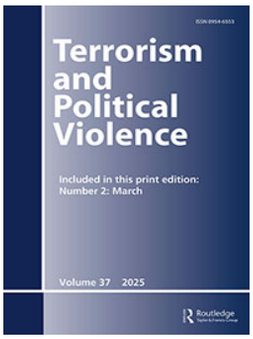

Terrorism and Political Violence

Routledge Taylor & Francis Group

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/ftpv20

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To cite this article: Jon Kåre Skiple, Jacob Sohlberg, Luke Field & Hulda Thórisdóttir (08 Jan 2025): Public Perceptions of What Qualifies as Terrorism Across Similar Countries with Diverse Terrorism Experiences, Terrorism and Political Violence, DOI: 10.1080/09546553.2024.2433644

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2024.2433644

TERRORISM AND POLITICAL VIOLENCE
https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2024.2433644

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Public Perceptions of What Qualifies as Terrorism Across Similar Countries with Diverse Terrorism Experiences

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ABSTRACT

Norway, Sweden and Iceland are neighboring countries that have diverse experiences with terrorism. A right-wing extremist used explosives and guns to kill scores of Norwegians and an Islamic fundamentalist used a truck as a weapon to kill Swedes. Meanwhile, Icelanders have not experienced terrorism at all. What role, if any, do these experiences have in what the public defines as terrorism? Drawing on theories that emphasize similarities in media environments and culture between the countries, we examine the pre-registered hypotheses that certain features of political violence lead to shared definitions of terrorism. Results from survey experiments show a broad Nordic terrorism consensus, demonstrating the importance of violence, a high number of casualties, right-wing extremism and incidents motivated by policy change and hatred. Our findings have practical implications for predicting when societies will likely perceive violent incidents as terrorism and thus whether they will be receptive to the label assigned by media or authorities.

KEYWORDS

Terrorism; political violence; public opinion; Nordic countries

Introduction

Do citizens across countries with different terrorism experiences have similar or different views of what qualifies as an act of terrorism? Many countries have had recent experiences with political violence, yet the characteristics of the violence vary widely between them in terms of perpetrator ideology, violent tactics, the number of casualties and so on. For instance, the deadliest attack in Norway was carried out in 2011 by a far-right extremist who killed 77 people, most of them with a semi-automatic rifle, while the deadliest terrorist attack in Sweden was conducted in 2017 by an Islamic fundamentalist who used a truck to kill five people. It is possible that such disparate domestic experiences linger in the minds of the public. If so, new violence that shares the characteristics of previous violence might be interpreted as more serious, perhaps as an act of terrorism, than if the violence is of a different kind.

However, a more likely possibility is that the country-specific history with political violence fades in comparison with the international environment of political violence. Large scale terrorist attacks are global media events that are covered beyond national borders.[1] For instance, the September 2001 attacks in the U.S. and the January 2015 Paris attacks were big news abroad for a long time.[2] In fact, this type of political violence can alter public opinion in other countries, with stronger effects in countries with greater proximity.[3] From this perspective, perceptions of what qualifies as terrorism would be relatively uniform across countries, at least within a region.

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Supplemental data for this article can be accessed online at https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2024.2433644

Analyzing public perceptions of what qualifies as terrorism across countries with diverse terrorism experiences is important to understand and anticipate how societies react to violent events. Terrorism moves public opinion in ways that have profound political and social consequences. It influences support for political leaders and institutions,[4] outcomes in elections and referendums,[5] support for political parties,[6] and attitudes towards out-groups and immigrants.[7] Moreover, terrorism is regularly used to justify actions with severe legal and political consequences.[8] Yet, terrorism is a famously contested concept,[9] and framing violence as 'terrorism' may benefit political actors such as incumbents, because they gain support from the 'rally round the flag' effect.[10]

To analyze public perceptions of what qualifies as an act of terrorism across countries, we fielded a conjoint experiment with probability-based samples in three Nordic countries with diverse terrorism experiences: Norway, Sweden, and Iceland. While Norwegians and Swedes experienced different types of terrorism, Icelanders have never experienced lethal terrorism. Still, our pre-registered hypotheses assume that in spite of differences between the countries in the level and type of experienced terrorism, their citizens'perceptions of what qualifies as terrorism are shaped by the same factors.[11] Our comparative analysis builds on and complements single-country studies showing that American citizens' perceptions of what qualifies as terrorism are influenced by how violent incidents are framed,[12] and comparative research showing that citizens in the U.S., U.K. and Israel have uniform perceptions of what qualifies as *cyberterrorism*.[13]

We find support for a Nordic terrorism consensus in a survey experiment that builds on the design of Huff and Kertzer.[14] Respondents were presented with a hypothetical scenario describing an incident taking place in their home country. Each scenario was made up of six randomly-varied attributes: tactic, number of casualties, target, actor type, social category of the perpetrator and perpetrator motivation. After reading the incident description, respondents were asked whether they perceived the incident as an act of terrorism or not. The results show that Nordic citizens' ideas of what constitutes terrorism are largely shaped by the same incident characteristics, and demonstrate the importance of violence, high number of casualties, right-wing extremism, and perpetrator motivation.

In general, we find little evidence to suggest that country-specific experiences have a particular sway on how people define terrorism. For instance, even though neither Sweden nor Iceland have had right-wing terrorist attacks on anything like the same scale as Norway, survey participants in all three countries responded similarly—and most strongly—when the imagined perpetrator in our vignette was assigned a right-wing extremist ideology. Overall, our main results therefore suggest that large-scale terrorism contributes to similar ideas of what constitutes terrorism across countries in the same region. However, we do find evidence that is consistent with the idea that previous experiences matter: Norwegians are more likely than both Swedes and Icelanders to generally classify violence as terrorism. Therefore, one interpretation of our results is that previous large-scale attacks make citizens more sensitive to many types of violence, not just the type they were exposed to.

