

Rallying Around the Flag? Political Parties' Reactions to Terrorist Acts

Christophe Chowanietz
Université de Montréal
Canada Research Chair in Electoral Studies
(c.chowanietz@umontreal.ca)

Paper presented at the 2007 Annual Meeting of the Canadian Political Science Association, Saskatoon, May 30 to June 1, 2007.

Rallying Around the Flag? Political Parties' Reactions to Terrorist Acts

On September 12th 2001 dozens of members of the U.S. Congress from both the Republican and Democratic parties stood side by side on the steps of the Capitol pledging their support to Georges W. Bush in a rare display of unity.¹ In the week that followed the tragic events of 9/11, Bush's public approval ratings rose from 51% to an unprecedented 86%.² With a large support both in Congress and across the nation, the rally around the flag was complete and of a proportion unseen in the United States since the attack on Pearl Harbor some 60 years before.

Rallies around the flag are not uncommon in times of foreign policy crises and have been widely studied, as will be shown below, though mostly from a US perspective. However, studies on the reactions of public opinion and of political elites and parties to acts of terror have been scant, even after the events of September 2001.³ This paper attempts to fill the gap by analysing political parties' reactions to terrorism in five countries – France, Germany, Spain, the United Kingdom, the United States – and determining which factors influence political elites and whether rallies around the flag are the rule or the exception.

Rallies in times of war and of diplomatic crises

Much of the literature on the rally-around-the-flag phenomenon centers on the reactions of political elites and public opinion to the occurrence of military and diplomatic crises. John Mathews in a pioneering article on political parties' attitudes in times of war remarked that "one effect of war upon the party system (...) is to bring about, at least for a time, a relatively greater stability of party control, if not complete quiescence of partisanship, either through coalition or through cessation of party opposition, or both" (Mathews 1919, 213). He concluded, however, that this union of political elites and parties was neither perfect nor durable: "While there may be practical unanimity upon the question of entering the war, there is more likelihood of a difference developing in the reaction of the parties toward the questions involved in the method of prosecuting it and of terminating it" (Mathews, 214).

Whilst the rallying capacity of wars and diplomatic crises has been acknowledged by many scholars (Polsby 1964, Waltz 1967, Mueller 1973, MacKuen 1983, Ostrom and Simon 1985, Brody 1991, Oneal and Bryan, 1995), there is far less agreement as to how and why this rallying process comes about.⁴ John Mueller in his seminal work *War, Presidents and Public Opinion* observes that rallies around the flag are the results of

¹ *The New York Times*, September 12, 2001.

² Source: Gallup Polls, September 7-10 and 14-15, 2001.

³ Of particular relevance amongst the more recent studies is an article by Claude Berrebi and Esteban Klor (2006) on how terrorism impacts Israeli politics, as well as an article by Raj Chari (2004) on how the terrorist attacks of March 2004 in Madrid influenced the outcome of the Spanish elections.

⁴ For their part, Oneal and Bryan have demonstrated that the effect on the president's public approval is likely to be minimal.

specific, dramatic and sharply focused international events directly involving the U.S. and its president. He lists six types of events that have the potential to trigger rallies: sudden US military interventions abroad (e.g. Korea in 1950), major military operations in ongoing wars (e.g. the Tet offensive), major diplomatic developments (e.g. the Berlin blockade), dramatic technological developments (e.g. the launch of Sputnik), meetings between the American president and his Soviet counterpart, and the start of each presidential term. Interestingly international terrorism is not listed as a potential trigger.

Unlike Mueller, who describes rallies as patriotic reflexes, proponents of the opinion leadership school (Brody and Shapiro 1989, Brody 1991) see the absence of elite criticism as the main cause for rallies.⁵ Richard Brody links the reaction of the general population to that of the political elite. He explains that in times of crises the information is often monopolised by those in government which leads members of the opposition to avoid open criticism, at least in the short-run. This cautious approach on the part of the opposition elites gives a signal to the public that the government is doing a fine job in those critical moments and should be supported, hence a rally around the flag both within mainstream elites and the general population. This explanation has been questioned by Matthew Baum (2002) who finds that elite support for the president – especially from the opposition party – while perhaps necessary, is not a sufficient condition for a rally. More recently, Baum has gone as far as suggesting that elites do not in fact suspend partisan attacks in times of crises (Baum and Groeling, 2004). Others have pointed out that Brody's understanding of the rallying phenomenon is incomplete, the argument being that the support offered by the opposition elite is often nothing more than a reaction to the popular mood (Hetherington and Nelson, 2003). In other words, the elite avoids criticizing the president because it believes public opinion is backing him.

