Researching Democracy and Terrorism: How Political Access Affects Militant Activity

RISA BROOKS

Strikingly, little systematic study of the relationship between democracy and terrorism has been undertaken. This article addresses this lacuna by laying some groundwork for further analytical study of the issues. It does so, first, by suggesting a family of independent variables related to the concept of political access that might be employed in this research; and second, by introducing a more expansive set of dependent variables, which will help capture the diverse effects of political access on militant group activity. The bulk of the paper examines the variety of causal logics that could potentially connect democracy and terrorist group activity, drawing from five analytical approaches to understanding terrorist motivation evident in the literature. Two major conclusions follow from the analysis. First, the democracy and terrorism debate constitutes not one research question, but many. Second, the prediction that follows from many approaches to terrorist motivation is not that democracy should promote an easy, inevitable lessening of terrorism. Rather, a more refined understanding of when democracy, or other forms of political access, may reduce violence or yield other desirable (and undesirable) outcomes is essential.

Promoting democracy has long played a role in United States foreign policy, but in recent years it has emerged as one of the country’s primary instruments of statecraft. Among the central arguments in favor of democracy promotion has been its putative benefits for reducing the incidence of global terrorism.

Risa Brooks is assistant professor of Political Science at Northwestern University
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As, for example, the George W. Bush administration articulated in its 2006 National Security Strategy, with the advancement of democracy, the conditions allowing terrorist groups to operate will worsen and therefore their incentives to continue operations will diminish: democracy is less likely to generate terrorists and terrorist violence.¹

Although the Bush administration was an especially forceful advocate of this view, it resonates across the political spectrum. Take, for example, the claim by Jennifer Windsor, executive director of Freedom House, who when speaking about the Middle East in summer 2003 argued that “promoting democratization in the closed societies of the Middle East can provide a set of values and ideas that offer a powerful alternative to the appeal of the kind of extremism that today has found expression in terrorist activity.”² Her comments echo claims by Martin Indyk in 2002, a senior official in the Clinton administration, and by Strobe Talbott who five years prior, as deputy secretary of state under President Clinton, argued that democracies were better prepared to confront the challenges of terrorism.³ In short, as one analyst (like Windsor, in addressing the Middle East), nicely captures the attraction of these ideas, “Most experts on both the left and the right agree that promoting democracy will help address the root causes of terrorism in the region, though they differ on what degree. The reasoning is simple: if Arabs and Muslims lack legitimate, peaceful outlets with which to express their grievances, they are more likely to resort to violence.”⁴


That the idea of spreading democracy as a means to reduce terrorist violence has many supporters, in fact, is unsurprising. It has profound intuitive appeal: provide mechanisms for the peaceful redress of grievances, and militant groups and the societies that support them will forgo violence in favor of nonviolent political action. In other words, terrorism is a tool of last resort, used only in the absence of peaceful opportunities for political expression.

Given the centrality of these ideas, both to policy debate and to the scholarly study of political violence, it is striking how little systematic study of the relationship between democracy and terrorism has been undertaken. Aside from a smattering of case studies and large-n empirical analyses, minimal research has been completed on the topic. As one recent study relates, when a senior Bush administration official involved in drafting the president’s 2006 National Strategy for Combating Terrorism was asked to justify the document, he could not cite a single authoritative study in support of the contention that the spread of democracy reduces terrorist violence.5

The goal of this article is to help address this lacuna. It does so with a particular approach. Rather than assess different cases, as have some recent, useful efforts, or mediate the policy debate, it attempts to lay some groundwork for further analytical inquiry into the relationship between democracy and terrorism.6 It does so in three ways.

First, I seek to expand our understanding of the independent variable in the debate: that is to highlight the importance of the implications of what we precisely mean by “democracy” and indeed ask whether that is the most useful conceptualization to employ within an emergent research program. Here I highlight the core logic underlying the democracy-terror thesis, suggesting that a broader concept, “political access,” better captures the central proposition that expanding opportunities to participate in political systems affects militant incentives and behavior. Political access, in turn, is conceptualized as encompassing a family of independent variables in which the specific variable employed should depend on the analyst’s research question.

Second, I seek to expand our understanding of the outcomes that may result if we study the effects of political access on militant groups. Loosely conceived, the question has been framed as how democracy affects the incidence of terrorist violence—an important dependent variable. But, in fact, political access could have a number of effects on terrorist groups, aside from


(directly) influencing the incidence of violent attacks. As I explain below, we need to expand our conception of the dependent variable, to explore effects on other innovations in strategy, methods, and organizational form.

Finally, and most substantially, this article examines the variety of causal logics that could potentially connect democracy and terrorist group activity. Here I draw from existing theories of what motivates militant groups to use terrorist violence. As I explain below, much of the current debate on the democracy and terrorism question presupposes one such theory of motivation: terrorist groups are fundamentally motivated by, or constrained by, the societies in which they operate. There are however at least four other major schools of thought that conceptualize the origins of terrorist violence very differently. Indeed, according to these alternative perspectives, the decision to engage in terrorist attacks could result from a complex assessment of costs and benefits in which a variety of factors influence the choice of terrorism (strategic choice approaches). Alternatively, the use of terrorism by a militant group could originate in group or individual psychological attributes (psychological approaches); in ideational factors and the doctrine or ideology the leadership espouses (ideational approaches); in intra-organizational dynamics (organizational approaches); or, as suggested above, in pressures from local society (societal approaches). In order to understand how groups might respond to democracy or political access, we must root our theories in clear understandings of what is motivating them to use terrorism in the first place. Accordingly, in this article I filter the effects of political access through these five models of terrorist motivation to see what the different approaches suggest for how groups will react if their opportunities to participate in politics expand.

Two major conclusions follow from the analysis. First, we begin to see that the democracy and terrorism debate constitutes not one research question, but many. Conceptualizing political access in its variety of forms raises questions about how different types of opportunities to participate in politics might affect militant groups’ strategies and activities. In turn, different, and sometimes contradictory, hypotheses emerge about the nature of those activities when we build theories grounded in alternative approaches to understanding terrorist motivation.

Second, and perhaps more provocatively, we see that we must resist the impulse to assume a positive relationship between promoting democracy and reducing terrorism. The prediction that follows from many approaches to terrorist motivation is not that democracy should promote an

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7 Note that in this article I intend the concept of terrorism to refer to the use of violence aimed at killing—or threatening to kill—people or destroying property to generate fear and the anticipation of future harm, as a way of coercing an opposing government, society, or authority. On the controversies surrounding efforts to define terrorism, see, for example, Alex P. Schmid and Albert J. Jongman, Political Terrorism, rev. ed. (1984; repr., New Brunswick: Transaction, 1988); Andrew Silke, “An Introduction to Terrorism Research,” in Andrew Silke, ed., Research on Terrorism (London: Frank Cass, 2004).
easy, inevitable lessening of terrorism. In many cases, the beneficial effects of providing militants political access depend on a range of factors and particular characteristics of the group and its environment. Even more sobering, some approaches to motivation suggest political access could enhance incentives to engage in terror attacks, perhaps even against civilians, or to other variations in strategy, such as the development of political wings as adjuncts to armed wings or to terrorist groups splintering and dividing into multiple—including some especially violent—entities.

In short, we need to take care analytically—and by implication practically—in specifying the conditions under which democracy should lead to declines in terrorist attacks. The effects of political access may be contrary to that outcome, or tangential to it. Consequently, any unqualified advocacy of democracy as a panacea to terrorism should be viewed with significant apprehension. Rather, the goal should be to develop a more refined understanding of when democracy, or other forms of political access, may reduce violence or yield other desirable (and undesirable) outcomes. This will lay the groundwork for a research program in which we might cumulate our knowledge and engage in greater, analytically minded, empirical research as the basis for informed policy.

WHAT IS THE INDEPENDENT VARIABLE(S)?

Underlying the proposition that democracy reduces terrorism is a hypothesis about the equilibrating effects of open political systems on militant violence: democracy increases militant groups’ opportunities to participate in institutional politics and other nonviolent forms of political activity and therefore reduces incentives to resort to violence. Specifically, in what Joe Eyerman calls the political access school, democracy is viewed as a mechanism.