When compared to the U.S. literature, our findings point to a common core in how western citizens understand terrorism, but also suggest differences between Nordic and U.S. citizens with regard to the types of perpetrators that are most strongly associated with acts of terrorism. Whereas Americans most strongly associate terrorism with Muslim perpetrators,[15] incidents perpetrated by right-wing extremists are most likely to be classified as acts of terrorism across the Nordic countries. This difference between Nordic and U.S. citizens points to personal or cultural proximity as a scope condition for uniform perceptions regarding perpetrators.[16]

These findings have important implications for understanding how the public reacts to messaging by political elites and news media in the aftermath of violent events. Our results indicate that large scale terrorism in one country can make citizens of other culturally proximate countries more susceptible to particular ways of framing violence. For instance, a plausible consequence of the 22/7 attack in Norway is that Icelanders are more ready to perceive violence framed as right-wing extremism as an act of terrorism. Our results also suggest that there is no premium on past country-experiences. Citizens are not particularly swayed by incidents that are similar to past experiences in

their home country. However, we should expect that citizens who have experienced large-scale terrorism in their country are more easily convinced that borderline cases are acts of terrorism.

Theory

How citizens across countries form similar perceptions of what qualifies as terrorism

In most of the research on public opinion and terrorism the focus is on what happens *after* an event has been unequivocally defined as terrorism, yet our point of departure is what takes place *before*, at the definition phase. Realizing the importance of this issue, scholars have recently turned their attention to what the public perceives as acts of terrorism, and presented American citizens with details of a real violent attack or hypothetical incidents.[17] Afterwards, respondents were asked whether or not they perceived these events as acts of terrorism. Both types of studies show that this perception is shaped by the framing of the incident and the existing attitudes of the respondent, thereby demonstrating how news media and political elites can shape public opinion by framing violent incidents in certain ways.

We add to this US-centric literature by shifting attention to how citizens across Nordic countries with different terrorism experiences define terrorism. While studies examine the importance of the geographical location of terrorist attacks on public reactions,[18] there has been little attention paid to cross-country perceptions of what qualifies as an act of terrorism. A notable exception is Shandler, Kostyuk, and Oppenheimer, who use a survey experiment and find largely uniform public perceptions of what constitute cyberterrorism among citizens in the U.S., U.K. and Israel.[19] Our research on conventional terrorism is complementary to Shandler et al.[20] Citizens are likely to experience conventional terrorism differently than cyberterrorism, with the former typically being more physically threatening to civilians than the latter. In what follows, we combine insights from literature on news media coverage of terrorism and literature on the effects of proximity to terrorist attacks to generate expectations about what citizens in countries with different experiences of political violence will perceive as terrorism.

How do citizens form perceptions of whether violent incidents are acts of terrorism or not? Citizens learn about terrorism in three main ways: first-hand experience, media coverage and interpersonal communication. Since very few people have first-hand experience with terrorism, it is reasonable to assume that most citizens learn about terrorism from media coverage (including social media), which, in turn, also informs interpersonal communication. We therefore expect that citizens' perceptions of what qualifies as terrorism are informed and shaped by the content and quantity of news media coverage of violence.

The amount of people who are affected by the content and quantity, in turn, is influenced by the scope of news media coverage. Large-scale terrorist attacks receive global media attention and have the potential to shape public opinion across a wide range of countries. Not only Americans, but many millions of people worldwide saw images of planes crashing into the World Trade Center and the towers falling down on 9/11.[21] Similarly, the Charlie Hebdo shooting in Paris (January 2015) made the front page of newspapers worldwide.[22] Thus, when a major terrorist attack takes place it is usually covered extensively abroad, suggesting that these salient incidents inform both domestic and foreign audiences.

The expectation that political violence abroad has the potential to shape public opinion at home is supported by several studies. Worry about terrorism at home is affected by terrorist activities abroad.[23] Terrorism abroad also triggers more negative attitudes towards migration[24] and leads to more restrictive migration policies, with stronger effects in neighboring countries.[25]

Assuming that most citizens learn about terrorism from media coverage, we expect that new violent incidents resembling past terrorist incidents are more likely to be classified as acts of terrorism. Yet, not all past incidents of political violence add to citizens' perceptions of what qualifies as terrorism.

News media are selective in labelling violent incidents as terrorism,[26] some incidents are covered more extensively than others,[27] and people have limited memory capacities.[28] Citizens are therefore likely to draw on a relatively limited and skewed (relative to the population of terrorist attacks) sample of terrorist incidents when looking for terrorism cues. The ways in which news media cover political violence and terrorism suggest that citizens across culturally similar countries have uniform ideas of what constitutes terrorism, even if they have different country-experiences with terrorism.

There are also reasons to expect that domestic experiences are particularly influential in influencing citizens ideas of what qualifies as an act of terrorism. Citizens may attach greater weight to incidents taking place at home than incidents taking place abroad because they generate stronger emotional reactions. Memories formed during emotional arousal are also stronger and more likely to be remembered.[29] If this is the case, we should observe that citizens are more likely to perceive incidents as acts of terrorism when they remind them of past domestic events.

However, the lingering effects of terrorism are unlikely to stop at national borders. While some studies have shown that an individual's physical proximity to terrorist incidents has a positive relationship with fear, stress and the sense of vulnerability,[30] other studies find similar effects among individuals living in the same country who are exposed to terrorism only through media coverage.[31] The latter suggests that personal or cultural proximity, the affinity one feels with the victims of the attack, also matters for citizens' reactions to terrorist attacks.[32] Therefore, we should we expect that citizens across geographical and culturally similar countries are influenced by large-scale terrorism in similar ways.

Cases

Norway, Sweden and Iceland provide compelling cases to explore citizens' ideas of what constitutes terrorism across countries with diverse terrorism experiences. In Sweden, a terrorist attack took place on April 7, 2017, when a supporter of the Islamic State used a stolen truck to ram into people on a busy pedestrian street in Stockholm. Five people were killed and 15 injured. In Norway, a terrorist attack took place on July 22, 2011, when a right-wing extremist first detonated a bomb in central Oslo, killing eight people and destroying several government buildings, before shooting and killing 69 people at the Labour Party's youth wing summer camp on the island of Utøya. Table 1 summarizes key incident characteristics of the two attacks.

