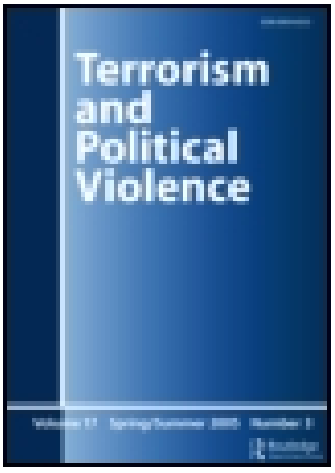

Terrorism and Political Violence
Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:
http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/ftpv20

Terrorism and Democracy: Perpetrators and Victims

W. Eubank & L. Weinberg
Published online: 08 Sep 2010.

To cite this article: W. Eubank & L. Weinberg (2001) Terrorism and Democracy: Perpetrators and Victims, Terrorism and Political Violence, 13:1, 155-164, DOI: 10.1080/09546550109609674

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09546550109609674

Terrorism and Democracy: Perpetrators and Victims

WILLIAM EUBANK and LEONARD WEINBERG

Most observers believe that the 'democratic rules of the game' provide a peaceful means for resolving political conflicts. This may be true but not all groups or even single individuals in democratic societies need play by these rules. This analysis uses two data sets: one that classifies most countries of the world based on how they were ruled in the mid-1980s, and the other on the frequency with which their nationals either perpetrated or were victimized by terrorists attacks, to investigate the relationship between terrorism and democracy. The findings suggest that stable democracy and terrorism go together. An analysis of the data reveal that terrorist attacks occur most often in the world's most stable democracies, and that, further, both the perpetrators and victims of those attacks are citizens of the same democracies.

Perhaps a certain amount of disenchantment was inevitable. After the mood of euphoria caused by the wave of democratization that occurred around the world over the last decade, it almost seems natural that ordinary citizens, as well as political scientists and other observers of the process, would induce some depression by having second thoughts. The newer and more sober outlook is the result of at least three factors.

First, particularly in Latin America, new or newly restored democracies have not been able to solve the manifold economic problems confronting the various countries. Second, the initiation of open, competitive elections has by no means guaranteed the establishment of limited constitutional governments; nor have such elections necessarily served to protect the rights of minorities or individuals or encouraged greater tolerance for dissenting opinions. Too often democratic elections in places like Belarus, Serbia, Slovakia, and the newly independent republics of central Asia have resulted in the election of executives whose authoritarian styles are not strikingly different from their predecessors'. And third, open, competitive elections and the installation of democratic governments have often been followed a few years later by military or para-military coups d'etat and the end of these democratic experiments, at least for a while – sub-Saharan Africa would serve as exhibit 'A' in this instance.

The kinds of unsettling problems these new regimes have experienced

Terrorism and Political Violence, Vol. 13, No. 1 (Spring 2001)
PUBLISHED BY FRANK CASS, LONDON

have led to a renewed interest in the role of political violence within democracies. Discussion has focused on the general question of the relationship between democracy and violence. Two competing perspectives on the matter have emerged or re-emerged.[1]

The resource mobilization view contends that open societies with democratic governments are highly susceptible to violent conflict. In fact this vulnerability is a price democracies must pay for their very openness.[2] To quote Hegre et al., 'The more democratic a regime, the more likely that various groups express political protest, non-violent as well as violent'. In the current context, the sudden onset of democracy brings to the surface long-simmering ethnic and religious grievances with violent consequences.

The second perspective holds quite the opposite position. Such analysts as Fred Riggs, Rudy Rummel and Ted Gurr argue that the democratic rules of the game provide a framework for the non-violent resolution of political conflicts. Since, at least in theory, all relevant racial, religious, ethnic and class groups possess the ability to participate in the process and get at least some of what they want by peaceful means, their members are less likely to turn to violence. Rummel and Gurr offer impressive empirical evidence to support their judgments. According to their findings autocracies, since they choke off alternative means of political expression, are far more likely to experience civil wars and other types of political violence.[3]

In the context of the above discussion, there are ways of splitting the difference. These involve the magnitude and timing of political violence. Some have found that democracies register high levels of turmoil, relatively unplanned mass protests with some attendant violence, while autocracies are more likely to experience more serious manifestations of violence, e.g. civil wars. While democracies have protests, autocracies have rebellions.[4] And as far as the matter of timing is concerned, there are those who maintain that democracies are likely to experience serious bouts of political violence during the initial, transitional stages of their development.