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legalizing and institutionalizing political action, making alternative channels for influencing state policy available.⁹

Although not the only logic that connects democracy and terrorism, the political access perspective is a dominant theme in the small scholarly literature on the topic that currently exists.¹⁰ Herein lies a first limitation in the debate as it has been heretofore conceptualized: equating democracy with political access is conceptually and empirically problematic. Democracy is neither necessary nor sufficient for groups to enjoy political access in a state.

To start, democracy does not guarantee political access to all groups and constituencies within society. Even if formal rules allow for competitive elections, the actual capacity to mobilize and grow a political movement in order to contest those elections may be limited due to other features of the political environment. For example, political access may be truncated in procedural or electoral democracies in which civil liberties, and therefore the capacity to freely organize and associate, are limited. In the worst cases, social polarization and weak central authority may contribute to the government or local authorities engaging in on-going campaigns against segments of the population, limiting its ability to mobilize even where democratic institutions are formally in place.¹¹ Moreover, even absent outright repression, the efficacy of political action within democratic institutions may be in doubt. Long-standing social cleavages, domination by deeply entrenched

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⁹ See Alex P. Schmid, “Terrorism and Democracy,” *Terrorism and Political Violence* 4, no. 4 (1992): 14–25; Jeffrey Ian Ross, “Structural Causes of Oppositional Terrorism: Towards a Causal Model,” *Journal of Peace Research* 30, no. 3 (August 1993): 317-29. Note this logic suggests that the argument best applies to non-state actors excluded from power (rather than those within the state apparatus and who therefore have access) using violence against their own (versus foreign) state governments and complicit populations. My discussion for this reason focuses on groups’ use of violence against the groups’ own states and not transnational violence or state-led terrorist acts.

¹⁰ One other logic relates to the inadequacy of democracies in protecting against terrorism. Perhaps best articulated by Eubank and Weinberg, according to this line of argument, the openness of democratic societies makes it easier for terrorists to mobilize and harder for government officials to launch effective counterterror operations: democracy increases the incidence of terrorism. One immediate counter is that there is tremendous variation in the nature and success of counterterror operations in democracies. See Robert Art and Louise Richardson, *Democracy and Counterterrorism: Lessons from the Past* (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace Press, 2007). Generally, however, although the democracy-as-vulnerable-to-terrorism thesis merits greater analysis, I stay with the political access logic in this paper in large part because of its current influence in the scholarly and policy realms. See Eubank and Weinberg “Terrorism and Democracy: What Recent Events Disclose”; Eubank and Weinberg, “Terrorism and Democracy: Perpetrators and Victims.”

¹¹ Alternatively, a state may be in transition from authoritarianism, and the newly democratized regime may lack the ability to credibly commit to end repression of suppressed minorities or be unwilling to do so. See Martha Crenshaw, “Political Explanations,” *Addressing the Causes of Terrorism: The Club de Madrid Series on Democracy and Terrorism*, vol. 1, The Madrid Summit Working Paper Series, The International Summit on Democracy, Terrorism and Security, 8-11 March 2005 (Madrid: Club de Madrid, 2005), 15; For an example from the Basque case, see Goldie Shabad and Francisco Jose Llera Ramo, “Political Violence in a Democratic State: Basque Terrorism in Spain,” in *Terrorism in Context*, ed. Martha Crenshaw (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University, 1995), 420. See also note 17.
political parties, or other features of the party system and political institutions may make it difficult to enter the political system, or to have much influence within it. In short, competitive elections are not sufficient to ensure that there are clear benefits to peaceful political action: democracy does not guarantee political access.

Neither are democratic institutions necessary to ensure political access for militant groups: the absence of democracy does not (always) prevent groups from enjoying political access. Authoritarian states may liberalize and allow space, albeit circumscribed, for political expression and groups may be able to capitalize on those openings and grow their movements peacefully. Alternatively, political leaders in those states might make specific allowances for a targeted group in an effort to co-opt its leadership; they may grant concessions, facilitating the group’s representation in what is otherwise a restrictive political system. Or they may simply tolerate a group’s existence as long as it does not overtly challenge their right to rule. In other words, political access may be afforded by different forms of state-led accommodation in otherwise not fully democratic, or authoritarian, settings.12

In sum, democracy may be a useful shorthand, but analytically the concept fails to capture the range of factors that influence the actual openings for participation in the political system. What is required, I suggest, is a family of independent variables and accompanying measures under the rubric of “political access” (see Table 1).

There are doubtless many ways we could discriminate among the variety of forms of political access. In Table 1, I provide an illustration of one approach, which is intended not as a definitive statement of how we should make these distinctions but as a means of underscoring the potential diversity of forms that could be analytically significant. For example, we might distinguish among the following: liberal democracy (expansive political

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participation, civil-liberties protections, and legal rights)\textsuperscript{13}; procedural democracy (elections without accompanying political rights and civil-liberties)\textsuperscript{14}; liberalized autocracy (no free and fair elections but some political rights and civil-liberties)\textsuperscript{15}; reformed democracy (institutional or other reforms that expand de facto opportunities for participation in otherwise de jure democracies); accommodation in partly free democracy or autocracy, which could consist of targeted concessions (explicit efforts to provide prerogatives that enhance political representation, even in otherwise restricted democratic or autocratic setting) or what might be understood as selective tolerance (implicit tolerance of political activity by a group, where such activity by mass and other groups is generally circumscribed).

What the phenomena in Table 1 share is that each represents a mechanism or environment that creates an opening for militant groups to engage in nonviolent political activity. Where they differ is in the specific nature or manifestation of that opening; each form of political access differs in what exactly the opening consists and therefore the specific incentives and opportunities available to groups.

By moving beyond the concept of democracy and developing a more comprehensive understanding of the variety of forms political access can take, we expand our capacity to analyze how the range of changing incentives created by political environments actually affect a group’s strategic choices and activities. Different definitions of political access might be employed, in turn, depending on the question under investigation. For example, to evaluate the effects of creating more space for political competition on


\textsuperscript{14} Here I refer to Freedom House’s terminology, which defines political rights as involving three sets of criteria associated with electoral processes, political pluralism and participation, and functioning of government. Civil liberties consist of attributes associated with freedom of expression and belief, associational and organizational rights, rule of law, and personal autonomy and individual rights. For details, see www.FreedomHouse.org. Note that we might also include democratizing states here, if we distinguish those as states that have established the basic institutions for competitive elections but not other features of liberal democracies. Alternatively, it might make sense to create a different category of “democratizing” states or those in transition from autocracy to democracy if we anticipate that there is something unique about the kinds of political access and the incentives therein of states in the process of change from one system to another. For an argument that the transition phase is a unique form of political environment that engenders particular incentives, see Edward D. Mansfield and Jack Snyder, \textit{Elections to Fight: Why Emerging Democracies Go to War} (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005). Dassa Kaye, et al., \textit{More Freedom, Less Terror} argues also that change in a system—for that study, back-tracking from newly established liberalization measures—is especially likely to bolster political violence.

societal support for violence and therefore militant activity, we might define access in terms of liberalized autocracy. To evaluate how militant leaders respond to focused efforts to enhance their group’s participation in political institutions, emphasizing governmental officials’ accommodative strategies may make sense. If we want to understand how the basic opportunity to participate in elections shapes militant group incentives, even absent other features of liberal democracy, we could define political access in terms of procedural democracy (see Table 2).

In sum, democracy is too rough a concept if we are to capture and study the actual effects of changing opportunities in the political environment on militant activity. We need a broader family of variables under the rubric of political access, from which analysts can then specify the form under investigation.

Accordingly, in the text that follows, I forgo use of the term “democracy” in favor of “political access.” For reasons of space, working through the logic of each form of access in light of the five approaches to terrorist motivation discussed below is infeasible. So, I rely primarily on the generic concept of political access and explore the general logic of creating more opportunities for a group to participate in political institutions. However, where a specific definition of political access might yield especially unique or notable predictions, I specify more precisely how that access manifests.

