample public opinion and rationalize particular beliefs (Gamson 1992). If conversation elevates long-term and substantive factors associated with reason over short-term emotional responses, it would help local officials deal with the raw emotions unleashed by urban terrorism. Even though the United States has not experienced any attacks since September 11, 2001, there remains considerable fear, anxiety, and anger about future attacks. These emotions force public officials, especially those at the local level who are primarily responsible for public safety, to devote huge (perhaps irrational) sums of money to homeland security.

The focus on safety and security drains resources from other pressing needs such as education, health care, and housing. As mayors and other city officials struggle with the issue of juggling resources to pay for additional security, there needs to be ways to elevate reason over fear in discussions of urban priorities. The more reasoned and substantive these conversations are with friends and neighbors, the greater the likelihood that urban officials will reassure citizens and not be forced to spend excessive amounts of money on public security.

THE CASE OF URBAN TERRORISM

National public opinion surveys find that Americans feel a range of emotions over future terrorism attacks. For example, a 2004 *New York Times* survey revealed that 43% felt the United States was prepared for another terrorist attack. However, most people have not done anything personally to prepare for such an attack. Those who had not put together an emergency food kit with water to prepare for an attack totaled 61%. A total of 70% had not chosen a family meeting place or communications plan in the event of an attack (Sims 2004; see also Lee 2004).

Local surveys in areas a few hours from New York City demonstrate that terrorism remains a salient topic. A Brown University (2004) survey of Providence, Rhode Island, found that 60% are willing for the city to reallocate funds to protect against terrorism. Almost half (48%) report that terrorism

makes them very angry. More than a quarter (28%) say that they have stocked an emergency kit of food, batteries, first aid, or other supplies in case of a terrorist attack, while 45% say they have become more careful about their surroundings when the federal government raises its official terrorism threat alert. Those who said they are less likely to trust their neighbors totaled 9%, and 41% say they try to watch out for people who look or act like terrorists.

To test the role of emotion and reason in citizen thinking, this Providence telephone survey probed the sources of attitudes of ordinary citizens. A total of 432 adults 18 years or older were interviewed between September 18 and September 21, 2004, at Brown University. Interviewers were hired, trained, and supervised in accordance with professional norms. Sampling was undertaken through random digit dialing of the Providence area. Interviewing was conducted either in English or Spanish to reach both English and non-English-speaking populations. Overall, the poll had a margin of error of about plus or minus 5%. We used up to three callbacks to build the sample.

The dependent variables were measures of people's responses to terrorism (question wording is available on request from the authors). For our cognitive measures, we looked at worry over becoming a victim of terrorism and concern over specific attacks, asking the following question: "How worried are you that you or someone in your family will be the victim of a terrorist attack in Providence during the next year?" (1 = *very worried*, 2 = *somewhat worried*, and 3 = *not too worried*). We also used a scale running from 3 to 9 based on the sum of three items: "How concerned are you about the possibility of there being a radioactive bomb/car or truck bomb/biological or chemical attack in Providence over the next year?" (1 = *very concerned*, 2 = *somewhat concerned*, and 3 = *not very concerned*). For this scale, we used Cronbach's alpha to measure internal consistency, and the alpha was .85, indicating a high level of consistency. Bohrnstedt and Knoke (1988) specify an alpha of .65 or higher as the minimum standard of internal consistency for scales.

We used two items to measure behavioral responses to terrorism. The first looked at the impact of terrorism on tolerance: "As a result of September 11, do you try to watch out for people who look or act like terrorists?" (1 = yes and 2 = no). The second was an additive scale running from 2 to 4 based on the sum of answers to the following question: "Have the September 11 terrorist attacks made you less likely to go to downtown Providence for restaurants and entertainment (or for business)?" (1 = yes and 2 = no). Cronbach's alpha for this scale was .67, indicating an acceptable level of consistency.

Our goal in this survey was to investigate the impact of emotion and reason on these measures. We looked at three separate measures of emotion found in other studies (Marcus and MacKuen 1993; Kuklinski et al. 1977) to be relevant for policy opinions and came up with the following questions:

"How does the thought of terrorism make you feel?" (1 = *very anxious*, 2 = *somewhat anxious*, and 3 = *not very anxious*); "How does the thought of terrorism make you feel?" (1 = *very afraid*, 2 = *somewhat afraid*, and 3 = *not very afraid*); and "How does the thought of terrorism make you feel?" (1 = *very angry*, 2 = *somewhat angry*, and 3 = *not very angry*).