Rallies around the flag in times of foreign policy crises are frequent but they are also ephemeral and not always characterized by massive surges in the popularity of the president. What is particularly noteworthy is that scholars have often chosen to consider rallies around the flag and spikes in approval ratings (i.e. of the President) as part of the same phenomenon. Although it falls out of the scope of this particular paper, it must be pointed out that whereas a sudden surge in approval ratings can indicate the presence of a rally around the president within the general population, it does not necessarily indicate a rally within the political elite. Nor is it absolutely clear whether one follows from the other, though Brody goes some way into explaining how the two might interact.⁶ While it is probable that elites do take into consideration the mood across the country, this argument becomes less valid for crises situations, such as terrorist attacks, requiring an immediate response from the government and the leading opposition parties.

⁵ An argument developed by Jong R. Lee (1977) who believes that rallies are the product of patriotism and a natural tendency to support the leader in times of crises (Mueller's thesis), but also the result of a lack of information that makes it difficult for people to assess the situation correctly.

⁶ Robert Entman's (2004) cascade model is particularly relevant to this discussion. Entman suggests, among other things, that criticism of the White House is more likely when foreign policy events are culturally ambiguous (i.e. they give rise to conflicting interpretations among elites, media and the general population). Opposition leaders will pay particular attention to how public opinion feels towards the government. If the opposition feels that the population is backing the White House, they will be less critical and the media will not have any dissent to report.

For the purpose of this paper, a rally around the flag is said to exist whenever the mainstream opposition parties support the government.⁷ This support can either be explicit (i.e. support made public by a spokesperson or a leading figure of the opposition) or implicit (i.e. silence implies consent). Rallies involve at best a truce in party politics (i.e. total support of the government) and at the very least an absence of criticism on the part of the mainstream parties as far as the government's reaction to the act of terror and to the issue of public security is concerned. In order to constitute a rally, this support must last a minimum of five consecutive days following the terrorist event.

Hypotheses

The frequent occurrence of rallies around the flag following military or diplomatic crises would indicate that a similar phenomenon is likely to take place within mainstream political elites following acts of terror (domestic and international). The logic should be similar. Political elites will stick together when the nation is under attack or is facing a threat, whether conventional or unconventional. Hence our first hypothesis:

H1: Acts of terrorism will cause mainstream opposition parties to rally in support of the government.

Acts of terror being of various magnitudes, we would expect the number of fatalities to influence the reaction of political elites. Medias in particular tend to rate the gravity of terror acts by the number of victims they cause. In other words, the casualty rate can be seen as a proxy for the severity of the attack (the more casualties, the more the act will resonate). We would expect opposition parties and elites to be less inclined to openly criticize the government when casualty rates are high. The second hypothesis follows from this argument:

H2: Political parties and elites will be more likely to rally around the flag as the terrorist act causes more fatalities.

Terrorism in the countries selected for this study is not limited to a handful of occurrences. It is a persistent problem which governments have to deal with on a regular basis, although waves of attacks might be followed by quieter periods. Those in charge of governing the country are expected to limit the occurrence of terror acts. If they fail, they will likely be criticized by those in the opposition who wish to replace them in government. Mainstream opposition parties will likely be patient when the government faces its first terrorist acts and therefore rally around the flag. This support will however fade if acts of terror keep repeating themselves. This suggests the following hypothesis:

⁷ Extreme and minor opposition parties have been left out of the analysis. Mainstream parties for each of the five countries are: PP and PSOE for Spain; RPR (later UMP), UDF, PS (Gauche Plurielle between 1997 and 2002) for France; CDU/CSU, FDP, SPD, Grünen for Germany; Labour Party, Conservative Party and Liberal Democrats for the United Kingdom; Republican Party and Democratic Party for the United States.