WHAT IS THE DEPENDENT VARIABLE(S)?

A second step in developing a research program is expanding our understanding of the dependent variable in the political access and terror debate. As noted above, heretofore the primary outcome of interest has been the

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incidence of terrorist attacks. Yet, focusing primarily on the number of attacks may obscure other effects of political access on innovations in strategy or organizational form.

For example, political access may promote innovations in the qualitative nature of a group’s terrorist methods—including the scope and size of operations—who is targeted, or what tactics are used in attacks. Insights from what I introduce above as a societal approach to terrorist motivation illustrate this point. From that perspective, political access affect terrorism by influencing the attitudes and behaviors toward the use of terrorism within a group’s community of supporters: When those supporters cease to support the use of violence, this line of argument suggests, the group will reduce the incidence of violent attacks.

The lack of social support, however, could do more than affect the incidence of attacks. Indeed, it could deprive the group of crucial resources, such as local security, that might result in less complex forms of attacks; militants may have a harder time engaging in coordinated and simultaneous attacks against hardened and secured targets and may instead be forced to choose more accessible locations or individuals that require less local security, planning, and logistical support. Alternatively, social support could affect the preferred targets of terrorists—whether those be regime allies, like military personnel or politicians, or bystander civilians—or it could affect the specific tactics employed in attacks. For example, recent studies demonstrate that where local communities tolerate the use of suicide bombing, militant organizations are more likely to engage in this especially virulent form of killing. In sum, by focusing only on the incidence of attacks, we may miss these other innovations in strategy that relate less to how much a group attacks versus how it attacks.

Moreover, we may miss other diversifications in militant methods that are influenced by the degree of political access groups enjoy. For example, where groups benefit from political access (as expressed in procedural democracy, liberalized autocracy, or reformed democracy), they may have stronger incentive to invest in participating in political parties as complements to their terrorist wings’ activities. Groups may develop what I call hybrid organizations. Here, the movement splits into two closely allied but

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18 In many places, this is a religious or ethnic community or some subsection thereof: the IRA (Catholics), ETA (Basque population), Hamas (Palestinians), and Hezbollah (Lebanese Shia).


20 On developing political parties, see Leonard Weinberg and Ami Pedahzur, Political Parties and Terrorist Groups (London: Routledge, 2003).
separate organizations, one of which pursues violent armed struggle and the other nonviolent political party activity.21

Alternatively, we may see the splintering and division of a movement into wholly separate organizations as political access expands. Moderates may split off, as ETA experienced in Spain’s post-Franco transition, and, subsequently, with changes in the country’s political environment.22 Here we see the emergence of distinct, independent entities, some of which may devote themselves to nonviolent political action, while others continue their armed activities.23

Finally, there is one other possible strategic outcome we should consider: the possibility a group does not just attack less but goes out of business altogether. Access to nonviolent forms of political activity could yield a renunciation of violence or the potential dismantlement or morphing of the group into another form of political movement, such as a political party.24

In short, when studying how political access affects militant groups, we should not limit ourselves to strictly focusing on the incidence of attacks— despite the manifest importance of the issue—but also examine the potential effects on other dimensions of militant strategy and activities.

POLITICAL ACCESS AND MILITANT ACTIVITY: EXPLORING THE CAUSAL LOGICS

Below I examine the implications of five approaches to militant group motivation for how political access affects militant activity: strategic choice, psychological, ideational, organizational, and societal approaches. They each represent major themes of terrorist motivation in the scholarly literature. For each category of motivation, I examine how, given the basic premises of the approach, changes in the exogenous, political environment might affect the group, its reactions or calculations, and consequently influence the strategies it pursues. I also marshal the small amount of existing empirical evidence and research within these traditions to see how it bears out the hypothesized effects of political access on terrorism.

21 These hybrids appear to be surprisingly common. One study shows that of 399 contemporary terrorist groups, 124 are affiliates with or splits from political parties. Study cited in Ted Robert Gurr, “Economic Factors,” *Addressing the Causes of Terrorism: The Club de Madrid Series on Democracy and Terrorism*, vol. 1, The Madrid Summit Working Paper Series, The International Summit on Democracy, Terrorism and Security, 8–11 March 2005 (Madrid: Club de Madrid, 2005); Weinberg and Pedahzur, *Political Parties and Terrorist Groups*. In fact, several contemporary and historical militant groups have affiliated political parties or participate in party politics. Prominent examples include groups like ETA, the Provisional IRA, and Hamas.

22 Shabad and Llera Ramo, “Political Violence in a Democratic State.”

23 We also see the hybrid phenomenon with the emergence of ETA’s political wing, Herri Batasuna, and the political party’s successors.

Note that while I try to be complete in exploring the different frameworks, I am not able to capture in the discussion below every potential hypothesis we might investigate. In addition, some frameworks are so skeletal and poorly specified that extrapolating logical implications from them can yield different, even contradictory hypotheses. The goal, nevertheless is to show how different approaches, given their different objects of analysis and assumptions about what motivates group behavior, yield variable predictions about how access should affect terrorism.

The Strategic Choice Approach

A strategic choice approach to explaining terrorist activity views terrorism as a means to an end—a strategy chosen from among many to achieve a group’s stated objectives—versus a form of expression with intrinsic value. As such, a strategic choice approach exhibits two distinguishing features. First, it posits a model of decision making based on the rationality or goal-seeking nature of the group and its ability to make cost-benefit calculations in choosing strategies best suited to attaining its goals. “Terrorist organizations attempt to either maximize their expected political returns for any given level of effort or minimize the expected costs necessary to achieve a specified set of political objectives.”


Terrorist groups therefore hold no intrinsic preferences over strategy; the choice of strategy is instrumental, designed to achieve goals with the highest probability and lowest costs of attaining objectives. They should shift strategies readily based on estimates of the approach most likely to achieve their objectives. Second, as commonly employed, the strategic choice approach treats the group as a unitary actor, assuming internal rationality and some stable preferences over outcomes. Consequently, events outside the group—political access, access to technology, new military capabilities, changes in the adversary’s nature and preferences—heavily influence the group’s strategic choices. The key to understanding a group’s strategic choices therefore is looking at these environmental and contextual factors.

Using the basic premises of this approach, one can identify at least five causal pathways through which political access, in principle, could influence the appeal of employing terrorist tactics relative to other strategies. Depending, in part, on the specific incarnation of political access under investigation (liberalization, establishment of procedural democracy, concessions to a militant group that grant position/benefits in political institutions, and the like) such opportunities could affect: (1) the costs of organizing a political party

or what Eyerman refers to as the “price of legal activity,” making it easier and therefore more attractive to use that method in pursuit of group goals in concert with or as a substitute for armed attacks; (2) the probability of achieving goals through operating as a political party and participating in elections, “or the gain from legal activity,” especially if the institutional or partisan nature of the democratic system means a party representing the group’s interests could achieve some measure of influence in the political system; (3) the costs of using terror, or “the price of illegal activity,” if political access and the nature of the system that affords them undermine the capacity of governing authorities to apprehend militants due to civil-liberties protections or constraints on intelligence gathering; (4) the probability of using terror attacks to achieve successfully the group’s goals, or the “sum of demands placed against the government as a result of illegal activity,” if political access affects how responsive a government is to the civilian population and therefore how willing it is to make concessions.26

In short, depending on how we conceptualize the effects of political access on militant incentives, the implications are diverse and often cross-cutting, yielding different observable implications. Some might generate incentives for groups to use terror tactics less frequently or to use less operationally sophisticated tactics (as when the price of terror goes up); others, conversely, might increase the intensity and lethality of these tactics (as when the costs of terror go down). Still other incentives favor the diversification in strategy such as the establishment of political wings as adjuncts to armed wings or splintering of the movement into independent violent and nonviolent organizations (as when the costs of legal activity decreases); or the disbanding of the terrorist group or its being supplanted by a peaceful political party or nonviolent organization (when simultaneously the costs of terror increase, the costs of legal activity fall and the odds of success increase through the latter increase). Consequently, from within the framework of a strategic choice approach, there is no self-evident answer as to how democracy should affect terrorism: it depends on how the analyst conceptualizes political access and conceives of how it affects the values assigned for the costs, benefits, and probabilities that drive militant strategy and influence organizational capabilities and form.

