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Article

Authoritarianism and privacy: The moderating role of terrorist threat

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Abstract

The resurgence in interest in authoritarianism has been linked to a rise not only in the acceptance of right-wing ideologies, but specifically restrictions to civil liberties. Threats from posed by immigration and terrorism, for example, have made these been particularly noticeable in relation to surveillance and the right to privacy. We can observe simple correlations between these variables; however, the dynamics of threat are more complex to understand. The analysis reported here demonstrates how the relationship between authoritarianism and the curtailment of civil liberties is moderated by the threat of terrorism. Using 2005 British Social Attitudes survey data, collected either side of the 7/7 bombings, comparisons between the pre-/post- samples indicate that the threat of terrorism activates authoritarian tendencies and reduces the protection of rights to privacy from government. Interestingly and importantly, reactions to terrorism in the form of a change in opinion regarding civil liberties for those scoring higher in authoritarianism remained almost constant between the two periods. The results provide support for understanding how minority opinions (removal of rights to privacy) can become majority views during times of threat.

Introduction

The threat posed by terrorism has been one of the key influences on Western governmental agendas since the attacks on the World Trade Centre and other targets in the US in 2001. Further incidents in London in July 2005 (amongst others) have created what some regard as a 'state of fear' (Merolla and Zechmeister 2009). Legislation implemented in the wake of these events (e.g. the *US Patriot Act* and the *UK Prevention of Terrorism Act*) has been accused of being anti-democratic, inconsistent with Human Rights, and ultimately resulted in the erosion of civil liberties (Heymann 2002; Pantazis and Pemberton 2009). Understanding the way in which terrorist attacks can lead to calls for and acceptance of more surveillance, invasion of privacy and an erosion of democratic rights has become a key issue for researchers and policy makers.

A recent example came in the aftermath of the Westminster attack in March 2017; calls were made for police and security services to be permitted access to encrypted messaging services after it was discovered that Khalid Masood had used *WhatsApp* minutes before driving his car into pedestrians. Speaking shortly after, UK Home Secretary Amber Rudd stated:

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We need to make sure that organisations like WhatsApp, and there are plenty of others like that, don't provide a secret place for terrorists to communicate with each other.¹

Similar concerns over access to iPhones nearly reached Federal Court following the San Bernardino shooting in the US in December 2015. Eventually a third-party unlocked Syed Farook's device after Apple refused; however, an intense debate over data privacy and government surveillance ensued. On the one hand, technology company supporters advocated a responsibility to protect users' privacy:

This kind of technological power will become ripe for abuse not only by the government, but also by identity thieves, estranged spouses or anyone who would benefit from snooping into your life. (Sophia Cope, EFF²)

The debate on the other side accused Apple of supporting terrorism and anyone else with something to 'hide':

Apple chose to protect a dead ISIS terrorist's privacy over the security of the American people [...] Apple is becoming the company of choice for terrorists, drug dealers, and sexual predators of all sorts. (Tom Cotton, Senator for Arkansas³)

Opinion polls produced conflicting results; Pew Research Centre released figures showing 51 per cent of US citizens supported the FBI's position [that Apple should unlock the phone], 38 per cent believing they shouldn't, with 11 per cent undecided. In contrast, a Reuters/Ipsos poll indicated a 35:46:20 split respectively.⁴ Although questions differed slightly between the surveys, we can see that there is significant support for the erosion of the right to privacy to some degree. Issues of national security and protection from terrorism appear to weaken support for rights to keep our private lives from the government and other regulatory agencies.

The central question being addressed in this paper relates to the specific circumstances under which restrictions on civil liberties and democracy are likely to become vulnerable. This is specifically examined in relation to public attitudes following terrorist attacks. In addition, in what way are individual differences in personality features—such as authoritarianism—likely to impact upon support for restrictive social policies and infringe on individual freedom. The threat posed by terrorism to individual and group security is suggested to instil a state of fear in authoritarians and make them more likely to accept restrictions to their rights, such as privacy. Specifically, this paper will examine whether authoritarianism provides the link between the threat posed by terrorism and the likelihood that the general public will support increased surveillance and communications monitoring.

Authoritarianism

Following the humanitarian atrocities committed during WWII, a plethora of studies emerged from psychology attempting to explain just how seemingly 'ordinary' people had allowed themselves to succumb to totalitarian regimes. *The Authoritarian Personality* (Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswick, Levinson, and Stanford 1950) was one such attempt to quantify the apparent acceptance of the Third Reich by the German population under the Nazi occupation. Many have since critiqued this theory and the study itself (see

¹ <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/whatsapp-amber-rudd-security-access-spy-users-messages-home-secretary-khalid-masood-a7650481.html>. Accessed June 19, 2017.