H3: The repeated occurrence of acts of terror under a same government (and same mandate) will make a rally around the flag less likely.⁸

Finally, in a world where terrorism and political violence in general can take several forms and aim just about anyone and anything, we would expect mainstream political parties and their elites to be particularly sensitive to acts of terror targeted at symbols of the State (government officials, civil servants, etc.). An act aimed at such a symbol challenges the government's authority and especially its monopoly of physical force on the national territory. The fourth hypothesis follows from this argument:

H4: Terrorist acts aimed at symbols of the State are more likely to trigger a rally around the flag.

Methodology

To assess the impact of terrorism on political parties and elites, we use a database comprising 181 terrorist acts committed in five countries (France, Germany, Spain, the United Kingdom and the United States) since 1990.⁹ These countries have been stable democracies throughout the period which means, among other things, that mainstream political parties are free to oppose their government if they choose to do so. The rally can therefore not be forced upon them by the government. The choice to rally is always theirs. Furthermore, terrorism is nothing new for these five countries. Although this phenomenon might have been more acute in recent years in some countries (Spain) than in others (Germany), it remains a recurring problem for all of them.¹⁰

For each act recorded in the database, we look at how mainstream political parties reacted and determine whether there was criticism from the opposition, expressed either

⁸ This hypothesis implies that each new government or each government starting a new mandate will be given a clean sheet and will not necessarily be held responsible for the home security failures of the previous government.

⁹ The database does not take into consideration acts of terror that have caused no fatalities and less than six injuries. A preliminary survey of these low magnitude incidents in the newspapers indicates that they are very often not reported. The source for the terror acts is the online database *MIPT Terrorism Knowledge Base*: <http://www.tkb.org>

¹⁰ Terrorism is defined as:

Violence, or the threat of violence, calculated to create an atmosphere of fear and alarm. These acts are designed to coerce others into actions they would not otherwise undertake, or refrain from actions they desired to take. All terrorist acts are crimes. Many would also be violation of the rules of war if a state of war existed. This violence or threat of violence is generally directed against civilian targets. The motives of all terrorists are political, and terrorist actions are generally carried out in a way that will achieve maximum publicity. Unlike other criminal acts, terrorists often claim credit for their acts. Finally, terrorist acts are intended to produce effects beyond the immediate physical damage of the cause, having long-term psychological repercussions on a particular target audience. The fear created by terrorists may be intended to cause people to exaggerate the strengths of the terrorist and the importance of the cause, to provoke governmental overreaction, to discourage dissent, or simply to intimidate and thereby enforce compliance with their demands (MIPT Terrorism Knowledge Base).

by a spokesperson or a leading figure of the party. A rally is said to occur when during the five days that follow the act of terror no criticism from the main opposition parties appears in the selected media outlet.¹¹

Three variables are particularly important for this study: the magnitude of the terror act (i.e. number of fatalities), the number of terror acts recorded under each government, and the type of target. In view of the capacity of military and diplomatic crises to trigger rallies around the flag, a control variable for these two types of crises has also been included. Moreover, acts have been selected from 1990 onwards so as to avoid any overlap with the Cold War period (a potentially strong explanatory variable for the behaviour of parties and elites prior to 1990).

Discussion

A number of terrorist acts do not register on the media radar and do not initiate any public reactions on the part of the spokespeople of the mainstream parties. Part of the explanation for the lack of interest (and of coverage) for certain acts lies with their magnitude in terms of fatalities. Terrorist acts with low human costs are unlikely to elicit much interest from both the media outlets and political elites. On the other hand, acts causing more than two deaths are never ignored by the media in our database. Low magnitude acts have sometimes more to do with day to day criminality than actual terrorism and are perhaps not as exceptional and as “news worthy” as more politically oriented terror acts. Another explanation points to the type of target. State targets are reported 91% of the time by our newspapers, and only 72% of the time for other targets¹². Finally, country specific reporting attitudes may also play a role. France and Spain exhibit larger reporting numbers with respectively 84% and 98% of all terrorist acts reported in the mainstream newspapers compared to other countries which show rates ranging from 56% to 68%.