We emphasize these two large scale events because they received extensive media coverage and affected public opinion.[33] However, it is relevant to consider how less consequential events of political violence and information in the overall threat environment influence public perceptions. In Sweden, the level of right-wing terrorism has traditionally been considerably higher than in Norway,[34] which could influence their views on whether events performed by right-wing perpetrators are acts of terrorism compared to Norwegians. However, as we document in more detail in Section 1 in the SI, both countries have experienced failed attacks and attempts by Islamic fundamentalists as well. In stark contrast, Iceland has had no attempted acts of terrorism nor have any natural born citizens or immigrants been known to have ties to local or international right-wing extremist or Islamic fundamentalist groups.

Table 1. Country experience with terrorism

Experience	Norway	Sweden	Iceland
Major terrorist event	Yes	Yes	No
Date	July 22, 2011	April 7, 2017	—
Fatalities	77	5	0
Injured	66	15	0
Perpetrator	Individual	Individual	—
Perpetrator ideology	Right-wing extremist	Islamist extremist	—
Violent tactic	Bombing, shooting	Car	—
Motivation	Political, hatred	Political, hatred	—

Iceland therefore offers a key point of comparison. It is reasonable to assume that Icelandic citizens' perceptions of what qualifies as terrorism are mainly informed by news coverage of incidents taking place abroad.

Anti-terrorism policies in all three countries are influenced both by international developments and more local or regional events. In Sweden for example, in the decade after 9/11, policies focused on preventing and mitigating attacks from organized international terrorism such as Al-Qaeda whereas around the time of data collection, they were increasingly directed at stopping lone-wolf attackers. The focus has been on addressing Islamist extremism,[35] but policy-related documents have also emphasized the threat from right-wing extremism and left-wing extremism, and suggested techniques to address the threats, including more collaboration between authorities.[36] Norwegian anti-terrorist policies have also mainly been targeted at preventing and mitigating attacks from organized international terrorist organizations such as Al-Qaeda and IS. In more recent years, the Norwegian Police Security Service's yearly assessment of threats against Norway have in addition to radical Muslim groups, pointed to right-wing extremists as the most important risk groups.[37] In Iceland, the terrorism threat assessment issued by the National Commissioners Office in 2017 focused almost exclusively on Islamic fundamentalists coming from abroad. The threat was deemed to be substantially lower than in Sweden, Norway or Denmark (although similar to Finland) but should not be disregarded. More recent threat assessments have considered ideologically motivated lone-wolf attacks to be the most probable threat.[38]

Despite these country-differences, our expectation is that perceptions of what is terrorism are uniform across the three countries. The Nordic countries (which also include Denmark and Finland) are regarded as a group of countries that are fairly similar in their cultural and normative values, as well as being linked by geographical factors and language family.[39] The countries are also relatively similar on other macro and micro-level variables that have been shown to impact public opinion on terrorism,[40] such as level of democracy and citizens' social and institutional trust.[41] Within this shared cultural and political frame we expect ' ... broad consensus about how terrorist events should be interpreted,'[42] and thus uniform perceptions of what is terrorism.

Empirical expectations

But what are the specific factors that make violence pass the threshold to be perceived as terrorism? To guide our hypotheses, our starting point is that the Nordic countries belong to a group of societies that are similar on a range of factors that set them apart from the rest of the world: they are Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich and Democratic (WEIRD).[43] Within this group of countries, major news stories, like terrorism attacks, tend to be spread and framed in similar ways.[44] Thus, analogous to the argument that the Nordic countries have similar perceptions of terrorism, previous research on perceptions of what qualifies as terrorism in this group of societies informs our predictions.

Our hypotheses are grounded in Huff and Kertzer's typology for classifying terrorism.[45] The typology include information about incidents on key dimensions: the type of violence, the number of casualties, the target and location, and information on the perpetrator(s) and the motivation. Within these broad characteristics there is room for incident attributes that capture the more abstract ideas citizens have about terrorism, such as the distinction between civilian and non-civilian targets that is emphasized in formal definitions, as well as more contentious elements that typically emerge in public debates following violent incidents, such as the perpetrator's social identity. Our pre-registered hypotheses are formulated based on findings from the U.S. and provide a broad test of how similar perceptions are between the Nordic countries and the U.S. context. At the more granular attribute level, we also discuss how region- and country-specific experiences possibly influence perceptions. These are not pre-registered and are exploratory in nature. We discuss each incident dimension in turn.

Violent tactics

Violence is central to terrorism and can occur in many different forms.[46] Huff and Kertzer show that violent tactics are integral for understanding American citizens' perception of terrorism: Incidents using violent tactics, including hostage takings, shootings and bombings, are more likely to be classified as terrorism than non-violent protest incidents.[47] We expect that violence is also central to Nordic citizens' ideas of what constitute terrorism:

H1: Violent tactics are more likely to be classified as terrorism than non-violent tactics.

Within the different types of violent tactics that can be employed, certain types of tactics may be more strongly associated with terrorism, possibly reflecting previous experience with violence. For instance, Americans are more likely to classify bombings as terrorism than shootings,[48] which could be related to their experience with mass shootings. In the Nordic context there is not a similar history with mass shootings and both the bombing and shooting attributes resonate with the Norwegian terrorist attack.

Casualties

Even though most terrorism incidents do not lead to casualties,[49] coverage of terrorism incidents increase with the number of casualties,[50] and the most devastating and shocking terrorism incidents are high casualty incidents. Huff and Kertzer finds that Americans are more likely to classify incidents as acts of terrorism when they are exposed to a description of either one, two and ten casualties, compared to none.[51] We expect that Nordic citizens associate terrorism with casualties and in particular higher-casualty incidents:

H2: The higher the number of casualties, the more likely the incident is to be classified as terrorism.