The conflicting findings of the small extant literature on the democracy-terror thesis reinforce the necessity of carefully specifying the causal relationship between political access and militant activity. The results of those studies suggest that political access, variously defined and conceptualized, can generate contradictory pressures for militant groups. For example, William Eubank and Leonard Weinberg find that terrorist incidents are most likely to

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occur in democracies (using data from 1994 to 1995 and 1980 to 1987). 27 Eyerman conversely finds that consolidated democracies suffer the fewest terror attacks; like Alberto Abadie, he suggests the relationship between regime type and terrorism is non-linear, such that democratizing states are most vulnerable. 28 Alan Krueger more recently questions the basis for Abadie’s finding, suggesting that the incidence of terrorism is linear and inversely related to the level of democracy observed in a state; that is, more democracy equals less terrorism. 29 Similarly, Quan Li finds that terrorist attacks are less likely in democracies but more likely in more constrained institutional systems. 30 Coming full circle from the original Eubank and Weinberg thesis, James Piazza, in studying Middle Eastern countries, once again finds the opposite—that democracy (or liberalization) results in more terror attacks. 31

In order to adjudicate among these findings, future studies must do more to parse the different logical connections between political access and militant strategy and derive from them different observable implications to be evaluated empirically. As Li nicely captures it, “An aggregate indicator [of political regime type] cannot offer an empirical separation of the positive and negative effects of democracy if competing effects are at work at the same time.” 32 Future studies should also ensure that research designs replicate the analytical arguments in the empirical analysis. This is a limitation of some studies, including those of Eubank and Weinberg and Li, which presume to test the political access model yet focus exclusively on transnational acts of terrorism or fail to distinguish between attacks by citizens against their own democracies or other democracies. 33 These improvements could advance

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28 Eyerman, “Terrorism and Democratic States”; Abadie, Poverty, Political Freedom and the Roots of Terrorism. On democratizing states constituting a unique form of political environment and category of political access, see note 13.
29 Krueger, What Makes A Terrorist, 82.
30 Li, “Does Democracy Promote or Reduce Transnational Terrorist Incidents?”
31 Piazza, “Draining the Swamp.”
32 Li, “Does Democracy Promote or Reduce Transnational Terrorist Incidents?” 279.
33 Li focuses exclusively on transnational terrorism whereby a domestic actor targets a foreign installation in a country, a foreign terrorist targets a domestic target in a country, or a foreign terrorist attacks some other foreign target in a country. Li, “Does Democracy Promote or Reduce Transnational Terrorist Incidents?” 280. Eubank and Weinberg are careful to identify whether an attacker came from a democratic state and the regime type of the target; they find that terrorism is common even when the attacker came from a democracy and the target is a democracy. (They are interested, for example, in whether members of authoritarian regimes attack democracies or vice versa. Yet why the regime type of the attacker’s home country should be consequential here is unclear.) As they put it, “The prototypical terrorist event recorded in ITERATE [the data employed] 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.” Eubank and Weinberg, “Terrorism and Democracy: Perpetrators and Victims,” 161. Yet, as this statement reveals, they do not specify whether the terrorist and the target are from the same democracy. Consistent with the logic of the political access model, we should look at the incidence of militant groups employing terrorism against their own democratic states. It is only then that
our knowledge considerably about the variable effects of political access on militant activity.\textsuperscript{34}

**Psychological Approaches**

Psychological approaches to terrorism assume the primary importance of emotional, cognitive, and psychological phenomena for militant behavior. From this perspective, how a militant group interprets external stimuli depends on how that stimuli interacts with psychological phenomena motivating group and individual behavior.

Analysts employ psychological approaches on two levels of analysis: the individual and the group. On the individual level, scholars often study the propensity of individuals to join terrorist movements and the psychological traits of those who do. One central debate has been about the degree to which individuals in these movements exhibit some psychopathology or particular psychological tendencies.\textsuperscript{35} Similarly, analysts examine how participation in a terrorist group feeds individuals' psychological needs. In this tradition, members are understood to have some internal need met by the group's violent and extreme activities. “Apart from its political function, [the terrorist act] also serve[s] the individual and collective psychological needs of the terrorists themselves. The resort to terrorism [is] an existential choice.”\textsuperscript{36} Here, terrorism is best explained by its expressive function rather than its instrumental role—a contrast between “those who employ terrorism on behalf of an external goal and those whose goal is to carry out acts of terror.”\textsuperscript{37}

In addition, members have important needs met through their involvement in the terror organization: they get a sense of purpose, belonging, friendship, and meaning in their lives.\textsuperscript{38} Consequently, for individuals within the group, over time, terrorism “may become an identity for them the incentives—the possibility to pursue nonviolent options—should have the potential to condition the utility of engaging in terrorism. On this point, see Piazza, “Draining the Swamp.”

\textsuperscript{34} Eubank and Weinberg focus on executed attacks only, finding them more common in democracies and therefore concluding that terrorism is worse in democracies in part because they are handicapped in launching counter-terror operations. The selection effect obscures the possibility that democracies may succumb to more violent and nonviolent protests overall than autocracies and may foil more attacks than are executed.


\textsuperscript{36} McCormick, “Terrorist Decision Making,” 477.

\textsuperscript{37} Ibid., 480.

as much as a strategy.” Survival of the group therefore may trump other goals, even the attainment of the political or ideological ends for which the group was purportedly formed. The decision to use terrorism is detached from the group’s actual strategic environment and the costs and benefits of employing it.

Analysts in the psychological school also focus on the group as a whole, employing organizational and social psychology in order to evaluate group decision making, interactions, motivation, and action. Here, the clandestine nature of many militant groups renders them vulnerable to introversion in decision-making processes and therefore appropriate to analyze from a psychological perspective. In light of this covert nature, Gordon McCormick contends that the dynamics of groupthink might inure militant groups to external stimuli; and instead, groups will experience an illusion of invulnerability in how they evaluate information and an unquestioning belief in the morality of the in-group and apply pressure against group members who express even momentary doubts about virtually any illusions the group shares. Groups are ill equipped to evaluate the costs and benefits of using violence versus other strategies in a calculated, rational assessment process.

Both individual and group-oriented psychological theories imply that political access could have a less than favorable effect on group strategy and activity. Groupthink may make it difficult to process events in the external environment, such that unless those events confirm a preexisting consensus or conform to an emerging one, change will not occur. Terrorist groups subject to groupthink may resist information about external developments, such as the emergence of greater political access, that challenge their standard worldview that violence is an expeditious and morally justified means for pursuing goals. The group may consequently continue employing violent tactics even in the face of significant changes in its political environment.

From the perspective of those that emphasize individuals’ psychological needs in belonging to a group, political access—especially if it comes in the form of liberalization or reform of political institutions—might even heighten incentives to use violence. These opportunities challenge the raison d’etre of the group and subvert its cohesion by raising questions about whether the violent means it has used in the past justify its existence. Indeed, as the necessity of rationalizing the group’s existence magnifies, new propaganda or doctrine may be issued affirming righteousness and a commitment

to violence. The group retrenches in the face of changes in its environment. Leaders may increase the lethality and intensity of terror attacks in order to bolster group cohesion and reassure themselves of the efficacy and necessity of maintaining the organization and its clandestine, violent focus.

A more sanguine outcome might occur if political access comes in the form of specific accommodations or dispensations within the political system that effectively preserve and empower the militant group’s membership. This might allow a group to sustain itself and feed the psychological needs of members, while transforming itself from a violent entity. If, however, at least some members are also motivated by the expressive benefits of using violence, as suggested in some psychological approaches, political access could yield splintering and the emergence of new, especially violent factions.