² <https://www.nytimes.com/roomfordebate/2016/02/18/crimes-iphones-and-encryption/an-unprecedented-order-that-puts-us-all-at-risk>. Accessed June 19, 2017.

³ <http://fortune.com/2016/02/18/apple-fbi-opinion-makers/>. Accessed June 19, 2017.

⁴ <https://www.theatlantic.com/national/archive/2016/02/apple-fbi-polls/470736/>. Accessed June 19, 2017.

Altemeyer 1981, 1988, 1996; Christie and Jahoda 1954; Hyman and Sheatsley 1954; Martin 2001), although the legacy lives on. Many of the original personality features—although no longer entwined to psychodynamic theory—are still at the core of the authoritarian personality, including: conventionalism, submission to authority, conformity and aggression towards out-groups.

More recent incarnations of authoritarian theory (e.g. Feldman and Stenner 1997) propose that a variety of ‘normative threats’ (political, economic, and fear of war) could significantly impact upon what they termed ‘authoritarian predispositions’ (in essence a personality structure that manifests itself in an expression of authoritarian attitudes when exposed to a threatening situation). These ‘dormant’ personality features though are likely to be activated by threat. Early examinations of this concept (e.g. Sales 1972, 1973) analysed archival data relating to events such as the Great Depression, reporting that threats to economic order were sufficient to invoke authoritarian reactions. Doty, Peterson, and Winter (1991) widened this remit to include a range of social and political indices, supporting Sales’ hypothesis that external threats could have significant impact upon levels of authoritarianism.

Terrorism, as an example of a normative threat, has been examined by a number of researchers in this field. For example, when participants read either a threatening or non-threatening newspaper article relating to the September 11th attacks, Hastings and Shaffer (2005) reported that there were significant differences between authoritarianism attitudes and scores on both the Democratic Values and Militarism scales. Similarly, Cohrs, Kielmann, Maes and Moschner (2005) demonstrated that authoritarians responded specifically to the threat initiated by the events of 9/11, which were manifested in anti-Islamic attitudes. Furthermore, these were explained as being driven by the ‘motivational goals’ of social control and security.

Heaven, Organ, Supavandeeprasit and Leeson (2005) compared pre- and post-RWA scores either side of the invasion of Iraq (19th March 2003). Their sample of Australian residents indicated a strong positive correlation between attitudes towards the war and a negative relationship with attitudes towards Middle Eastern people. Another novel examination used letters published in major US newspapers pre- and post-September 11th, which were compared for sentiments reflecting authoritarian and anti-authoritarian discourse. Perrin (2005) reports that both of these categories rose significantly following the terrorist activities of 2001; essentially, an authoritarian reaction can have two elements, with many seeking more restrictive social policies (authoritarian) whereas others advocated a more liberal response and increased tolerance (anti-authoritarian). An unpublished examination of authoritarian attitudes and predispositions under crisis by Merolla, Ramos, and Zechmeister (2006) also indicated that the threat to national security [from terrorism] had a greater impact in raising authoritarian attitudes and predispositions than did economic disaster. Similar models—with threat as a central tenet—have also been reviewed by Jugert and Duckitt (2009) and Jost, Napier, Thorisdottir, Gosling, Palfai and Ostafin (2007).

Lavine, Lodge and Freitas (2005) refer to these theories as third generation ‘activation models’ of authoritarianism:

[...] precipitating situations make predispositions *relevant*⁵ and thereby strengthen the connections with their presumed affective, cognitive, and behavioural consequences. In the absence of trait-situation feature matching, predispositions should remain cognitively and motivationally dormant and therefore less likely to influence subsequent judgements and behaviours. (2005: 222)

The current paper follows this trend and sits within a raft of studies that have attempted to explain the way in which threat from terrorism influences attitudinal responses through a range of ‘personality’ features. For authoritarianism, these are the ‘activation’ models described by Lavine et al., whereby the presence of a

⁵ Emphasis in original.

threat is likely to enact a change in opinions to a range of policies designed to limit this threat [from terrorism]. The analysis presented here mirrors that of one such study by Hetherington and Suhay (2011), in that it examines the impact of threat (9/11) upon the opinions of citizens to a range of anti-democratic policies (phone tapping, CCTV, etc.). In a similar vein, this analysis tests for the interaction between authoritarianism and threat as a way of predicting support for such policies (e.g. right to privacy). However, the current study differs substantially in that rather than assessing threat using a self-report measure (Hetherington and Suhay asked respondents: “How worried are you that you personally might become a victim of a terrorist attack?”), the current data allows a naturalistic experiment to unfold by directly comparing respondents interviewed before with those canvassed after the July 7/7 attacks.