Target

In line with principle of *jus in bello* there is a crucial distinction between civilian and non-civilian targets, whereby ' . . . attacks upon the government or state apparatus might be undesirable, but they are nonetheless legitimate in a way that targeting civilians is not.'[52] At the same time, large-scale terrorist attacks such as the 22/7-attack in Norway have targeted the state apparatus explicitly and incidents targeting government increase media coverage of terrorism incidents.[53] Indeed, Huff and Kertzer find that Americans do not differentiate between different types of targets when considering whether an incident is an act of terrorism.[54] We expect the same pattern to emerge among citizens in the Nordic countries:

H3: The target of incidents is not linked to classification of incidents as terrorism.[55]

Actor type

Huff and Kertzer find that American citizens are more likely to perceive an incident as an act of terrorism when it is carried out by a collective (a 'group' or an 'organization,' in their experiment) than by an individual perpetrator.[56] By contrast, when an incident is perpetrated by an individual with a history with mental health issues, American citizens are less likely to classify the incident an act of terrorism. Faced with both Norwegian and Swedish citizens' experiences with lone wolf terrorism, the distinction between collectives and individual perpetrators may be less pronounced among Nordic citizens. Still, both the Swedish and Norwegian attacks are examples of lone wolf terrorists ' . . . acting

from rhetoric embedded in larger social movements,'[57] possibly blurring the distinction between lone wolf terrorists and terrorist organizations.

H4: Incidents performed by collectives are more likely to be classified as terrorism than incidents performed by individuals.

One particular important element of the Norwegian attack is the considerable scrutiny devoted to the perpetrator's mental health. Whereas earlier research has highlighted the negative relationship between mental illness and citizens' willingness to perceive incidents as acts of terrorism, the Norwegian public believes that the 22/7 attack were 'the act of a crazy person and that he was at the same time motivated by right-wing extremism.'[58] We might therefore expect that Norwegians are open to the idea that individuals with a history of mental illness can carry out acts of terrorism.

Perpetrator identity

Numerous studies have shown that news media are more likely to adopt a terrorism-frame when perpetrators are identified as Muslim compared to when perpetrators are identified as white,[59] and that terrorist attacks also receive more coverage when they are perpetrated by Muslims.[60] Consistent with these patterns, Huff and Kertzer finds that Americans are most likely to classify violent incidents as acts of terrorism when incident descriptions identify the perpetrator as Muslim, compared to an incident description providing no information on the social categorization of the actor.[61] Yet, they also find positive effects of left-wing and right-wing actors. These findings therefore suggest a fairly general effect of different types of perpetrator identities. Faced with Nordic citizens' experiences with different types of perpetrators, we expect that they are more likely to classify incidents as terrorism when they are exposed to various perpetrator identities:

H5: Incidents carried out by actors with an identified social category are more likely to be classified as terrorism compared to incidents carried out by non-identified actors.

Yet, given the scale of the attack in Norway, there is a possibility that Nordic citizens associate terrorism most strongly with right-wing extremism. Moreover, if individuals are primed by their country-specific experiences, we would expect that Norwegians are more strongly influenced by a right-wing extremist perpetrator than Swedes and Icelanders. If, on the other hand, large scale terrorist events contribute to shared definitions, we should not observe any differences between the countries. A similar argument can be made for Muslim perpetrators among the Swedish public.

Motivation

Whereas formal definitions emphasize the political goals of terrorism, American citizens are as likely to classify an incident as an act of terrorism when it is described as motivated by hatred as they are when it is described as motivated by policy change (compared to incidents with no clear motivation).[62] Both the Norwegian and Swedish perpetrators explicitly expressed political goals, yet their shocking and devastating actions are also likely to be associated with hatred towards their targets.

H6: Incidents motivated by policy goals and hatred are more likely to be classified as terrorism than incidents with no clear motivation.[63]

Data, survey design and estimation

Our survey data are generated through three probability-based survey panels that target representative samples of their respective populations: the Norwegian Citizen Panel (NCP) at the University of Bergen, the internet panel operated by the Social Science Research Institute at the University of Iceland (SSRI), and the Swedish Citizen Panel (SCP) at the University of Gothenburg. The Norwegian part was fielded from May 21, 2019 to June 10, 2019, the Icelandic from September 27, 2019 to November 5, 2019, and the Swedish from December 11, 2019 to January 15, 2020. In total, the three surveys consist of 6,013 respondents (NCP = 1,360 respondents, SSRI = 3,360 respondents, SCP = 1,293 respondents).

Descriptive statistics supplied in Table 1 in the SI show that the distribution of political preferences measured on a left-right scale in the three countries is relatively similar, while the Norwegian sample has a younger age profile than the other two. The samples differ in their education profile: the proportion of Icelandic respondents in the higher education category is considerably higher than the Norwegian and Swedish samples. In the Norwegian sample, respondents with higher education were a slight majority over those who had left education after second level, while the proportions of the Swedish sample were the reverse.[64]

To examine the effect of incident attributes on classification of the incident as terrorism, we use a ratings-based conjoint survey experiment. Conjoint experiments are designed for studying multidimensional choices.[65] They are therefore ideal for studying how citizens' different experiences with political violence affect what they perceive as terrorism, since experiences and violent incidents typically vary along multiple dimensions.

We build on Huff and Kertzer's survey instrument.[66] First, we randomly vary the incident tactic: protest (reference category), sabotage, hostage taking, shooting, bombing. Second, we randomly vary the severity of casualties: none (reference category), one, two or ten casualties. Third, we randomly vary the target of the incident: military facility (reference category), police station, school, church, mosque, synagogue. Fourth, we vary the location of the incident conditional on the survey country such that all respondents are presented with a domestic incident: Norwegian respondents are exposed to an incident in Norway, Swedish respondents are exposed to an incident in Sweden, and Icelandic respondents are exposed to an incident in Iceland. Fifth, we randomly vary the actor description: none (reference category), Christian, Muslim, left-wing extremist, right-wing extremist. Sixth, we randomly vary actor type: individual (reference category), individual with unsound mind, group, organization. Seven, we randomly vary actor motivation: there was no clear motivation for the incident (reference category), the motivation for the incident came from hatred towards the target, the incident was carried out with the aim of changing government policy. The following paragraph provides an example vignette.

> The incident relates to a bombing occurring at military facility in Norway. There was one person killed in the bombing. The bombing was carried out by a Christian organization. News reports suggest that there was no clear motivation for the incident.

Respondents are then asked to classify the incident. The question reads: Would you classify this incident as an act of terrorism? Respondents' perceptions are measured on a binary scale: Yes, this is terrorism; No, this is not terrorism.