As expected, rallies are the rule after terrorist attacks. More precisely, table 1 shows that overall 84% of reported acts of terrorism trigger rallies around the flag. Table 1 also reveals that French and Spanish political elites tend to rally relatively less often than their German, American and British counterparts. The context might account for this difference. Spain and France are experiencing more reported acts of terror than the other countries. As a result, opposition parties in those two countries might be less patient towards their government. The UK (Ulster included) is dealing with a number of reported attacks similar to that of France, but unlike France the British political elite usually relies on a bipartisan approach to tackle terrorism.

¹¹ For each of the five countries chosen for this study one national newspaper has been selected. The list is the following: *Le Monde* for France, *Frankfurter Allgemeine* for Germany, *El Pais* for Spain, *The Times* for the United Kingdom, and *The New York Times* for the United States.

¹² This difference is significant at the 5% level.

Table 1: The Rallying Phenomenon

| Country | Total Number of Attacks | Number of Newspaper ¹ Reported ² Attacks (%) | Number of Reported Attacks With Rally (%) |
|------------------------------|-------------------------|--|---|
| France | 38 | 32 84% | 25 78% |
| Germany ³ | 9 | 6 67% | 6 100% |
| Spain | 59 | 58 98% | 46 79% |
| Spain - no Pact ⁴ | 33 | 32 97% | 21 66% |
| United Kingdom | 9 | 5 56% | 5 100% |
| United Kingdom - Ulster | 44 | 25 57% | 23 92% |
| United States | 22 | 15 68% | 14 93% |
| Total⁵ | 181 | 141 78% | 119 84% |

Notes:

¹ Newspapers used to define media reporting are *Le Monde* for France, *Frankfurter Allgemeine* for Germany, *El Pais* for Spain, *The Times* for the United Kingdom, and *The New York Times* for the United States.

² Factors affecting newspapers reporting include targets (state targets are reported 91% of times versus 72% for other targets) and size of the attacks (acts with more than 2 deaths are never ignored by the media in our database).

³ The sample for Germany is restricted to attacks taking place after January 1, 1993 due to limited public access to newspaper archives.

⁴ “Spain - no Pact” uses only attacks occurring outside of the antiterrorist pact period during which governing and opposing parties (PP and PSOE) agreed to present a unified front towards terrorists.

⁵ Total statistics use France, Germany, Spain, U.K., U.K - Ulster and the U.S.A.

The magnitude of the terrorist act (i.e. number of deaths) plays an important role in the reaction of the mainstream political elite. Table 2 shows that 93 % of all terror acts causing three fatalities or more trigger a rally in support of the government, whereas amongst attacks causing less than three fatalities, only 57% elicit explicit or implicit support for the government in the media. Moreover 28% of the attacks causing less than three deaths are ignored by the media altogether. Amongst media reported attacks only, 80% of the attacks with less than three fatalities resulted in rallies, versus 93% for attacks causing three deaths or more.

Table 2: The “Magnitude” Effect

| Number ¹ of Deaths (%) | Less Than 3 Deaths | 3 Deaths or more |
|--|--------------------|------------------|
| Attacks not Reported in the Press ² | 40 (28%) | 0 (0%) |
| Attacks Without Rally | 20 (14%) | 1 (7%) |
| Attacks With Rally | 81 (57%) | 13 (93%) |
| Total | 141 (100%) | 14 (100%) |

Notes:

¹ Attacks in Spain during the antiterrorist pact period are not included in this analysis in order to control for the artificial rallying effect of the pact.

² Newspapers used to define media reporting are *Le Monde* for France, *Frankfurter Allgemeine* for Germany, *El Pais* for Spain, *The Times* for the United Kingdom, and *The New York Times* for the United States.