The use of ‘before and after’ naturalistic data from large-scale public surveys has been previously employed in similar ways to assess the impact of threat upon personality features similar to authoritarianism. Van de Vyver, Houston, Abrams, and Vasiljevic (2016) published an analysis of data pre-/post- the London 7/7 bombings from a survey on Equality and Diversity being administered during June-August 2005. The results supported a model of *threat x personality* interaction in so far as their measurement of the liberal-conservative dimension of personality was reflected in their test of moral foundations theory and motivated social cognition. In a similar way to authoritarian activations models, the *reactive-liberal hypothesis* (that liberals under threat become more conservative; see Nail, McGregor, Drinkwater, Steele and Thompson 2009) was supported. Within their supplementary analysis, Van de Vyver et al. also make reference to items from the 2005 British Social Attitudes (BSA) survey, noting differences in immigration support varying by political orientation (but not linking to authoritarianism).

Further evidence of these personality/threat interactions is evident in the work of Kam and Kinder (2007), analysing a large US cross-sectional survey either side of 9/11 (National Election Surveys 2000-02). As with Van de Vyver et al., the focus is not specifically on authoritarianism; rather Kam and Kinder (2007) explore the related concept of *Ethnocentrism* (itself a chapter of the Adorno et al. book). Analysis of some authoritarian items within these scales suggest that ethnocentrism is: “[...] less important than partisanship in explaining American opinion on the war on terrorism, but more consequential than authoritarianism” (2007: 330). The current analysis diverges here in that it assumes ethnocentrism to be a discrete facet of authoritarianism, specifically the high in-group/out-group bias. In addition, the outcome variables from Kam and Kinder’s study relate to macro-level policies such as increased border spending, foreign aid, defence budgets and attitudes towards (the President) Bush.

The relatively unique contribution to the current debate made within this paper is threefold; firstly, it focuses on authoritarian theory and particularly the activation model. Secondly, the fear manipulation is real in the sense that the data is from a naturally occurring event (before and after 7/7 bombings). Finally, it relates to UK residents attitudes towards democratic views and civil liberties. The focus is on the impact terrorist threat has upon authoritarianism and the subsequent reactions to social policies such as surveillance and privacy. One could argue that once we have lost these rights, citizens are largely at the mercy of the government through the dilution of democratic principles.

The Present Study and Hypotheses

The current study analysed archival cross-sectional data from the 2005 British Social Attitudes (BSA) survey. It is hypothesised that levels of expressed authoritarian attitudes will differ for those respondents completing the survey *after* the terrorist incidents had taken place in comparison to those taking part in the earlier stages of the annual data collection period (i.e. before 7th July 2005). The threat posed by the terrorist attacks is hypothesised to impact upon post-event respondent’s authoritarianism to sway acceptance of curtailment of civil liberties. Specifically, the link between authoritarianism and respect for privacy will be moderated by the threat posed by the 7/7 terrorist threat.

Method

Sample

The BSA is an annual ‘snap-shot’ of Britain conducted by National Centre for Social Research (NCSR) and contains a range of different themes each year, including beliefs about healthcare, crime, work, education, transport, etc. (see Park, Curtice, Thompson, Phillips and Johnson 2007). Each year, the BSA survey contains themed question sets on a variety of social and political issues. Contained amongst the survey items for the 2005 data are a number of questions relating specifically to the subject of democracy and terrorism. The pre/post division from the 7/7 sample⁶ allows specific analysis of these items in relation to the potential changes in attitudes following the terrorist attack in London (Johnson and Gearty 2007). Since the inception of the BSA in 1985, the survey has also collected responses on six items designed to measure *liberalism-authoritarianism*. All data is available from the UK Data Service website.⁷

The 2005 survey contains a total of 4,268 responses. Using the actual survey date to establish which respondents had completed the questionnaire items *before* and those *after* the incident, the number of full post-July 7th respondents was 129.⁸ In essence, the data is a naturally occurring experiment in that participants are randomly assigned to different conditions, with the pre-/post-event data collection forming the instrumental selection variable (Angrist 1991).