Our design uses similar reference categories to Huff and Kertzer's, with the exception of the motivation dimension. Yet, because our design differs from Huff and Kertzer in some respects, a direct comparison of the effect of specific incident attributes is not possible.[67]

To test our hypotheses on citizens' perceptions of what qualifies as acts of terrorism, we estimate the average marginal component effects (AMCE) for each country individually. AMCEs measure how much a given value of a conjoint profile feature increases, or decreases, respondents'support for the overall profile relative to a baseline, averaging across all respondents and other features.[68] The AMCEs thus offer a clear causal interpretation about the effect of incident attributes.

Combining a conjoint design with AMCE we can test the causal effect of multiple features simultaneously. As the number of hypotheses increases, however, so does the probability of false-positive findings.[69] For each country, our design involves six dimensions with 27 attributes, which require 21 comparisons excluding a reference category in each dimension. With a conventional significance level of .05, the probability that at least one of multiple test rejects a true null hypothesis, the familywise error rate (FWER), is .659.[70] To correct for multiple hypothesis testing we follow Liu and Shiraito's suggestions and adjust our confirmatory hypothesis using the Bonferroni correction method (BC),[71] which adjusts the uncertainty of the estimates based on the number of tests carried out.[72]

In addition to AMCEs, we report and compare (differences in) marginal means (MMs) across the three countries to explore the possible relationship between country-specific experiences and citizens' perceptions. The MMs allow us to directly compare the probability that incident attributes (e.g., right-wing extremism) are classified as acts of terrorism across the three countries. The MMs also offer transparency with regard to differences between the three countries in the attributes that are used as reference groups in the estimation of AMCEs.[73] Because our experiment includes both incident attributes that resonate with citizens' country-specific experiences and attributes that do not, we can assess whether potential differences in effects and levels between countries are consistent with country-specific experiences, or follow a different pattern. To directly compare the levels at which incidents with different attributes are classified as acts of terrorism, we rely on differences in MMs between countries, shown in Section 4.4 in the SI.

Results

What qualifies as an act of terrorism in the eyes of Nordic citizens

Figure 1 shows AMCEs for each attribute along the six different incident dimensions for each country. The AMCEs depict the change in probability that an incident attribute is classified as an act of terrorism compared to the reference category. Point estimates further to the right indicate a greater probability that an incident will be classified as terrorism. Grey point estimates and confidence intervals show the BC corrected estimates for those attributes where uncorrected and BC estimates differ in terms of statistical significance. Tables that complement the uncorrected estimates in Figure 1 are reported in Section 4.1 in the SI.[74]

Starting with the tactic dimension, we find support in all three countries for our expectation that incidents where violent tactics are employed are more likely to be classified as acts of terrorism than a non-violent tactic (**H1**). Compared to protest, the AMCEs show that respondents exposed to sabotage, hostage taking, shooting or bombing incidents are significantly more likely to classify such incidents as acts of terrorism. Icelanders are particularly swayed by bombing incidents. Not only are Icelanders 42 percentage points more likely to classify bombings as acts of terrorism than protests, they are also significantly more likely to classify bombings as acts of terrorism than other violent tactics. By contrast, Norwegians and Swedes do not differentiate as much between different types of violent tactics, including the shooting and bombing attribute. Overall, these results show that violence is central to Nordic citizens' ideas of what qualifies as an act of terrorism, yet Icelanders differentiate more between different violent tactics than Norwegians and Swedes.

We find only mixed support for our expectation that incidents with higher numbers of casualties are more likely to be classified as terrorism (**H2**). On the one hand, the results show that when Nordic citizens are exposed to a higher-casualty incident they are more likely to classify it as an act of terrorism. Compared to an incident with no casualties, the AMCEs show that citizens in all three countries are 19–23 percentage points more likely to perceive incidents as acts of terrorism when they are exposed to ten casualties. On the other hand, the relationship between lower casualty incidents and terrorism is less clear among Nordic citizens. In fact, among Icelanders, incidents with one casualty are 10 percentage points (CI: −0.14 to −0.06) less likely to classify incidents with one casualty as acts of