Like the diverse theoretical predictions suggested by the literature, the available evidence suggests the relationship between group and individual psychology and militant strategy and activity is complicated. Profiles of terrorist actors reveal no clear pattern of psychological characteristics or pathologies. By implication, if members exhibit no uniform set of psychological features, there should be little consistency in how they and their groups respond to changes in the political access available to them in their states of operation.\footnote{This is a widely observed conclusion. For examples, see the profiling work done by Hudson, \textit{Who Becomes a Terrorist and Why}, 91–97; and the review of the literature by Neil J. Smelser and Faith Mitchell, eds., \textit{Terrorism: Perspectives from the Behavioral and Social Sciences} (Washington, DC: National Research Council, National Academies Press, 2002), 31.}

In addition, other evidence about group behavior suggests members may not be as uniformly insulated from changes in the external environment as the groupthink model proposes; nor do they always operate as cohesive wholes bonded by intragroup pressures. Rather, many studies emphasize just the opposite about militant groups: there are divisions and competition among different factions.\footnote{See, for example, Bloom, \textit{Dying to Kill}; Cynthia Irwin, \textit{Militant Nationalism} (University of Minnesota Press, 1999); Jacob D. Shapiro and David A. Siegel, “Under funding in Terrorist Organizations,” \textit{International Studies Quarterly} 51 (June 2007): 405-30. See also Frederick D. Miller, “The End of SDS and the Emergence of Weatherman: Demise Through Success,” in \textit{Social Movements of the Sixties and Seventies}, ed. Jo Freeman (New York: Longman, 1983), 283.} Moreover, individuals within these groups appear often to be hypersensitive to changes in their environments because those changes can affect their positions in the organization. At the least, there seems to be great diversity in the cohesiveness of militant groups, with some falling prey to what Frederick Miller refers to as encapsulation (and potentially groupthink) and with others being mired in internal dissent.\footnote{Miller, “The End of SDS,” 283.} The properties of groups as a whole appear to vary widely, making a consistent response across the spectrum to opportunities for political access unlikely.
In short, from within the psychological approach, reactions to the political environment could depend on any number of factors, including the specific incarnation of political access, the psychological disposition of members, whether the group is encapsulated and, in the latter case, the content of the prevailing consensus within the entity.

Ideational Approaches

A third set of arguments relates to the immaterial and symbolic dimension of militant activity. Two approaches might be categorized under this rubric: ideology and organizational culture.

Scholars who emphasize the importance of ideology in explaining group behavior focus on the written and unwritten doctrine that guides group action. These prescribe and proscribe actions, while embedding them in a philosophical framework. Some scholars stress, for example, the significance of militants who draw from religious doctrine and how it can provide leaders natural organizing principles for group action. More broadly, from within an ideational approach, the tenets of group doctrine or ideology often influence the means employed by a group, not just its goals.

Alternatively, an organizational culture approach presumes that different militant movements will have unique cultures defined in terms shared world views or beliefs or as a tool kit that prescribes alternative courses of action. This culture filters external stimuli and affects members’ understandings of their appropriate responses to changes in their social and political environment. Distinctive about this approach is that every group should have its own organizational culture depending on its history and other experiences. There is no universal organizational culture.

For both ideational approaches, how changes in political access are received and the response they precipitate might depend on the specific content of the doctrine or culture and the beliefs they engender about the use of violence versus nonviolent strategies to achieve group objectives. To understand how the group will respond, one must understand the content of

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46 Crenshaw, “Political Explanations,” 15.
48 For examples of this approach as applied to military organizations, see Jeffrey Legro, *Cooperation under Fire: Anglo-German Restraint during World War II* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995); Kier, *Imagining War*. 
the ideational systems and how organizational culture or doctrine influences the interpretation of external stimuli.

If an organization’s culture, for example, reflects a belief that nonviolent political activity is normatively acceptable but has been out of the question because the opportunities have not been available, then the expansion of political access might be favorably received. If an organization’s culture, for example, reflects a belief that nonviolent political activity is normatively acceptable but has been out of the question because the opportunities have not been available, then the expansion of political access might be favorably received. Alternatively, if the group culture is reflexively suspicious of political activity and those that advocate it, these opportunities should have little influence on strategy. Take, for example, one analyst’s characterization of the Basque nationalist group, ETA. In that account, the group’s understanding of violence and its role in promoting Basque identity became core features of the group’s organizational culture over time, such that any “change in attitudes [would be] tantamount to an epistemological change affecting the very premises on which political order and personal identity are founded.” We would expect ETA, if this analyst is correct, to alter little its attacks or methods in the face of growing political access.

McCormick’s characterization of the late nineteenth-century anarchist movement is similarly suggestive of how ideational factors might affect a group’s response to political access. As he characterizes it, for anarchists, terrorist violence was the “archetypical form of human resistance . . . and the medium through which heroic values can most fully be expressed.” In addition, the movement opposed hierarchical organization, including any essential to constituting an organized political party or movement, viewing it as antithetical to the movement’s principles and “theory of victory” (in which regime collapse would be achieved through a spontaneous popular uprising catalyzed by protest and violent action, not by takeover by a parallel organized opposition). From the stance of an organizational culture perspective, the salience of violence and the principles espoused by the late nineteenth-century anarchists would render changes in strategy in favor of traditional political activity exceedingly unlikely.

The reaction to opportunities for greater political participation also depends on the capacity of the group’s leadership to situate the meaning

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49 One problem here, of course, is measuring what in group discourse and belief systems is a reflection of a persistent organizational culture versus what in its discourse and belief system is a reflection of its strategic circumstances. Observance of a reflexive opposition to political action in group doctrine and statements may be a reflection of, and reinforced by, the absence of political opportunities. Some independent measures of organizational culture are essential.

50 Given the need to sustain group support for killing innocents, organizational cultures of terror groups might be more prone to reflect themes of resistance to political activity and the justification of violence.


of those opportunities within the group’s symbolic system or doctrine or to reinterpret the doctrine to allow for alternative understandings of the stimuli. As such, group leaders can play an important role in ideational approaches. Analyzing the process by which political entrepreneurs or leaders appropriate and employ ideologies for recruitment and motivational purposes is an important subtheme in studies that emphasize ideational factors.

What evidence do we have that ideology or organizational culture is a central determinant of how groups react to the political access available in their external environments? Like psychological approaches, research on the topic is lacking. However, common arguments about the importance of ideology and empirical examples about its impact on group strategy are suggestive.

Scholars commonly distinguish groups according to particular categories of ideologies: religious, left-wing, right-wing, and so forth. Moreover, within these categories, groups with religious ideologies are considered by many to be especially impervious to external influence and wedded to violence. Mark Juergensmeyer, for example, contends that within a terror group, religion generates a view of violence as an essential component of a cosmic war in which members are engaged. “Acts of religious terror serve not only as tactics in a political strategy but also as evocations of a much larger spiritual confrontation.”

By implication, we might expect that groups with religious ideologies, such as Al Qaeda in Iraq and Afghanistan’s Taliban, would have been in the past poorly receptive to political access and opportunities to engage in nonviolent political activity. For example, they might resist forming hybrids in which they pair violent action with a nonviolent political party. This supposition may seem to resonate with empirical reality. Certainly, at least to date, core factions of the Taliban in Afghanistan have done little to form any sort of political wing to compete in elections, while Al Qaeda in Iraq did little to respond to (albeit problematic) opportunities for participation in elections in that country, even during the height of its influence when it was allied with Iraq’s Sunni tribes.

We should, however, take care in advancing such cases as evidence that religion/ideology affects a group’s responsiveness to political access. First, there may be an omitted variable in both cases that better explains the failure to develop political wings. That is, ideology may be important to the extent that it influences a more fundamental determinant of strategy: the nature of

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social support for the movement. Al Qaeda in Iraq and the Taliban may have, at least in the recent past, lacked the mass-based social constituencies that support their underlying political objectives; this means that although they may undertake some tactical alliances with local populations and other militant groups, were they to enter the political system, they lack a constituency that would support their platforms and goals. This may help explain why these groups have fielded no political parties.

Second, there are certainly counterexamples of religious groups that do form hybrids: Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hamas in the Palestinian territories both have joint armed and political wings. In Iraq, Moqtada al Sadr’s radical, religiously inspired ideology did not prevent his movement from building a substantial political wing.