Our interest in this paper is with the relationship between democracy and political terrorism. Are democracies more or less likely than autocracies to experience this particular form of political violence? In earlier works published in this journal, we reported strongly positive relationships between democracy and political terrorism.[5] Naturally, given the disturbing nature of these findings, our work did not go unchallenged. One critic argued that violent events were a much better indicator of terrorist activity than the number of terrorist organizations active in the different countries.[6] Another expressed skepticism about the value of studying terrorism by relying on large-scale cross-national data sets.[7] We responded to these criticisms in two ways. First, we used the frequency of terrorist events occurring on a worldwide basis (events occurring within countries governed

by different types of political regimes) and over a two year period (1994–95) to see if the link between terrorism and democracy was supported by this type of evidence. And, second we investigated the role of terrorism within one country, Italy. For purposes of analysis, the latter was divided into more and less democratic regions to see if there was a link between terrorist activity and the strength of democratic institutions as they existed in the country's various regions. The results of both studies confirmed our initial findings. So far as we were able to tell terrorism and democracy did indeed go together. The present study, to which we now turn, represents a still more ambitious effort to investigate the problem.

Terrorism typically is not the kind of large-scale violence we associate with rebellions or civil wars, although in any number of cases, e.g. Lebanon in the mid-1970s, Sri Lanka more recently, terrorist campaigns have escalated into high magnitude conflicts. Nor does terrorism equal turmoil, the kind of mass protest some analysts have linked to democracy. Characteristically terrorist violence involves small-scale and highly planned attacks carried out by relatively small groups or, in some instances, single individuals against non-combatants usually for the purpose of sending a message to some audience.[8]

Related to the problem of the hypothetical relationship between terrorist violence and democracy (or autocracy) there is the matter of degree. Not all autocracies are equally repressive nor are all democracies equally stable or free. The literature on political violence to which we have referred above is divided over the broad issue of regime type and violence, as well as the magnitude of violence, but it is relatively clear on the question of differences within regime types. That is, political violence is likely to be most prevalent in countries with weak or limited authoritarian governments and in countries whose democracies appear insecure or unstable. (Of course there seems to be a certain amount of circularity in this reasoning.)

We have sought to explore the relationship between terrorism and regime type by developing an analysis based on two sources. First, we used a classification of political regimes developed by Robert Wesson in 1987. He placed 159 governments around the world as it existed in the mid-80s into one of the following five categories: stable democracies, insecure democracies, partial democracies, limited authoritarian regimes, and absolutisms.[9] For Wesson these labels have the following meanings.

Stable democracies (28) conduct free and fair elections. Their citizens enjoy freedom of expression as well as civil rights protections. Insecure democracies (26) refer to countries where the above freedoms and rights exist on paper but where they are violated from time-to-time. They are also countries where honesty is not always the prevailing policy when it comes to elections and where there is some threat of military intervention. By

'partial democracies' (18) Wesson has in mind such countries as Mexico, Singapore, Pakistan, and Nepal, nations with a mix of authoritarian and democratic elements. The regimes he classifies as 'limited authoritarian' (48) are dictatorships, but ones whose leaders have only a limited interest in dominating the societies in which they rule. If citizens do not challenge the regime and its core policies, they will be left in peace. Absolutisms (39) are regimes whose rulers are not satisfied by passive compliance and ritualized obedience. They attempt to command popular support and seek to regulate virtually all aspects of life. Here Wesson includes not only the now defunct communist regimes but also such benevolent despotisms as the Saudi monarchy.

The reader should bear in mind that Wesson's scheme was intended to fit the world as it existed in the mid-80s; obviously the major events since then would require the reclassification of many countries. But it is perfectly appropriate for our purposes since the terrorism database we have used is also drawn from that time period. The particular ITERATE (International Terrorism: Attributes of Terrorist Events, 1978–90, ITERATE III) chronology on which we rely encompasses terrorist events from 1980 through 1987.[10] This data set comprises 2989 terrorist events, of which approximately 1700 contain complete data.[11] Recorded in the data are variables describing the nationality of the terrorist, the victim and where the incident occurred. Also included are the number of victims, killed or wounded, and type and target of attack. For the purposes of this paper, we restrict ourselves to the nationalities of the terrorists and victims and the location of the incident.