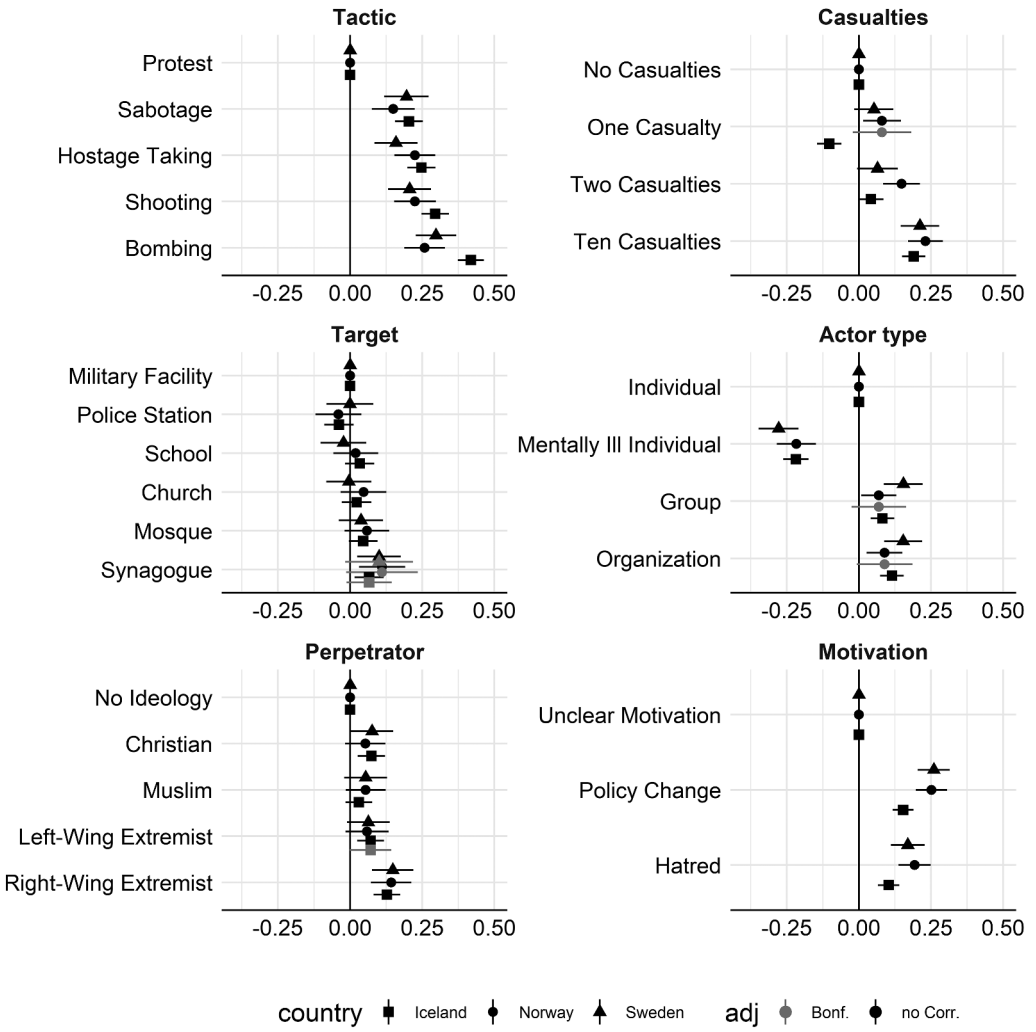

Figure 1. Effect of attributes on classifying incidents as terrorism conditional on country. N Norway = 1350, N Sweden = 1259, N Iceland = 3304.

terrorism than an incident without casualties. Only among Norwegians do we observe a statistically significant higher likelihood that one and two casualties are classified as acts of terrorism compared to no casualties. With BC the effect of one casualty among Norwegians is not significantly different from zero.

We find support for our expectation that the targets of incidents are not linked to classification of incidents as acts of terrorism (**H3**). The AMCEs in all three countries show that citizens are not more likely to classify incidents as acts of terrorism when a police station, a school, a church or a mosque is targeted compared to an incident targeting a military facility. Breaking from this overall pattern, citizens in all three countries are more likely to classify an incident targeting a synagogue an act of terrorism, compared to a military facility. Yet, the BC estimates in all three countries show insignificant results. These results therefore suggest that Nordic citizens, similar to their American counterparts, do not apply a consistent distinction between non-civilian and civilian targets, and do not associate terrorism with specific religious minorities.

We find support for our expectation that incidents performed by collectives are more likely to be classified as terrorism than incidents performed by individuals (**H4**) among Swedes and Icelanders,

while the evidence is less clear among Norwegians. The effect of organization and group is most pronounced among Swedes, who are 15 percentage points more likely to classify these types of incident as acts of terrorism, compared to an incident carried out by an individual perpetrator. Among Norwegians, the uncorrected effect of group and organization is positive and statistically significant from zero, but the BC estimates for both attributes overlap zero. Across the three countries, citizens are 22–28 percentage points less likely to classify incidents as acts of terrorism when the incident is carried out by an individual with mental health issues.

Moving on to the perpetrator dimension, we find little support for our general expectation that incidents carried out by actors with an identified social category are more likely to be classified as terrorism compared to incidents carried out by non-identified actors (No Ideology) (**H5**). Among Norwegians and Swedes, descriptions that identify the perpetrator(s) as Christian, Muslim or left-wing extremist are not more likely to be classified as acts of terrorism than descriptions that do not identify the perpetrator identity. Among Icelanders, the uncorrected estimates for both the Christian and the left-wing extremist attribute is positive and significantly different from zero, yet the BC left-wing extremist attribute overlaps zero. The AMCEs show that only incidents perpetrated by right-wing extremists are significantly more likely to be classified as acts of terrorism (compared to perpetrators without a defined ideology) in all three countries. The probability that an incident is classified as an act of terrorism increases by 13–15 percentage points in the three countries when the perpetrator is identified as a right-wing extremist. While it is true that the word 'extremist' may have primed respondents towards classifying right-wing perpetrated incidents as acts of terrorism, the same is true for the left-wing perpetrator attribute. The findings therefore highlight the shared perception that right-wing extremism is associated with terrorism, indicating that the right-wing perpetrated attack in Norway lingers in all three countries.

Finally, we find support in all three countries for our expectation that the motivation behind the incident matters for citizens' perceptions of whether the incident is an act of terrorism or not (**H6**). In all three countries, incidents that are motivated by hatred or policy change are more likely to be classified as an act of terrorism than incidents carried out with no clear motivation. The effect of hatred and policy change is particularly pronounced among Norwegian and Swedish citizens, and suggests that media or political authorities could increase the likelihood of an incident being perceived as an act of terrorism in the range of 11 to 32 percentage points by describing the perpetrators' motivation in these two countries.

Country-specific experiences and perceptions of what is terrorism

How do these perceptions square with country-specific experiences? Figure 2 plots marginal means (MM) for each country for each incident attribute along the six different incident dimensions. The MMs depict the probability that an incident with a particular attribute is classified as an act of terrorism. Table 2 summarizes differences in MMs across the three countries. Incident attributes that resonate with country-specific experiences are marked in bold.

The MMs show that there are considerable differences between Norwegians and Icelanders in the probability that similar attributes lead to the incident being classified as an act of terrorism, and to a lesser extent between Swedes and Icelanders. Yet there is little support for the notion that country-specific experiences have a particular sway on what citizens classify as acts of terrorism. Looking at the bold incident attributes in Table 2, differences between the countries concern both attributes that resonate with experienced violence and attributes that do not. The direction is positive for all differences in MMs, i.e. Norwegians are more likely to classify these incident attributes as acts of terrorism than Swedes, and so on. When differences in MMs are corrected for multiplicity (see Figure S11 in the SI) there are fewer significant differences between the countries.