Organizational Approaches

Generally, organizational approaches share the view that intragroup complexities affect militant strategy and that changes in the group’s external environment are filtered through organizational dynamics.54 I discuss three approaches below.

**Organizations as Distributions of Power and Preferences**

One approach involves defining organizations according to the differences in the individual preferences and the balance of power among different constituencies within an organization’s leadership and membership. This approach has two common variants. First, analysts may distinguish organizations according to whether they contain individuals with more and less intense preferences over goals and strategy (moderates versus hardliners) and analyze the influence of each faction.55

The distribution of moderates versus hardliners in the organization may in turn affect how it responds in the aggregate to political access. A divided organization with heterogeneous membership preferences may be vulnerable to forming hybrids: increasing political access results in the formation of a political party by moderates while hardliners maintain the armed wing.

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54 I discuss three central variants, but my treatment of organizational approaches is not exhaustive. Sometimes they use slightly different language. Irwin refers to ideologues, radicals and politicos. 
Irwin, *Militant Nationalism*. DeNardo refers to pragmatists versus purists. James DeNardo, *Power in Numbers* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985). Note that the meaning of these distinctions, especially for hardliners versus softliners, is not always well defined. The differences could reduce to several things: individuals/factions may exhibit different preferences over outcomes (that is, intensity of commitment to attainment of all goals); preferences over strategy (valuations of the costs and risks of alternative approaches to pursuing those goals); or beliefs about the causal relationship between different strategies and their outcomes—divergences that are commonly rooted in personality/intellectual dispositions or prior experiences in the organization.
Homogenous organizations, or those in which one faction dominates, will reflect the preferences of the prevailing group. If moderates are ascendant, we may see a diminishment of armed activity and perhaps the eventual supplantation of the violent group with a political party. Where hardliners prevail, there may be little change in strategy as they reject outright the efficacy or legitimacy of using nonviolent action to achieve their goals. Finally, one potential effect of a change in political access is that it may shift the balance of power between different factions within the organization, either empowering moderates, and allowing them to push the organization in a peaceful direction or causing the marginalized hardliners to split off and form a separate violent entity.

A second variant of the “organizations as distributions of preferences/power” approach emphasizes the different jobs or roles of actors within the organization and how those might shape the actors’ preferences over group strategy. For example, middle management or personnel in charge of managing operations may have different preferences over strategy, relative to the leaders or directors of the organization, because of how those strategies bear on private interests. In turn, political access may appeal more to leaders than managers. For the former, opportunities to participate in formal institutional politics may generate private benefits (perquisites of office holding, prestige, international legitimacy) that heighten incentives to push the organization toward nonviolent activity. Conversely, middle managers, and those running day-to-day operations may be threatened by changes in the political environment, as they could lose the material and symbolic benefits they enjoy from their jobs running a violent, terrorist organization. Where such divisions of labor emerge in organizations, political access could produce splintering or hybrids.

Organizations as Structures

A second organizational approach discriminates among organizations based on their formal structure: how units with responsibility for management tasks and operational activities are defined, organized, and relate to one another. There are different ways of conceptualizing “structure.” One approach emphasizes the degree to which the organizations are hierarchical or decentralized—that is how the organizations concentrate authority, divide

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56 For examples of these sorts of differentiated functions, see Rohan Gunaratna, Inside Al Qaeda (New York: Berkeley Books, 2003); Stern, Terror in the Name of God. Shapiro and Siegel, in “Underfunding in Terrorist Organizations,” argue that middle managers benefit from the clandestine nature of the organization and the difficulty of internal monitoring the exigencies of keeping operations secret poses for the leadership; middle managers are able to skim funds allocated for operations as well as to draw salaries. They therefore have a vested interest in maintaining the terrorist activities of the organization because of the private benefits that they accrue.
and integrate specialized functions, and distribute information. A hierarchical organization, in turn, may have better “command and control” and capacity to ensure that subordinates implement changes in strategy, as well as guard against defections. This, in turn, could heighten its leaders’ incentives to respond to political access—they know they can bring the organization along and therefore not sacrifice control in the event of a major shift in strategy.

A second approach focuses on the network structure of the organization and relations among the organization’s constituent members. Applied to terrorist groups, these approaches emphasize the complex relationships among individuals that operate within networks in order to evaluate issues associated with recruitment, evolution, and communication of ideas and information. Networked organizations could face many obstacles in enforcing strategic changes within and across nodes, potentially creating disincentives to try and promote such dramatic change in the first place. In fact, converting to political action may be especially threatening to the endurance of the network from the central node’s perspective because it may require a reinterpretation of the ideology or doctrine that connects what otherwise might be dispersed membership communities.

In other respects, however, networks may help promote responsiveness to political access by allowing for greater innovation and adaptation to local conditions by the autonomous cells that constitute them. Hence, while we might see fewer efforts by the central node to respond to political access, we might also see local adaptation as political access becomes available. The hypotheses about structure are cross-cutting.

**Organizations as Bureaucracies**

A final organizational approach focuses on the specification of the preferences of the entity considered as a whole. A bureaucratic politics perspective posits that all organizations are governed by a universal culture (as opposed to a particular, historically bounded culture) in which protecting the well-being of the organization is paramount: strategy is heavily influenced by the need to insulate the entity from uncertainty and maintain its autonomy, prestige and resources. Attainment of the goals of the organization

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59 On the role of ideology connecting dispersed membership communities, see Stern, *Terror in the Name of God*. 
are not irrelevant, but the nature of the goals, and valuations of the best strategies to achieve them, will reflect a priority on protecting, if not enhancing, the prerogatives of the organization itself. Members of a group may also internalize the need to protect the organization and be socialized by their participation within it. Therefore the members will view problems and issues through the lens of their position in the institution. The health of the organization and its priorities color the evaluation of strategic alternatives.

To the extent political access and opportunities to participate in nonviolent politics enhance organizational prerogatives and resources—such as opening up new channels for fundraising or enhancing the organization’s international and domestic prestige—they should be well received. However, the organization as a whole should be far less responsive to growing political access if participation in nonviolent activity undermines group autonomy, increases uncertainty, renders the groups’ fate more dependent on events outside its immediate control, or undermines fundraising.

Empirically, there is some evidence in the scholarly literature that organizational factors, variously defined, do influence group strategy and activity. Take the 2007 study by West Point’s Combating Terrorism Center of leadership schisms in Al Qaeda from 1989 to 2006. The study identifies two enduring factions in the movement: planners and propagandists. Planners favor building a military organization to attack targets in the West; propagandists seek to establish Al Qaeda as a global brand. The supremacy of the propagandists (which includes bin Laden and Zawahiri), the report contends, has been a driving force of the movement’s strategy.

Similarly, Mia Bloom’s study suggests that bureaucratic factors often motivate militants. The desire to maximize visibility and social acclaim produces “outbidding” among groups when they operate in a crowded militant field. Bloom finds that in order to bolster resources (recruits, funding), enhance organizational prestige, and ensure the sustainability of the group,

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61 See, for example, Graham Allison, *Essence of Decision: Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1971).


63 Bloom, *Dying to Kill*.

64 Implicit in the outbidding literature is that organizations are motivated to protect their own prerogatives and prestige (otherwise they might defer to the most “effective” among them).
militant entities in the Palestinian territories engage in violent acts to demonstrate their superiority over their competitors.\(^{65}\)

Despite these studies that underscore the general usefulness of organizational approaches, evidence about how organizational factors specifically affect how groups respond to their political environments is limited. One exception is Cynthia Irwin’s analysis of what she calls government responsiveness (which is heavily influenced by opportunities to participate in elections) and organizational strategy.\(^{66}\) She argues that high levels of responsiveness increase the balance of power in favor of factions that support the use of nonviolent political strategies, which can encourage a group’s movement into institutional politics. However, in a parallel study of the Irish Republican case, on which Irwin also focuses, Peter Neumann rebuts her findings, showing that there was no shift in the make-up of the nationalist movement and that other dynamics explain the IRA and Sinn Fein’s shift toward nonviolent tactics.\(^{67}\) In short, a great deal remains to be known about how, empirically, political access interacts with organizational incentives and behavior.\(^{68}\)

The Societal Approach

The final approach I discuss is not well developed in the literature but nonetheless reflects a pervasive theme within it: the social context in which a group operates and especially the degree of support it enjoys from society affects its strategic choices.\(^{69}\) Societies vary in the support they may offer.