The measures of "reason" are three specific steps citizens concerned about terrorism might reasonably take to safeguard themselves: "Do you have an emergency kit of food, batteries, first aid, or other supplies in case of a terrorist attack?" (1 = yes and 2 = no); "Are you more careful about your surroundings when the federal government raises its official terrorism threat alert?" (1 = yes and 2 = no); and "Would you be willing for the city of Providence to reallocate some of its existing funds to protect the city against a terrorist attack?" (1 = yes and 2 = no). Each of these tap responses prudent people would take or support if they thought terrorism could harm them.

To see if demographic or political factors affected their responses, we used a variety of control variables, such as gender, age, education, race (White or minority), party identification (Republican, Independent, or Democrat), and ideology (liberal, moderate, or conservative). There was little evidence of multicollinearity in the models. The scales and independent variables were not highly correlated with each other or the control variables cited above.

COGNITIVE AND BEHAVIORAL RESPONSES TO TERRORISM

Table 1 shows the results for worry about becoming a victim of terrorism and concern over specific attacks (radioactive bombs, car or truck bombs, or biological or chemical attacks). In general, we found that both measures of emotion and reason were relevant for these items. For example, the factors that were linked to worry about becoming a victim or having concern about a specific attack were fear about terrorism, being careful when the government terror alert was raised, and education level. People who were fearful about terrorism, who were more careful about their surroundings when the federal government raised its official terrorism threat alert, and who were not very educated were the ones most worried about becoming a victim. Individuals were motivated by fear of terrorism but also by substantive factors such as government terror alert levels.

We also looked at the factors that affected people's behavioral responses to terrorism by examining the role of emotion and reason in people's likelihood of going downtown for business, restaurants, or entertainment and whether they watched out for "people who looked or acted like terrorists."

TABLE 1: Predictors of Terrorism Reactions

	Cognitive Reactions				*Behavioral Reactions*			
	Worry about Becoming Victim		*Concern over Specific Attacks*		*Less Likely to go Downtown*		*Watch out for for Terrorists*	
	Unstandardized Regression Coefficient	SE	*Unstandardized Regression Coefficient*	SE	*Unstandardized Regression Coefficient*	SE	*Unstandardized Regression Coefficient*	SE
Anxious about terrorism	.07	.06	.21	.19	.06	.05	.15	.06
Fear about terrorism	.20	.06**	.79	.20***	.02	.05	–.03	.06
Anger about terrorism	–.01	.04	–.09	.14	.07	.04*	.06	.04
Have emergency kit	.14	.07*	.30	.22	–.05	.06	.11	.07
Careful when government terror alert is raised	.17	.07*	.81	.22***	.08	.06	.21	.07**
Think city should reallocate funds	.07	.07	.23	.22	.01	.06	.07	.07
Sex	–.04	.06	–.09	.20	.07	.05	.02	.06
Party identification	.03	.04	.09	.11	.02	.03	.02	.03
Ideology	–.01	.04	–.22	.14	–.03	.04	–.09	.04*
Race	–.08	.08	–.29	.26	–.25	.07***	–.02	.08
Education	.07	.02**	.24	.08**	.03	.02	–.02	.02
Age	–.04	.02	–.13	.07	–.03	.02	–.03	.02
Constant	1.55	.31***	3.78	1.00***	3.78	.26***	0.90	0.31**
N	247		244		238		240	
Adjusted R^2	.27		.35		.12		.17	
F value	8.60***		11.89***		3.83***		5.12***	

SOURCE: Brown University (2004).
*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$.

The only item where there was an impact of emotion was on the likelihood of going downtown. People who said they were less likely to go downtown also were likely to say they were angry about terrorism or to be a racial minority.

None of the emotion items were central to whether respondents watched out for suspicious people. Instead, ideology was an important factor, with conservatives being the people most likely to be suspicious of others. However, "reasoned" responses were not irrelevant to these responses. Being careful when the government raised its terror alert did affect attitudes such as tolerance. Those who reported being careful when the alert level went up also said they watched out for people who looked like terrorists.