Terrorism can represent a severe test of resilience for a population, but it is also very much a test of aptitude for those in government. If the government cannot maintain

order and security, the political opposition will grow impatient and increasingly critical. Table 3 indicates that following the first three attacks, opposition parties have always supported their government, but that they were less inclined to do so when the attacks kept on repeating themselves.

Table 3: The “Repetition” Effect

| Repetition of Attacks¹ | 0-3 | 4-5 | 6 or more |
|---|------------|------------|------------------|
| Attacks Leading to Rallies / Total Number of Attacks ² | 36 / 36 | 16 / 19 | 42 / 60 |
| Percentage of Rallies | 100% | 84% | 70% |

Notes:

¹ Number of attacks under the same government (same mandate).

² Attacks in Spain during the antiterrorist pact period are not included in this analysis in order to control for the artificial rallying effect of the pact.

Contrary to expectation aggregate data for the five countries do not seem to indicate that more rallies occur when the State is targeted. However, hypothesis 4 still holds for France and the United States where attacks on symbols of the State trigger more rallies than attacks on other targets. This mixed result is perhaps not that surprising. France is the embodiment of a centralised state, and one would expect French political elites to strongly condemn attacks on its symbols or representatives, or at the very least to refrain from criticizing those in charge of the State. It is perhaps less surprising that a decentralised country such as Spain should be less prone to rallies when the State is targeted.

Table 4: The “Target” Effect

| Country | Total Number of Attacks | Number of Attacks with State¹ Targets (%) | | % Reported Attacks With Rally | |
|------------------------------------|--------------------------------|---|-----|--------------------------------------|----------------------|
| | | | | State Targets | Other Targets |
| France | 38 | 7 | 18% | 83% | 77% |
| Germany² | 20 | 3 | 15% | N/A | 100% |
| Spain | 59 | 38 | 64% | 78% | 81% |
| Spain - no Pact³ | 33 | 20 | 61% | 58% | 77% |
| United Kingdom | 9 | 1 | 11% | 100% | 100% |
| United Kingdom - Ulster | 44 | 7 | 16% | 75% | 95% |
| United States | 22 | 3 | 14% | 100% | 92% |
| Total⁴ | 192 | 59 | 31% | 70% | 86% |

Notes:

¹ State targets include government, military and police targets.

² Information regarding rallies is limited to the nine attacks taking place after January 1, 1993 for the Germany sample due to limited public access to newspaper archives. The total number of attacks and number of attacks with state targets however include all attacks in Germany during the period covered.

³ Spain - no Pact uses only attacks occurring outside of the antiterrorist pact period during which governing and opposing parties agreed to adopt a unified front.

⁴ Total statistics use France, Germany, Spain, U.K., U.K - Ulster and the U.S.A. for total number of attacks and number of attacks with state targets. Statistics regarding percentages of attacks with rallies, however, use only attacks outside of the Spanish pact period to control for the rallying effect of the pact.

Finally, a logistic regression is used to model the impact of the repetition and magnitude of attacks on the likelihood of witnessing a rally in the five days following these attacks. We also control for the unifying effect of the Spanish pact and that of diplomatic and/or military crises. The type of group perpetrating the attack is also accounted for in this analysis.

The probability modeled is that of having a rally, i.e. that of having no open criticism towards the government within the five days following the attack. Dummy variables used in the model include *First 5 Attacks*, which takes value 1 if the attack is one of the first 5 under the current government, and 0 otherwise; *Pact (Spain)*, which takes value 1 if the attack took place in Spain during the period covered by the Spanish pact, i.e. between December 2000 and March 2004, and 0 otherwise; *Crisis*, which takes value 1 if the attack happened during a period of diplomatic crisis or military conflict for the country under attack, and 0 otherwise; and *Separatist*, a variable taking value 1 if the group claiming the attack is a separatist group, and 0 otherwise. Separatist groups encountered in our database include IRA, INLA, RIRA, CIRA, ETA, as well as Corsican, Basque (French part) and Breton separatist groups.

The magnitude effect is measured through a magnitude index which takes value 1 if there were no deaths involved in the attack (but at least 6 injured); value 2 if there were 1 or 2 deaths; and value 3 if there were 3 fatalities or more.