Our procedure for investigating the relationship between terrorist events and democracy was simple and straightforward. We identified all the terrorist events in the ITERATE chronology and distributed them by regime type. We did this in three separate ways. First, we classified the event(s) in terms of **where** it occurred, in what type of country was the event perpetrated. Next, we paid attention to **who** committed the act. What was the nationality of the terrorist? Did he/she come from a democratic or authoritarian country, etc.? Finally, the event(s) was also classified based on the nationality of the **victim** or target. Was the victim or target of the terrorist attack from a democracy or autocracy according to Wesson's classification?

While one may question the use of the ITERATE data to address questions of internal violence, ITERATE identifies the location of the event. Thus we are able to identify the country and the type of government in which an incident of international terrorism occurred. For example, we can tell if an individual from an absolutism carried out a terrorist act in a democracy, and vice-versa. Table 1 shows the result of such an analysis.

TABLE 1
TERRORIST AND VICTIM NATIONALITY

	Same Nationality	Different Nationality
Democracy	115	471
Insecure Democracy	57	292
Partial Democracy	64	354
Limited Authoritarianism	44	136
Absolutism	20	66

Chi square = 9.89 @ 4 df; $p < .05$

TABLE 2
TERRORIST AND VICTIM GOVERNMENT TYPE

	Democracy	Insecure Democracy	Partial Democracy	Limited Authoritarianism	Absolutism	Total
Democracy	242	102	11	26	21	402
Insecure Democracy	109	60	11	9	10	199
Partial Democracy	173	28	91	23	17	332
Limited Authoritarianism	94	15	11	92	15	227
Absolutism	33	20	15	20	79	167
Total	651	225	139	170	142	1327

Chi square = 646.11 @ 16 df; $p < .001$

TABLE 3
TERRORIST AND VICTIM GOVERNMENT TYPE WHEN NATIONALITY THE SAME

	Insecure Democracy	Partial Democracy	Limited Democracy	Limited Authoritarianism	Absolutism
Democracy	39				
Insecure Democracy		46			
Partial Democracy			83		
Limited Authoritarianism				67	
Absolutism					60

TABLE 4
TERRORIST AND VICTIM GOVERNMENT WHEN NATIONALITY DIFFERENT

	Democracy	Insecure Democracy	Partial Democracy	Limited Authoritarianism	Absolutism	Total
Democracy	157	99	10	21	19	306
Insecure Democracy	109	14	11	9	10	153
Partial Democracy	170	28	4	23	17	242
Limited Authoritarianism	92	15	11	25	15	158
Absolutism	33	20	15	20	19	107
Total	561	176	51	98	80	966

Chi square = 138. 83 @ 16 df; $p < .001$

Following this exercise in classification we ran several analyses. The purpose was to determine, whether there was any difference between governmental type and the occurrence of terrorist activity. As analyses go in the social sciences, our findings are clear and relatively unambiguous. During the 1980s terrorist events occurred far more commonly in democratic than autocratic settings. Within this generalization, terrorist violence was far more common in the stable democracies than either the insecure or partial ones. As the reader may see in table 3 we are almost confronted with a perfect scale. Absolutisms were the sites of few terrorist events, limited authoritarianisms a few more and so on. Except for the fact that partial democracies were a little more commonly the locale of terrorist events than insecure democracies were, the generalization we confront would be: the more democracy, the more terrorism. Further it should be noted that within each governmental type, terrorism is carried out by individuals of one nationality on those of another.

It may be objected that this finding simply reflects the open nature of democratic societies, a condition that makes them the natural battle ground for groups and individuals from elsewhere. Since travel and communication are open and easy compared to the situation in countries with authoritarian or absolutist regimes it is hardly surprising that terrorists from these countries would find it easy and convenient to carry out their attacks in democracies and against victims or targets that likewise bore some link to the perpetrator's country of origin. Palestinians wage a campaign against Israel by striking at targets located in the West European democracies or

Algerians express their grievances against the government in Algiers by committing terrorist attacks in France. Turks hostile to the government in Ankara do likewise in the Federal Republic of Germany and so on.[12]

In those many cases where we were able to identify not only the geographic location of the terrorist event but the nationality of both its perpetrator and victim or target, our results point to a slightly different pattern. They indicate that terrorist events were more likely to be carried out by the citizens of stable democracies than the citizens of any other type of country, from absolutism to insecure democracy. Furthermore, we are able to report the same with respect to the victims or targets of terrorist attacks. As with their attackers, the victims of terrorism were more likely to be the citizens of stable democratic countries than of any of Wesson's other categories. In other words, the prototypical terrorist event recorded in ITERATE was an attack on the territory of a democratic country committed by the citizen(s) of a democracy against the citizen(s) or property of the same or some other stable democracy.