THE IMPACT OF CONVERSATION

Thus far, we have found evidence that both emotion and reason are central to people's thinking about terrorism. However, we need to examine the extent to which frequency of conversation with other people affects the role of emotion versus reason. We hypothesize that conversation affects these relationships because of the impact of repetition on cue taking. People who spend a lot of time talking about terrorism elevate reason over emotion because the act of expressing thoughts to someone else provides a sounding board that helps to screen out unreasonable or unfair reasoning.

According to the Providence survey, the September 11 terrorism attacks remain a topic for many people, three years after the actual attacks. When asked about the frequency of personal discussion about 9/11 terrorist attacks with other people, 23% say they discuss the attacks at least once a week, 28% say they discuss them once every few weeks, 23% indicate they talk about them once every few months, and 21% claim they almost never discuss the attacks with other people. Our question did not specify who these "other people" were, merely the frequency of 9/11 conversation.

Table 2 examines the relationship between frequency of conversation about 9/11 and terrorism reactions. Conversation is linked to worry over becoming a victim and being less likely to go downtown. The more people talked about 9/11, the more worried they became about becoming a victim and the less likely they were to go downtown for business and entertainment. There was no impact of conversation on concern over specific types of terrorist attacks or watching out for people who look like terrorists.

There may be interaction effects between conversation and level of fear or awareness of government terrorism alerts, so we added interaction terms to the model. The results are the same as those reported above. Even with the additional specification, conversation still affected how people responded to

TABLE 2: Impact of Conversation on Terrorism Reactions

	Cognitive Reactions				*Behavioral Reactions*			
	Worry about Becoming Victim		*Concern over Specific Attacks*		*Less Likely to go Downtown*		*Watch out for for Terrorists*	
	Unstandardized Regression Coefficient	SE	*Unstandardized Regression Coefficient*	SE	*Unstandardized Regression Coefficient*	SE	*Unstandardized Regression Coefficient*	SE
Discussed 9/11	.08	.03**	.02	.09	.06	.02**	–.03	.03
Anxious about terrorism	.05	.06	.21	.19	.04	.05	.16	.06**
Fear about terrorism	.20	.06***	.79	.20***	.01	.05	–.03	.06
Anger about terrorism	–.03	.04	–.10	.14	.06	.04	.07	.04
Have emergency kit	.11	.07	.29	.22	–.06	.06	.11	.07
Careful when government terror alert is raised	.07**	.16	.07*	.80	.22***	.08	.06	.22
Think city should reallocate funds	.09	.07	.24	.22	.03	.06	.06	.07
Sex	–.05	.06	–.09	.21	.06	.05	.02	.06
Party identification	.02	.03	.09	.11	.02	.03	.02	.04
Ideology	–.01	.04	–.22	.14	–.04	.03	–.09	.04*
Race	–.11	.08	–.31	.26	–.25	.06***	–.02	.08
Education	.06	.02*	.23	.08**	.03	.02	–.02	.02
Age	–.04	.02*	–.13	.07*	–.03	.02*	–.03	.02
Constant	1.53	0.31***	3.80	1.01***	3.70	0.25***	0.95	0.32**
N	245		242		236		238	
Adjusted R^2	.29		.34		.15		.17	
F value	8.52***		10.68***		4.27***		4.71***	

SOURCE: Brown University (2004).
*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$.

victimization concern and propensity to go downtown. Similar to above, there were no effects in propensity to watch for those looking like terrorists or in how concerned people were about specific attacks.

To see how discussion influenced the role of emotion and reason in people's thinking, Table 3 breaks down three levels of discussion about terrorism (a little, some, and a lot) on worry about becoming a terrorist victim. We defined little discussion as talking about 9/11 once every few months or almost never, moderate discussion as once every few weeks, and a lot of discussion as once a day or once a week. The results demonstrate that those who spent a lot of time discussing the September 11 terrorist attacks with other people are more likely to be influenced by reason, while those who spend only a little time talking about the attacks are more likely to be affected by emotion.

Among the talkers, the people who are most likely to report worrying about becoming a terrorist victim are those who say they are careful when the government terror alert is raised and those who are willing for city officials to reallocate existing funds to protect the city against a terrorist attack. In contrast, nontalkers are more likely to have fear play a role in their assessments. Indeed, for these individuals, fear was the only factor in the model that was statistically significant. None of the other emotions or any of the reason measures or control factors affected the likelihood of concern. For those in the middle of the discussion spectrum, neither fear nor reason mattered much to the sense of becoming a victim. Long-term factors, such as party identification, education, and age, were the significant factors. Republicans were likely to worry about being a terrorist victim, as were those who were poorly educated and elderly.