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\(^{66}\) Irwin, *Militant Nationalism*.


\(^{68}\) Note one approach not discussed here is organizational learning. Relevant here is Trujillo and Jackson's emphasis on how an organization's capacity in acquisition, interpretation, distribution, and storage of new information facilitates improvements in strategic decision making, tactical planning, or operational activities. Accordingly, better learners may recognize and act upon the opportunities available when the group has political access (for example, form hybrids), while poor learners (those that exhibit weak capacities in these areas) could be less responsive to changes in their political environment; violence will continue at a status quo level. Horacio R. Trujillo and Brian A. Jackson, “Organizational Learning and Terrorist Groups,” in *Teaching Terror*, ed. James J.F. Forest (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2005), 52–68.

\(^{69}\) Cronin, “How Al-Qaida Ends,” 27, for example, suggests that society plays a central role in providing “active and passive” support to terrorist groups. In so doing, her study echoes the common, if rarely fully developed, theme in the literature that terrorists are influenced by their need to maintain social support and the assistance local communities provide them. For other studies emphasizing the importance of social support (or mass publics) and terrorism, see Pape, *Dying to Win*; Bloom, *Dying to Kill*; Ethan Bueno de Mesquita, “Terrorist Factions” *Quarterly Journal of Political Science* 3, no. 4 (2008).
militant groups, both in how much they support the militants’ goals and in their tolerance for the groups’ use of violence in pursuit of those objectives. Specifically, a societal approach implies that political access will affect militant strategy through two causal steps.

First, it presumes that where political access is available to the public, social tolerance for the use of violence by militant groups will be affected: that is, when militant groups have other means to pursue their goals, and the population itself has some recourse through the political system, mass publics who might otherwise support the militants’ goals will oppose the use of terrorism to achieve them. Second, the approach requires that this level of social support will condition the militant group’s choice of strategy or violent activities. Specifically, when society withdraws its support, militants have incentives to pursue alternative strategies, especially nonviolent methods, and invest less in terrorist campaigns, either because the legitimacy of those means is in question or they lose access to vital resources from society.

The logic of this approach can be seen in some intriguing research relevant to the democracy-terror debate. One study, for example, stresses the importance of “shifts in societal attitudes” stemming from democratic transitions as key to reducing terrorist violence. It argues that the establishment of democratic institutions enhances popular faith in the legitimacy of the political system and the commitment to liberal, democratic values and, therefore, reduces society’s tolerance for militant violence.70 Another recent analysis of several Middle East cases suggests that liberalization in the political system could work to undercut terrorism by promoting norms of tolerance, creating functioning and inclusive institutional structures and increasing the legitimacy of the political system.71

Equally influential has been the logic of the societal approach in policy debate. Take, once again, George Bush’s 2006 National Security Strategy. It contends that terrorism is furthered in states where people suffer from “political alienation” and “see no legitimate way to promote change in their own country.”72 Accordingly, expanding political access for local populations should lessen societal support for terrorism. Facing trouble recruiting and gaining sanctuary within a hostile environment, militant movements will be marginalized and forced to relinquish their violent tactics. In short, this strategy sees society as a lynchpin in the counterterror equation: lessening societal tolerance for terrorists is a central means for stamping out their movements.

What evidence is there for either causal step in the democracy-society-terrorism equation? On the first, there has been little direct, specific study

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70 Jebb, et al., The Fight for Legitimacy, 8.
72 The National Security Strategy, 10.
of how political access affects social support for terrorism. Within the few studies that explore the issues indirectly or limitedly, views tend to diverge. Most pessimistic is Gregory Gause in his widely cited essay on democracy promotion in the Middle East, which argues that there is not “any evidence that democracy in the Arab World would ‘drain the swamp,’ eliminating soft support for terrorist organizations among the Arab public and reducing the number of potential recruits for them.”73 Similarly, Katerina Delacoura finds little evidence of a causal relationship between the lack of democracy in the Middle East and the pervasiveness of religiously motivated groups using terrorist methods.74 Considerably more optimistic is the study by Cindy Jebb, et al., of how democratic transitions yield a political culture less tolerant of violence and therefore more likely to lead to the marginalization of militant groups.75 In the intermediate case falls the study by Dalia Dassa Kaye, et al., which offers a positive but carefully qualified endorsement of the hypothesis that in some respects, political liberalization can reduce support for political violence.76

In short, the studies we have on how democracy influences societal support for terrorism are far from monolithic in their conclusions. Perhaps we should not be surprised. Examination of the broader, scholarly literature suggests that social receptiveness to violence and militancy is a complex phenomenon, determined by many factors.77

Indeed, the most developed debate—that which stresses the socio-economic “root causes” of terrorism—reveals the difficulty of determining the basis of social support or opposition to violence.78 Some studies in this vein support a clear link between social support for terrorism and poverty.79 Others affirm a relationship but see it as mediated by the schools with radical religious-based curricula that emerge in the vacuum of public education in some impoverished countries.80 Others challenge altogether the purported

75 Jebb, et al., The Fight for Legitimacy.
78 For a review of the debate, see, for example, Pape, Dying to Win, 17-20; Kueger and Maleckova, “Education, Poverty and Terrorism”; Abadie, Poverty, Political Freedom and the Roots of Terrorism; Kueger, What Makes a Terrorist.
link between poverty and support for terrorism.\textsuperscript{81} For example, Alan Krueger and Jitka Maleckova find in the Palestinian case that more educated and well-off individuals are more likely to support terrorist violence than those who are impoverished.\textsuperscript{82} In this vein, also interesting are Judith Harik’s findings that Lebanese Shia supporters of Hezbollah are not in overwhelming numbers the most politically alienated nor economically deprived segment of that population.\textsuperscript{83} Yet others suggest it is not poverty per se that motivates support for violence but perhaps inequality, relative deprivation, or, more broadly, perceptions that an absence of economic opportunity can be due to a foreign adversary or repressive government.\textsuperscript{84}

Beyond studies in the socio-economic root causes tradition, other research too underscores the diversity of causes of social attitudes, such as those that point to the impact of governing authorities’ strategies on support for terrorist methods,\textsuperscript{85} or to cultural factors, such as “social habits and historical traditions that sanction the use of violence against the government.”\textsuperscript{86} Finally, in a very different context, we see arguments that link tolerance for violence and terrorism to a local population’s lack of security and sense of community well-being. This approach is well expressed in the current counterinsurgency field manual for the U.S. Army and Marine Corps, which supplies the philosophical and practical basis for strategy in the Afghanistan war.\textsuperscript{87}

Finally, it may be of interest to observe that public opinion research reinforces the notion that social views toward terrorism can be highly complex.\textsuperscript{88} Take the 2007 Pew Global Attitudes Project poll, which underscores the potential for attitudes to shift independently from any change in the opportunities for political participation available to the populace. From 2002 to 2007 the poll cites sharply shifting attitudes toward the use of suicide terrorism in Lebanon, Jordan, and Pakistan (the 2002 to 2007 change, respectively,
is −40 percent, −20 percent, and −24 percent), independent of any systematic change in political access in any of the three countries.89

Last, turning to the second causal step in the societal approach, we potentially see greater, albeit still modest, support for the thesis that variation in social support—however determined—does affect militant strategy and activity. For example, Pape finds that populations in which governments have made concessions to self-determination movements are less willing to support suicide terrorism and that there is an empirical pattern that links that lack of support and the forswearing of these tactics by the group.90 Bloom similarly links shifting attitudes toward the use of violence with the tendency to use suicide tactics in the Palestinian case.91 Finally, Neumann finds that public opinion in the Irish Republican case has an important role in supporting movement toward electoral strategies and away from terrorism over the long term.92 Hence social support may play a role in determining militant strategy and the violent methods groups employ or incentives to invest in a political wing. Yet the question remains whether the presence or absence of political access in a state is a central determinant of its society’s support for violence and, if so, how and in what degree.