Some differences in Figure 2 stand out. First, Icelanders are considerably less likely to classify protests (the reference group for the tactic dimension in Figure 1) as acts of terrorism than both Swedes and Norwegians. This puts the large effect size of the bombing attribute among

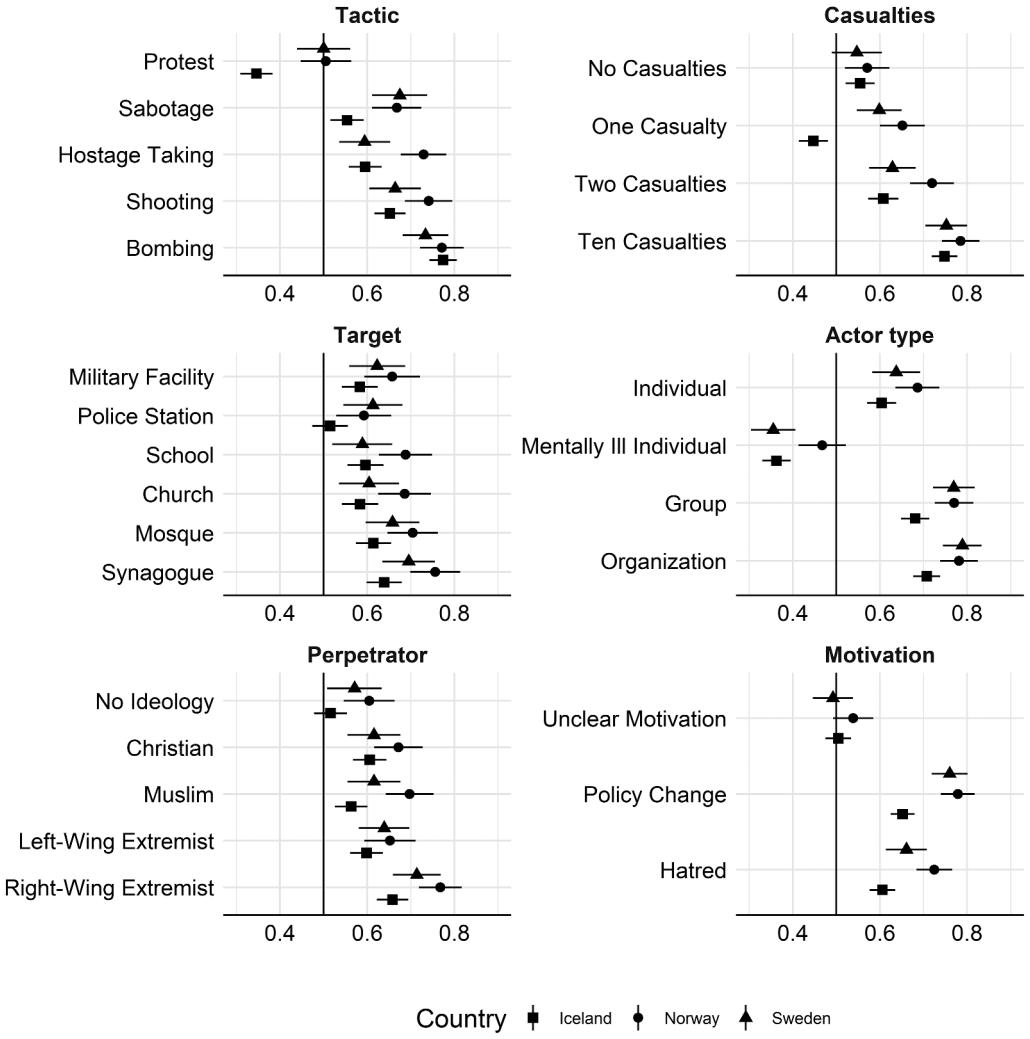

Figure 2. Incident attribute marginal means conditional on country (right column). N Norway = 1350, N Sweden = 1259, N Iceland = 3304.

Table 2. Summary of between-country MM differences

Comparison	Difference in MMs
Norway-Sweden	Hostage taking, two casualties, school, **individual mental illness**, hatred (5/27)
Norway-Iceland	**Shooting**, hostage taking, sabotage, protest, one casualty, two casualties, synagogue, mosque, church, school, police station, organization, group, **mentally ill individual, individual, right-wing extremist**, Muslim, no ideology, **policy change, hatred** (20/27)
Sweden-Iceland	Sabotage, protest, one casualty, police station, organization, group, **policy change** (7/27)

Incident attributes marked in bold are those that resonate with country-specific experiences.

Icelanders in Figure 1 in a new light. Second, Norwegian citizens classify incidents perpetrated by individuals with mental health issues as acts of terrorism at significantly higher rates (0.47, CI: 0.413, 0.522) than both Icelandic (0.36, CI: 0.330, 0.395) and Swedish citizens (0.36, CI: 0.304, 0.406). The multiplicity corrected difference between Norwegians and Swedes is only statistically different from zero with the most lenient BH-procedure. Still, following our discussion about Norwegians' experience with the public debate on the 22/7 perpetrator's sanity, it is

possible that Norwegians have been primed to view mental illness as compatible with committing acts of terrorism.[75]

Additional analysis of heterogenous perceptions of what is terrorism reported in Section 5 in the SI reveals that people largely agree on what qualifies as acts of terrorism in all three Nordic countries, irrespective of gender, education, or political outlook. Breaking with this pattern, we find a rather consistent age gap in citizens' sensitivity to violence among Icelanders, where citizens under 30 classify many more types of incident as acts of terrorism at higher rates than older age groups.

Conclusions and discussion

Acts of terrorism can have profound social and political consequences, including driving attitudes towards out-groups and shaping the results of elections. Research shows that consequences can depend on the characteristics of the perpetrators and their driving goals: when terrorism is perpetrated by right-wing extremist, citizens distance themselves from far-right ideology, and are also less likely to express a strong national identity and skepticism towards immigrants.[76] A prerequisite for the typical reactions that are observed in the aftermath of acts of terrorism is that people perceive violent incidents as acts of terrorism in the first place. Yet, we still know little about how the characteristics of violent events influence whether people perceive incidents as acts of terrorism and the extent to which these perceptions are shaped by country-specific experiences. For instance, are people more likely to view right-wing perpetrated violence as acts of terrorism if they have experienced large-scale right-wing terrorism in their country? One possibility is that country-specific experiences with political violence and terrorism influence perceptions of what qualifies as acts of terrorism. Another possibility is that the international news environment drives people's perceptions of what qualifies as acts of terrorism, and therefore that large-scale terrorism leads to shared perceptions.