In those many cases, however, where we were able to identify not only the geographic location of the terrorist event but the nationality of both its perpetrator and victim or target, our results are not ambiguous. They indicate that terrorist events were more likely to be carried out by the citizens of stable democracies than by the citizens of any other type of country, from absolutism to insecure democracy (see Table 2). Furthermore, we are able to report the same with respect to the victims or targets of terrorist attacks. As with their attackers, the victims of terrorism were more likely to be the citizens of stable democratic countries than any of Wesson's other categories (see Tables 2 and 3). In other words, the prototypical terrorist event recorded in ITERATE was an attack on the territory of a democratic country committed by the citizen of a democracy against the citizen(s) or property of the same or some other stable democracy.

The latter point needs to be stressed. Perhaps civil wars and other forms of high magnitude political violence tend to occur in weak, insecure democracies, as they enter or sometimes exit the democratic column. This does not appear to be the case with terrorism however. It is the stable, secure 'centripetal' democracies which are the most vulnerable to terrorist violence; that is where the events occur most frequently, that is where their perpetrators and victims tend to come from (see Tables 3 and 4).[13] And it is not simply a matter of democracies providing a hospitable locale. No doubt the Armenians and Palestinians were drawn to the democracies of Western Europe and North America because these countries offered attractive venues. But our findings suggest that there may be some things about the internal dynamics of democracies that make the use of terror tactics attractive to their own citizens.

In a somewhat different context Walter Laqueur has proposed a way to largely dismiss the disturbing prospect that the rules of stable democracies do not offer a barrier to terrorist violence.[14] In general, Laqueur encourages his readers to minimize the significance of terrorism in democracies. In one instance he draws a parallel with organized crime. Just as it is possible for a free-wheeling democracy like the United States to retain or even strengthen its democratic institutions despite the criminal operations of the *cosa nostra* and various gangs emanating from Colombia, Mexico, Russia and so on, so too should the appearance of small terrorist groups be thought of as politically irrelevant. In most instances a terrorist group can be equated with a gang of highly publicized bank robbers. The media may lavish attention, but in political terms both are minor nuisances or, at best, the modern equivalent of 'primitive rebels'.

During the 1970s the Federal Republic of Germany suffered a serious wave of terrorism as the Red Army Faction and other groups staged a long list of bombings, kidnappings, and killings. There was much hand wringing about the stability of the country's democratic institutions. Is Bonn Weimar? And so on. But after most of the terrorist luminaries had been captured or decided to switch careers, the terrorism came to an end without leaving many discernible effects on the German political system. Likewise, the Symbionese Liberation Army seems to have come and gone without much impact on the state of California.

Perhaps there is another way of looking at things. Terrorist groups operating within stable democracies may prove to be a minor annoyance but they may also be understood as the most extreme tip of a more substantial iceberg of popular sentiment. For instance, at the time the Red Brigades, Front Line and other revolutionary groups in Italy were waging their campaigns against that country's democratic institutions, public opinion survey results showed a not insignificant minority of Italians believed their corrupt system could only be changed by revolutionary means.[15] And in 1976 at about the height of Italy's 'years of lead' about 3/4 of a national sample said they were discontented or very discontented with the way their democracy was functioning.

Evidence suggests that about the same may be said about terrorist episodes in the United States. For example, between 1955 and 1971 the Ku Klux Klan and other white supremacist groups waged a campaign of terror (308 bombings, 156 shootings, 124 assaults) throughout the South in an effort to block steps toward racial integration. In these years Gallup poll results suggested that sympathy for the Klan was a distinctly minority sentiment in the country. Support for the Klan ranged from 4 to 6 per cent of Gallup's national samples over these violent years. But if the sampling process makes sense it would mean that between 1,300,000 and 1,660,000

Americans were sympathetic to the Klan.[16] A small minority of the public to be sure, but one still large enough to constitute a die-hard supportive constituency for the use of violence.