In looking at the demographic composition of high, medium, and low talking, there do not appear to be major differences in the composition of the samples. Rather than being a methodological artifact, our results demonstrate that frequent conversation elevates reason in terrorism reactions. Significance tests across the samples show that these differences are not a function of subsample size.

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We do not wish to make too much of these results, because they are limited to one northeastern urban area. It is conceivable that areas further removed from attack sites would show different results. Providence is only three hours from New York City, and proximity to ground zero surely affects the level of

TABLE 3: Impact of Conversation on Worry about Becoming Victim by Discussion Amount

	Little Discussion about Terrorism		*Some Discussion about Terrorism*		*A lot of Discussion about Terrorism*	
	Unstandardized Regression Coefficient	SE	*Unstandardized Regression Coefficient*	SE	*Unstandardized Regression Coefficient*	SE
Anxious about terrorism	.04	.07	.12	.13	.02	.11
Fear about terrorism	.17	.07**	.16	.13	.25	.15
Anger about terrorism	.00	.04	–.05	.09	–.05	.10
Have emergency kit	–.04	.08	.16	.14	.21	.16
Careful when government terror alert is raised	.00	.08	.23	.13	.37	.19*
Think city should reallocate funds	.08	.08	.12	.12	.33	.16*
Sex	.00	.07	–.22	.12	.19	.15
Party identification	–.02	.04	.15	.07*	–.08	.08
Ideology	.04	.05	–.09	.08	.02	.10
Race	–.07	.09	–.06	.18	–.16	.18
Education	.01	.03	.13	.05**	.01	.06
Age	–.02	.02	–.10	.05*	–.01	.05
Constant	2.43	.39***	1.46	0.62*	0.77	0.69
N	111		73		62	
Adjusted R^2	.07		.43		.34	
F value	1.66		5.44***		3.62***	

SOURCE: Brown University (2004).
*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$.

concern people feel. Indeed, Murray and Stein (n.d.) find that people in Houston are far less likely than residents of New York to believe another terrorist attack is likely.

However, we feel that these findings suggest interesting possibilities for how local officials deal with homeland security and what they can do to assuage citizen concerns about terrorism. The more officials can stimulate conversation and deliberation, the more they can elevate reasoned discourse. Indeed, as pointed out by Ackerman and Fishkin (2004) and Price, Cappella, and Nir (2002), conversation is an antidote to the unhealthy role of the media in raising negative emotions. If people talk about volatile subjects such as terrorism, it may reassure them and encourage people to think more reasonably (Mutz 1998; Herbst 1993).

Several writers have found that television is a major stimulant to raising feelings such as anger and anxiety in public life. For example, Hibbing and Theiss-Morse (1998) find that people who rely heavily on television experience more negative emotions about Congress than those relying on newspapers or not having much media exposure to the news. In the same vein, Slone (2000) argues in regard to Israel that media coverage elevates anxiety responses to terrorism. Hutcheson et al. (2004) demonstrate that one of the reasons 9/11 generated such intense emotions is that press coverage afterward was nationalistic and patriotic in nature.

Our results also are relevant for how city officials respond to terrorism. Some scholars, such as Savitch (2003), have suggested a new urban paradigm in which "public security, order, and protection have become central issues for cities" (p. 103). In this scenario, metropolitan governments shift more resources to security, which leaves less money for human services. However, others, such as Eisinger (2004) and Harrigan and Martin (2002), predict less far-reaching changes arising from September 11. Rather than remaking city paradigms, these individuals argue that urban areas will continue to attract people because they offer jobs, restaurants, and entertainment.

The degree to which fear or reason dominates is vital to this debate. The most dramatic paradigm shifts in urban finance and issue priorities occur precisely when fear gets elevated to a high level. Public officials play a vital role in managing citizen fears about terrorism. The more discussion there is, the less likely that fear or anger will be central to public thinking. If cities are to endure as open and cosmopolitan venues, urban officials must find a way to mitigate the costly and irrational fears Americans have concerning urban terrorism.

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