SCHOLARLY AND PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

This article has two sets of implications. The first relates to the academic study of terrorism. Most significantly, the essay suggests three important lessons for research on the relationship between political access and terrorist activity. First, it suggests analysts carefully refine and clearly distinguish the specific meaning and form of political access relevant to their research questions. Second, analysts should consider the range of possible outcomes that different forms of political access could yield, without a priori limiting themselves to a single dependent variable, such as the incidence of attacks. Finally, the essay suggests that the best research will emerge when analysts are explicit about the approach to terrorist motivation in which their theories are grounded and how their approaches shape the levels of analysis, objects of analysis, and their assumptions about the forces that drive militant behavior. Indeed, one message of this article is that the assumptions analysts make about what motivates groups and individuals to engage in terrorist activity

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90 Pape, Dying to Win, 94-100.
91 Bloom, Dying to Kill, 19-44.
92 Neumann, “The bullet and the ballot box.”
have major implications for what we expect will happen when groups are faced with growing opportunities to participate in nonviolent politics. In sum, we should recognize that studying how militant groups respond to political access encompasses a wealth of research questions, while recognizing at the same time the necessity of carefully specifying the particular question under investigation at any given point in time.

A second set of implications relates to the overall implications of the hypotheses developed in this essay—and in particular what it means for policy analysts interested in finding solutions to the problems posed by global terrorist activity. Specifically, the essay suggests we should take care in anticipating a natural and inevitable relationship between spreading democracy and reducing terrorist violence. Despite our best intentions and intellectual intuitions that increasing peaceful alternatives for expressing grievances should reduce the appeal of terrorist activity, the relationship often does not deductively hold. That is, in many cases a relationship does not logically follow when one traces the causal processes connecting political access and the actual motivations of groups to engage in violent behavior. In only some circumstances do the five approaches suggest that democracy should reduce the incidence of violence. Some predict the opposite outcome—an increase in violence—while others predict diversifications and innovations in strategy (potentially) independent from changes in the level of violence employed. Even where increasing political access might negatively impact the level of militant violence, that relationship is apt to depend on variables that have little to do with the effects of the political environment; in other words, many of these theories are indeterminate in predicting a clear relationship between political access and terrorist violence (see Table 3).

Nor does the (admittedly limited) empirical research relevant to the topic offer cause for unqualified optimism (see Table 4). The scanty findings relevant to the democracy and terror debate offer little cause for sweeping optimism that expanding political access will prove the panacea to terrorist violence that we might hope it would.

Here, in fact, is where the academic and practical implications of this essay merge. Only by engaging in careful research will we begin to see when, and in what cases, providing opportunities for greater political access might have a favorable effect on terrorist activity. The detailed research prescribed above (hopefully) will help reveal which forms of political access, in what country and for which groups, will generate desirable outcomes. This will help us refine our policy tools and approaches rather than requiring us to rely on the blunt instrument of democracy promotion.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Analytical School/Approach to</strong></th>
<th><strong>Contingency</strong></th>
<th><strong>Strategy/Militant Activity</strong></th>
<th><strong>Other (likely)</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Terrorist Motivation</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>(Does political access reduce incidence of terror attacks?)</td>
<td>Strategic Outcomes (no change/status quo; incidence of attacks increases; change in tactics/targets; hybrid forms; splintering; terrorism ceases/ends)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Strategic Choice**
- Depends on how form of political access affects costs, probabilities, and benefits of legal versus illegal action
- Only in particular conditions—e.g., when expected utility of nonviolent political activity exceeds that of using terrorist attacks
- Attacks increase; change in tactics; Hybrid is formed; Terror ceases/ends—political party supplants terror group

**Psychology**
- Group level
  - Depends on content of groupthink consensus
  - Possible if prevailing consensus is to reduce violence when have political access
  - Attacks continue at SQ
- Individual level
  - (Members attracted to violence or to experience of membership; or exhibit psychopathology)
  - Unlikely
  - Attacks increase; Splintering

**Ideational**
- Depends on content of ideology or organizational culture
- Possible if culture/doctrine receptive to nonviolent activity
- Violence continues at SQ

**Organizational**
- Dist of pwr/prfs
  - (Variants: 1. def. by intensity of prefs; 2. def. by job/role in organization. See text.)
  - Structure
    - Decentralized orgs. subject to cross-cutting pressures; hierarchy may be more responsive to change by leadership
    - Possible if leaders in hierarchy want it or local cells in decentralized organization innovate
    - Violence Increases; Hybrid Forms; Splintering
    - Violence at SQ; Splintering
  - Bureaucracies
    - Depends on how access affect budgets, autonomy, etc.
    - Likely if org. benefits > costs
    - Violence at SQ
  - Societal
    - Depends on (1) how access affects social support and (2) how social support affects militant incentives
    - Likely if 1 and 2 hold
    - Change in tactics/targeting; Hybrid forms; End terror—political party supplants militant group
### TABLE 4 Relevant Empirical Studies and Implications for Research

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Analytical School</th>
<th>Representative Studies (Examples)</th>
<th>Key (relevant) Findings</th>
<th>Suggestions For Future Research</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strategic Choice</td>
<td>Eubank and Weinberg, 1998; 1994, 1998, 2001; Eyerman, 1998; Li, 2005; Piazza, 2007; Schmid, 1992; Ross, 1993; Weinberg and Pedahzur, 2003; Gershman, 1998; Kydd and Walter, 2006; Pape, 2005</td>
<td>Among SC studies on demo/terror, empirical tests reveal contradictory results, reflecting failure to disaggregate and evaluate competing effects and to specify clearly analytical connections b/w militant activity and different forms of political access</td>
<td>Need to parse causal steps and develop partial theories for how alternative factors affect terrorist strategy and activity; clearly specify form and expected effects of political access under investigation</td>
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<tr>
<td>Psychology</td>
<td>Post, 2007; Olsson, 2008; Bongar, et al., 2007; Horgan, 2005; McCormick, 2003; Post, 2005; Smelser and Mitchell, 2002; Hudson, 1999</td>
<td>Some evidence of psychological appeal of terrorist activities, but no consensus that individual members or groups exhibit consistent psychological characteristics (esp. psychopathology)</td>
<td>Especially for group psychology, need further discrimination among groups according to degree to which they are encapsulated and cohesive versus factionalized and responsive to external stimuli</td>
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<td>Ideational</td>
<td>Juergensmeyer, 2003; Hoffman, 2006; Stern, 2004; Rangstorp, 1996</td>
<td>Despite contention that ideology (esp. religion) can influence group action, unclear it correlates empirically with strategies groups employ in response to political access</td>
<td>Need means for discriminating ideologies (such as, according to content and flexibility/ease of reinterpretation) to potentially assess how receptive groups will be to changes in pol. access</td>
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<td>Organizational</td>
<td>Gunarantha, 2003; Arquilla and Ronfeldt, 2001; Bueno de Mesquita, 2007; Bloom, 2005; Irwin, 1999; Neumann, 2005; Shapiro and Siegel, 2007; Wasserman and Faust, 1994; Sageman, 2008; Abrahms, 2008</td>
<td>Evidence that organizational factors are empirically salient, although not clear they yield systematic response to changes in political access</td>
<td>Need studies that clearly specify org. approach, whether defined by distribution of preferences (hard/softliners or members’ jobs/roles), structure, or bureaucratic parochialism and generate from those logics hypotheses for how groups will react to changes in political access</td>
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<td>Societal</td>
<td>Abadie, 2004; Harik, 1996; Krueger and Maleckova, 2003; Pape, 2005; Bloom, 2005; Jebbs et al., 2008; Dassa Kaye, et al., 2008</td>
<td>Evidence that groups respond to social opinion, but unclear opportunities systematically affect social attitudes</td>
<td>Need more systematic study of (1) how changes in political access affect social support for terrorist activity and (2) how groups respond to societal support/opinion</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: For complete bibliographic information on the works referenced in Table 4, see article’s notes.