Table 5: Factors Affecting the Probability of Rally

| Variable | Parameter Estimate | Probability Change ¹ | p-value |
|------------------------|--------------------|---------------------------------|---------|
| Intercept | 0.17 | - | 0.863 |
| First 5 Attacks | 2.49 | 22.4% | 0.001 |
| Pact (Spain) | 3.39 | 23.0% | 0.002 |
| Magnitude ² | 0.77 | 7.4% | 0.129 |
| Crisis | 1.13 | 9.0% | 0.365 |
| Separatist | -1.72 | -17.4% | 0.004 |

Notes:

¹ Changes in the probability of a rally are marginal effects calculated from the regression estimates by measuring the average simulated impact of a change in the relevant variable across all observations.

² The magnitude variable takes value 1 if there were no deaths involved in the attack (but at least 6 injured); value 2 if there were 1 or 2 deaths; and value 3 if there were 3 fatalities or more. The marginal effect reported is the average of the change from the group without fatalities to the group with 1 or 2 deaths (8.6%) and the change from the group of 1 or 2 deaths to that of 3 deaths or more (6.1%).

Results confirm that the repetition of acts significantly increases the chances of open criticism towards the government. For events taking place after the initial five, probability of dissention are increased by roughly 22% compared to the first five events.

The magnitude of the attack is, as expected, a unifying factor. As attacks yield more victims, rallies are more likely to be observed. Although not statistically significant ($p=0.13$) the impact of an increase of 1 unit of the magnitude index (from injured only to 1 to 2 deaths or from 1 to 2 deaths to more than 3 fatalities) results in an approximate 7% increase in the probability of witnessing open criticism from opposing parties.

The unifying effect of the Spanish pact is important and statistically significant, as one would expect. Attacks taking place in Spain during the corresponding period result in probabilities of open criticism that are reduced by more than 23% compared to those observed during regular times.

Crises also increase the probability of witnessing a rally by roughly 9%, although not significantly from a statistical standpoint. Finally, the probability of rally is 17% less when the group claiming the attack is a separatist group. This is surprising since we would expect parties to unite against groups whose *raison d'être* is secession of part of the national territory.

Rallies in the United States

Rallying around the president in times of international crises is common and so is rallying around the president during a terrorist crisis. But a closer look at terrorist events on U.S. soil since 1990 indicates that prior to 9/11 none of the terrorist events recorded in the database elicited an explicit and open support on the part of the opposition party.¹³ The support was in each of the pre-9/11 terrorist event silent (i.e. absence of open criticism), far from the explicit demonstration of support that would characterize the immediate post 9/11 period. Even tragic and high human cost events such as the bombing of the Oklahoma federal building in 1995 (168 fatalities) or the first attack on the World Trade Center in 1993 (6 fatalities) did not elicit explicit support from spokespeople and leaders of the opposition party in Congress. There are however signs of explicit support between local authorities and federal authorities. This was particularly clear following the Oklahoma bombing.

Historically, the one type of terrorism that has rallied people around the flag has been the assassination of U.S. presidents. In the days that followed the assassination of Abraham Lincoln on April 14, 1865, *The New York Times* reported a massive rally throughout the elite and the population. The Civil War was not yet over and this must have reinforced the rally. Similar rallies were triggered following the assassination of William McKinley in September 1901 and that of JFK in Dallas on November 22, 1963. The latter event prompted Senator Barry Goldwater, leading contender for the Republican nomination (although not officially candidate yet), to declare:

“I have confidence in Lyndon Johnson (...) We must give this man our full cooperation and our prayers and work with him; and let’s see the kind of president he will be (...) President Johnson certainly has the training; he has the instincts; he has the ability. I think we must now, as a nation, unite behind him and help him all we can, and go the usual

¹³ Based on reported events in *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*.

course of helping a president, of being critical when it's needed and helpful when that's needed".¹⁴

A model of rally around the president if there ever was one. As we pointed out above, political elites in the U.S. seem to be particularly prone to rally when symbols of the State are targeted. It comes as no surprise that successful attempts on the president's life should trigger rallies. Interestingly, the most recent attempt on the life of a president (Ronald Reagan on March 1981) did not trigger a rally. There were expressions of concerns on the part of many congressmen but the near fatal incident gave first and foremost a new impulse to the debate on gun-control.

