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[Europe](#)

How Terrorism Can Alter Elections

[The Interpreter](#)

By [MAX FISHER](#) APRIL 22, 2017



A French police officer at a demonstration on Saturday in Paris to support French security forces. Credit Emilio Morenatti/Associated Press

If Marine Le Pen, the leader of [France](#)'s far-right National Front, found herself hoping that Thursday's [terrorist attack in Paris](#) might bolster her prospects in Sunday's vote for president, then a substantial body of research suggests that those hopes could come true.

Terrorist attacks can shift support to right-wing parties by one or two percentage points, studies have found.

This could make the difference in the first round of France's presidential election, which polls suggest is nearly a tie among four candidates. The candidates who place first and second will face off in a second round of voting in May.

But some studies find that terrorism can create increased polarization, which could harm Ms. Le Pen's ability to pick off left-wing voters in the second round.

The research underscores that while the effect of terrorism on elections is profound, it is also complex.

A Shift to Right-Wing Parties

Terrorism is nearly alone in its power to amplify the actions of an individual to influence the behavior of millions.

By creating a fear of future attacks, terrorism affects even those who do not experience the violence firsthand. That fear leads people to give security a higher priority, to seek authority figures who will impose order and to re-evaluate who in society might pose a threat.

Researchers who seek to understand this effect have long looked to Israel. With its history of terrorism and its complex multiparty political system, the country is something of a laboratory for understanding the interplay of attacks and elections.

Claude Berrebi of the RAND Corporation and Esteban F. Klor of Hebrew University found, [in a 2008 study](#), that when an area suffered a terrorist attack in the three months before an election, voters in that area shifted toward right-wing parties by an average of 1.35 percentage points.

The effect was messier in parts of the country that did not experience the attack. Areas where voters already leaned right tended to increase support for right-wing parties. But left-leaning areas reduced their support for right-wing parties.

Even if those effects cancel out in the short term, in the long term they can deepen political polarization, making politics more extreme.

When Terrorism Decides Elections

In Israel, the study estimated, terrorist attacks swung the 1988 and 1996 elections to the right-wing Likud Party, which won both by small margins.

But Israel is small and endured many attacks in those years, making the effects of terrorism pronounced. It's hard to say whether these effects could decide France's elections.

Ten million voters live in the areas defined as urban Paris; 1.35 percent of those voters could make the difference. But 56 million live outside of the city.

If those voters become more polarized by Thursday's attack, this could help Ms. Le Pen in the first round by galvanizing right-wing voters. But polarization could hurt her in the second round, when she would need to draw on left-wing supporters to win.

A [later study of Israeli elections](#), by Anna Getmansky of the Interdisciplinary Center Herzliya and Thomas Zeitzoff of American University, found even more reason to suspect that the terror attacks could help Ms. Le Pen.

Areas in Israel that were within range of rocket attacks launched from Gaza-based terror groups showed a 2 to 6 percentage point increase in vote share to right-wing parties, the authors found, controlling for other factors.

The gain mostly went to Israel's nationalist right-wing parties, rather than religious or sectarian parties — an effect that also bodes well for Ms. Le Pen, who has run as a nationalist. The other right-wing candidate who is competitive in Sunday's race, the center-right François Fillon, has run as more of a pro-business social conservative.

But the study's most important finding may be that communities did not need to experience a rocket attack to shift rightward. The mere knowledge that rockets could reach them was enough.

Still, it is hard to say how the terrorist attack will affect the election in present-day France.

Unlike Israel, the country has had relatively few attacks. Still, it has experienced them as national traumas. Will voters outside Paris perceive Thursday's attack as something local to Paris, and deepen in their pre-existing views? Or will they perceive the attack as implying that they, too, are at risk, like the rocket attacks in southern Israel that led voters throughout the area to shift to the right?

An Attack on Identity

There is another, subtler way that terrorism can alter politics: by reshaping how people view themselves and the rest of society.

Exposure to terrorism tends to increase support for extreme politics in a number of ways, according to [a 2015 study](#) led by Daphna Canetti-Nisim, a political psychologist at the University of Maryland.

For one, it increases hostility toward minorities. While this effect is strongest when people associate that minority with the attack, it can play out in other ways. People who endure terrorism "feel threatened and vulnerable," the study found.

This "psychological distress" makes them more likely to retreat to familiar in-groups and view outsiders as threats. This supports Ms. Le Pen's narrative of a civilizational conflict along demographic lines.

Terrorism can also increase "popular support for nondemocratic regulations and practices," particularly those targeting minorities, the study finds. Ms. Le Pen has promised to impose restrictions on Muslims and immigrants that critics have called undemocratic or even authoritarian.

The French Variable

Still, it is unclear how these dynamics will play out in France's peculiar system, which forces voters to estimate how their vote in the first round will influence the second.

This could amplify some effects of terrorism or minimize others — underscoring the difficulty of isolating a single variable in something as complex as how people decide to vote.

The Interpreter is a column by [Max Fisher](#) and [Amanda Taub](#) exploring the ideas and context behind major world events. Follow them on Twitter [@Max_Fisher](#) and [@amandataub](#).

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