Results from our survey experiment in three Nordic countries with diverse terrorism experiences mainly support the latter perspective. Norwegians', Swedes', and Icelanders' perceptions of what is terrorism are largely driven by the same factors: violent tactics, high number of casualties, right-wing extremism, and an explicit perpetrator motivation. In fact, Nordic citizens seem to be influenced by generally similar characteristics to Americans in their views of what terrorism is,[77] indicating that it is the shared cultural and informational environment of Western countries that matters rather than a country's past exposure to terrorism. Our results therefore add to a recent study by Shandler et al. who show that U.S., U.K. and Israeli citizens have uniform perceptions of what qualifies as acts of cyberterrorism,[78] and literature that demonstrates that acts of terrorism influence public attitudes outside the target country.[79] Together with these studies, our results highlight the importance of the international news environment in shaping citizens' ideas of what qualifies as acts of terrorism. One important implication of our results is therefore that large scale terrorism in one country can make citizens of other countries more susceptible to particular ways of framing violence. For instance, a plausible consequence of the 22/7 attack in Norway is that Icelanders are more ready to perceive violence framed as right-wing extremism as acts of terrorism.

There are important exceptions to these broad conclusions which add to our understanding of how large-scale events can shape folk definitions of contested concepts. When comparing Nordic citizens' perceptions to their American counterparts, the pattern of perpetrator effects stands out. While studies on the American public finds that Muslim perpetrators are most strongly associated with acts of terrorism,[80] it is right-wing extremist violence that stands out among Nordic citizens. Although possible that Nordic citizens are more prone than Americans to social desirability bias when confronted with a Muslim perpetrator description, it seems more likely that the right-wing extremist attack in Norway was so shocking and devastating that it reshaped culturally and geographically proximate Nordic citizens' ideas of who is a terrorist.[81] Without data on Nordic citizens' perceptions of what qualifies as acts of terrorism before 22/7/2011 we cannot state with certainty that this event changed Nordic citizens' perceptions. Yet our results are consistent with the notion that the attack in Norway ' ... did not only create shock waves beyond the boundaries of Norway, but also blatantly

illustrated how the threat of terrorist attacks can be realized not only in or in close proximity to Sweden, but also by different types of terrorists.'[82]

An alternative explanation is that Nordic citizens' ideological preferences shape their ideas of what constitutes terrorism. If citizens in Nordic countries on average are more liberal or left-leaning than U. S. citizens, it is possible that they are more concerned with right-wing terrorism than Islamic terrorism. That is, it is not necessarily past experience with terrorism in the region that shapes attitudes, but rather a motivated-reasoning-type process where one cares about the terrorists that one is most opposed to ideologically.[83] In our data, the evidence for such a motivated reasoning process is inconclusive across the three countries. There is some evidence that respondents' political predispositions matter for their perpetrator perceptions among Norwegians and Swedes, but not among Icelanders (see Figure S12 in the SI).

Our results also show that Norwegians appear generally more likely than Icelanders to think that *any* political violence is terrorism. Swedish citizens, having experienced some terrorism but not at the same level of severity as Norway, are also more likely to think that some types of violence are terrorism compared to people from Iceland. This finding is substantively important, suggesting that Norwegians and Swedes will view more incidents as acts of terrorism than Icelanders. It also suggests that citizens living in countries with past experiences of terrorism have a lower threshold for classifying incidents as acts of terrorism than citizens without such an experience. Yet, these between-country differences are for the most part inconsistent with the notion that country-specific experiences weigh more strongly in citizens' ideas of what is terrorism. This could indicate that people are influenced by past violence in the country, but not so much by the details associated with the events. Such a tendency would be consistent with the psychological finding that people often remember the gist of information, but not the specifics.[84]

It is also possible that differences between countries are explained by factors that influence or are influenced by the overall threat environment, but that are not related to experiences directly. Iceland is a remote island in the Atlantic Ocean and is the most sparsely populated country in Europe. Although not true anymore, Iceland has historically had lower levels of immigration than Sweden and Norway, which possibly influence public debates about terrorism. For many Icelanders, then, terrorism may seem like a distant threat that is unlikely to happen in their country.[85] Thus, there are reasons to believe that Norwegians and Swedes would be more likely to view incident as acts of terrorism than Icelanders, independent of their country-experiences with large scale terrorism. After our data collection, Icelandic police arrested two individuals suspect of planning a terrorist attack in Iceland. They were later acquitted of these charges. Whether this incident has made Icelanders more attentive to the threat of terrorism is an interesting question to pursue in future work.

Our study has limitations that point to future research. Our approach to hypothesis-testing is limited by the chosen attributes in the survey experiment. For instance, we find little evidence that the target of the incident influence Nordic citizens' perception of what qualifies as an act of terrorism or not. However, it is certainly possible that our findings would be different had we used other types of targets, for instance a concert or a political gathering. Moreover, the ideological labels used for the perpetrator dimension in our survey experiment include the word "extremist" while the religious labels do not. A possibility for future work on this topic is to address more systematically how respondents react to religious and ideological labels with and without the "extremist" description.

We have studied perceptions of what qualifies as terrorism in relatively homogeneous countries that have experienced one large-scale terrorist attack or no attack at all in their countries. It is yet to be seen whether citizens in more heterogeneous European countries with other types of terrorism experiences have similar perceptions. Citizens in France, for instance, have experienced far more terrorism than the Nordic countries we study, and multiple large-scale terrorist attacks by Islamist extremists. Our survey was carried out after two large-scale terrorist events in Norway and Sweden. A research design that uses before-and-after data would obviously be better suited to capture changes in citizens' short-run perceptions of what qualifies as acts of terrorism. Finally, our study builds on the assumption that acts of terrorism lead to different public responses than less attention-grabbing forms

of violence. While this assumption seems reasonable for large-scale terrorism events, such as the 22/7 attacks in Norway, it is less certain for borderline cases that could or could not be acts of terrorism in the eyes of the public. To further our understanding of the consequences of political violence and terrorism, future research should examine this assumption empirically.

Funding

This work was supported by NordForsk [Projectnumber: 88043].

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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