Far less likely to trigger rallies are bombings and destruction of public buildings. Prior to the bombing of the federal building in Oklahoma City, the two largest terrorist attacks on U.S. soil took place in Los Angeles in 1910 and New York in 1920. In the first instance, some 20 people died following the bombing of The Los Angeles Times building, an event that elicited no comments from politicians in Washington. The second incident, the bombing of the J.P. Morgan Bank building in Wall Street, resulted in the death of 34 people (and over 200 injured). This act, although largely covered by *The New York Times*, elicited no comments on the part of prominent federal politicians. On the contrary, Governor Cox (Democrat) and Senator Harding (Republican) who were both seeking the nomination for the coming presidential election not only ignored the terror act but carried on criticising one another. Thus not until the tragic events of 9/11 did the U.S. political elite (at least in Congress) display any strong and explicit support during terrorist crises, with the exception of attempts on the president's life.¹⁵ Of course, 9/11 was different both in terms of magnitude and origin of the perpetrators, and could profoundly alter the way U.S. political elites react to terrorism.

Rallies in the other four countries

Of the five countries included in this study, Spain is the one with the highest number of terrorist events, the highest percentage of reported events (less than 3% of terror acts were not reported by *El Pais*), and the lowest rallying rate. Even when including the period covered by the antiterrorist pact, whereby the PSOE (socialists) pledged to support the PP government (conservatives) in its fight against Basque terrorism, the overall rallying rate was just 79%. Part of it has to do with the fact that terrorism has become an electoral issue over which the main parties try to gain the upper hand.¹⁶

France has with Spain the lowest rallying rate. Although it has experienced less terror acts over the last 17 years than Spain or the United Kingdom, France has been

¹⁴ « Goldwater holds to course for 64 », *The New York Times*, November 24, 1963.

¹⁵ Terrorist attacks against U.S. interests and citizens abroad have not been taken into account in this study.

¹⁶ Recently, Mariano Rajoy, president of the Partido popular, severely criticized José Luis Zapatero, the socialist Prime minister, for his accommodating policy towards ETA. See *Le Monde*, March 11, 2007 and Latin Reporters.com, January 17, 2007. Municipal and regional elections will be held in Spain at the end of May 2007, and legislative elections in 2008.

targeted by a more diverse range of terror groups than her two European neighbours.¹⁷ The political elite has been especially prompt to rally when symbols of the state were targeted. It also rallied in 1995 when a wave of terrorist attacks perpetrated by Islamic fundamentalists hit Paris.¹⁸ These rallies are often characterized by an explicit and public support from the political elite (with the exception of radical parties such as the Front national) but also from representatives of trade unions and religious groups.¹⁹

Terrorist activities since 1990 have been less intense in Germany than in any of the other four countries included in this study. Most of the attacks were either racially motivated or perpetrated by people with no clear political cause (except for the Kurdish activists). Faced with low intensity terrorism with unclear messages, the German political elite has usually ignored those attacks. Interestingly, the only instance of open disunion following a terror act is found at the local level in the town of Lübeck where the mayor of the city was criticized by the local opposition party (CDU) for his failure to put an end to racially motivated terrorist activities in the city.

The United Kingdom has both the lowest percentage of reported events (less than 60%), and the highest rallying rate (close to 100%). If rallies are almost automatic, they are also mostly implicit (i.e. no public declaration of support). The fact that the opposition remains usually silent can be explained by the bipartisan approach to terrorism. In other words, the agreement of the main parties on the aims and methods to deal with terrorists (mostly Ulster related terrorism) ensures a constant support from the parliamentary opposition.