So it may very well be that in stable democracies the appearance of terrorist groups is not simply the equivalent of the establishment of socially isolated and politically irrelevant criminal gangs. Rather the appearance of such terrorist organizations may reflect the political views of an excluded minority of the public whose preferences have lost out or are no longer seriously considered in the normal democratic struggle over the formation of public policy. To put it in still more general terms, our findings do not support the view that the democratic rules of the game inhibit terrorism because they furnish a peaceful means for conflict resolution. If anything, our results buttress the resource mobilization alternative. Democracy makes it possible for dissident groups of all sizes and shapes to wage campaigns of terrorist violence on behalf of whatever goals they seek to achieve. After all liberty is to faction (even violent faction) as oxygen is to fire. Our own findings provide support for this view.

NOTES

1. For a concise summary of the literature see Havard Hegre, Tanja Ellingsen, et al., 'Toward a Democratic Civil Peace? Democracy, Democratization and Civil War 1834–1992' (a paper presented at the 38th Annual Convention of the International Studies Association, Toronto, 18–22 March 1997).
2. Harry Eckstein and Ted Gurr, *Patterns of Authority* (New York: Wiley, 1975) p.452.
3. Fred Riggs, 'Ethno-national Rebellions and Viable Constitutionalism' (a paper presented at world congress of the International Political Science Association, Berlin, August 1994); Rudolph Rummel, 'Democracy, Power, Genocide and Mass Murder', *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 39:1 (1995) pp.3–26; Ted Gurr, 'Political Protest and Rebellion in the 1960s: the United States in World Perspective', in Hugh Graham and Ted Gurr (eds.), *Violence in America* (Beverly Hills, CA: Sage,1979) pp.59–73.
4. Ekkart Zimmermann, 'Macro-Comparative Research on Political Protest', in Ted Gurr (ed.), *Handbook of Political Conflict* (New York: the Free Press, 1980) pp.167–237.
5. See William Eubank and Leonard Weinberg, 'Does Democracy Encourage Terrorism?' *Terrorism and Political Violence* 6:4, (Winter, 1994), pp.417–43; 'Terrorism and Democracy: What Recent Events Disclose', *Terrorism and Political Violence* 10:1 (Spring 1998) pp.108–18; 'Terrorism and Democracy within One Country: the Case of Italy', *Terrorism and Political Violence* 9:1 (Spring, 1997) pp. 98–108; 'The Italian Regions and the Prospects for Democracy', *Terrorism and Political Violence* 12:3–4 (Autumn Winter 2000) pp.291–307.
6. Todd Sandler, 'On the Relationship between Democracy and Terrorism', *Terrorism and Political Violence* 7:4 (Winter, 1995) pp.1–9.
7. Chris Hewitt, 'Some Skeptial Comments on Large Cross-National Studies', *Terrorism and Political Violence* 6:4 (Winter 1994) pp.439–41.
8. For the U.S. statutory definition see *Patterns of Global Terrorism 1995* (Washington, DC: US Department of State, 1996) p.vi.
9. Robert Wesson (ed.), *Democracy: A Worldwide Survey* (New York: Praeger, 1987) pp.xi–xiii.

10. Edward Mickolus, Todd Sandler and Jean Murdock, *International Terrorism in the 1980s: A Chronology of Events* (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1989).
11. This number will vary depending on which variable(s) are used in each analysis.
12. Our evidence supports this well known contention, at least to some extent. A meaningful percentage of the terrorist events reported in ITERATE were committed in the democracies by individuals identified as Armenians and Palestinians. Since at the time their homelands did not enjoy independent status, their countries of origin were coded as missing data.
13. Comparing Table 3 with Table 4 reveals that while a small number of terrorist target victims of their own nationality, the vast majority carry out attacks on victims from other countries. In both Table 3 and Table 4 the data clearly indicate that most of the terrorist activity is carried out in stable democracies. Careful examination of Table 4 shows that those from Limited Authoritarianisms and Absolutisms migrate to Democracies to conduct their activities.
14. Walter Laqueur, *The Age of Terrorism* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1987) pp.298–322.
15. Giovanna Guidorossi, *Gli Italiani e La Politica* (Milan: Franco Angelli, 1984) pp.55–61.
16. For a discussion see Chris Hewitt, 'The Political Context of Terrorism in America', *Terrorism and Political Violence* 12:3–4 (Autumn Winter 2000) pp.325–44.