Conclusion

Rallying around the flag following terrorist attacks is frequent among the political elites of the five countries covered by this study though more so in some (Germany, United Kingdom and United States) than in others (France and Spain). Overall, the results show that the repetition of acts of terror is a strong factor affecting parties' responses to terrorist acts, as repeated attacks are more likely to prompt criticism. The magnitude of the attacks is also associated with a rallying effect as larger attacks are more likely to result in a unified front across parties.

The frequency of rallies does not mean that there is no criticism and disunion in between attacks, nor does it mean that each rally is characterised by explicit and complete support from the opposition. The rally triggered in the U.S. by the events of 9/11 is in this respect exceptional and should remind us that terrorist crises much like military and diplomatic crises can limit or even put on hold for an indeterminate period of time party politics. As with foreign policy crises, terrorism raises the possibility of political elites and parties exploiting the rally-round-the-flag phenomenon in electoral periods, as was

¹⁷ This list includes among others various Islamic fundamentalist groups, Palestinian activists, Corsican separatists, Basque separatists, etc.

¹⁸ The ninth and last attack did elicit criticism from the opposition.

¹⁹ See in particular *Libération*, July 27, 1995.

the case in Spain following the bombings of commuter trains in March 2004 just a few days before Election Day.

The results reported here are both limited in time (since 1990) and scope (five countries) but indicate at the very least a tendency among mainstream parties and elites to rally around the flag when facing terrorism. The limited number of cases of dissension between the government and the opposition makes it intrinsically difficult to obtain enough data to show statistical significance of impacting factors. However, given these limitations, the results presented above are surprisingly strong. The extension of this work to include more countries as well as extended case studies will be an important step in better understanding the factors that affect parties' reactions to terrorist acts.

References

Baum, Matthew. 2002. « Sex, Lies and War: How Soft News Brings Foreign Policy to the Inattentive Public ». *American Political Science Review* 96: 91-109

Baum, Matthew and Tim Groeling. 2004. « Crossing the Water's Edge: Elite Rhetoric, Media Coverage and the Rally-around-the-Flag Phenomenon, 1979-2003 ». Paper presented at the congress of the American Political Science Association, Chicago.

Berrebi, Claude and Esteban Klor. 2006. « On Terrorism and Electoral Outcome: Theory and Evidence from the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict ». *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 50: 899-925

Brody, Richard. 1991. *Assessing the President: the Media, Elite Opinion, and Public Support*. Stanford: Stanford University Press

Brody, Richard and C. R. Shapiro. 1989. « A Reconsideration of the Rally Phenomenon in Public Opinion ». In Long, S. *Political Behavior Annual*, Boulder: Westview Press

Chari, Raj. 2004. « The 2004 Spanish Election: Terrorism as a Catalyst for Change? ». *West European Politics* 27: 954-963

Entman, Robert M.. 2004. *Projections of Power: Framing News, Public Opinion, and U.S. Foreign Policy*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press

Hetherington, Marc and Michael Nelson. 2003. « Anatomy of a Rally Effect: George W. Bush and the War on Terrorism » *PSOnline*

Lee, Jong R..1977. « Rallying 'Round the Flag: Foreign Policy Events and Presidential Popularity ». *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 7: 252-256

MacKuen, Michael. 1983. « Political Drama, Economic Conditions, and the Dynamics of Presidential Popularity ». *American Journal of Political Science* 27: 165-192

Mathews, John. 1919. « Political Parties and the War ». *American Political Science Review* 13: 213-228

MIPT Terrorism Knowledge Base, <http://www.tkb.org>

Mueller, John. 1973. *War, Presidents and Public Opinion*. New York: John Wiley & Sons

Oneal, John and Anna Lillian Bryan. 1995. « The Rally 'Round the Flag Effect in U'S. Foreign Policy Crises, 1950-1985 ». *Political Behavior* 17: 379-401

Ostrom, C. W. and D. Simon. 1985. « Promise and Performance: A Dynamic Model of Presidential Popularity », *American Political Science Review* 79: 334-358

Polsby, Nelson. 1964. *Congress and the Presidency*. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall

Waltz, Kenneth (1967), « Electoral Punishment and Foreign Policy Crisis ». In Rosenau, James. *Domestic Sources of Foreign Policy*. New York: The Free Press