In order to equate the sample sizes (more surveys are generally completed in the early months of the calendar year), a random selection of the pre-incident respondents were generated, giving a total sample size of $n=227$. The final sample breakdown can be seen in *Table 1* below:

	<u>n</u>	<u>Male</u>	<u>Female</u>	<u>Age (SD)</u>
<u>Total</u>	227	98	129	52 (18)
<u>Pre</u>	98	48	50	55 (17)
<u>Post</u>	129	66	63	48 (18)

Table 1: Descriptive sample data for the 2005 British Social Attitudes sample.

Scale items

The authoritarian scales used in the BSA are summated from 6 items taken from the self-completed questionnaire (see Park et al. 2007: 271-272). Examples of the Authoritarianism items include: “Schools should teach children to obey authority.” Each scale item is scored on a 1-5 Likert-format (strongly agree—strongly disagree). Reliability scores for the 6 authoritarianism items were $\alpha=.874$. Exploratory Factor Analysis was employed to test the core structure of the authoritarianism items and indicated one principal factor accounted for 58.7 per cent of the scale variance.

⁶ Survey dates were requested from the UK Data Service as they are not routinely provided for all BSA data sets.

⁷ Registration required: <https://www.ukdataservice.ac.uk>; See also Park et al. (2007).

⁸ A small number of respondents completed the survey on the day of each incident and were excluded from the analysis ($n<2\%$). The survey is usually conducted from June-October, hence the smaller n for the pre-7/7 sample as data collection had only recently began.

Results

Authoritarian traits are relatively stable over time. The mean authoritarian scores for 2000 and 2002 were $M=2.29$ ($SD=.64$) $M=2.3$ ($SD=.66$) respectively. In 2003 ($M=2.26$, $SD=.65$) and 2004 ($M=2.27$, $SD=.63$) these levels were comparable to 2000; for 2005, the year of 7/7, it increases slightly to 2.33 ($SD=.98$) and remains again near this level in 2006 ($M=2.28$, $SD=.63$) and 2007 ($M=2.25$, $SD=.64$). With the exception of the increase from 2000 and 2001 (2.29 to 2.41) (and the subsequent decrease in 2002), there were no significant differences in authoritarian scores across the samples for the years 2000-2007 (see *Figure 1*). A post-hoc ANOVA, using the individual months after 9/11—to explore the potential reduction of time-lapse on mean scores—showed no overall significant main effect ($F=.021$, $df=2$, $p=.979$). The mean scores for each month remain relatively constant at 2.49 for September and October, only falling slightly to 2.45 in November. For the 2005 sample, differences between the pre- and post-7/7 authoritarian scores ($t=-.466$, $df=212$, $p=.656$) were not significant.

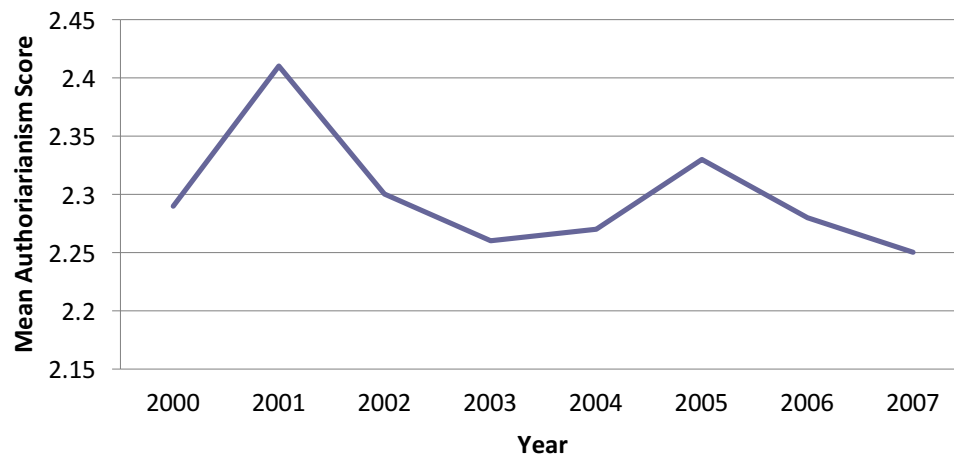


Figure 1: Mean authoritarianism scores from 2000-2007.

However, analysis of the mean authoritarianism scores only tells part of the story; although some small differences emerge in the authoritarianism scores over the 2000-2007 periods, only a small significant difference was recorded for the pre-/post- 9/11 attacks. Interestingly (for a survey of UK citizens), there were no significant differences recorded for the presence of threat on home soil (7/7).

Moderation analyses were conducted to test whether survey time (pre-/post- 7/7) interacted with authoritarianism to predict the limitation of civil liberties. One variable was selected to represent this process: *DemSocR3—Keep private life from Government* (Question B540—Civil Liberties Section). Generally, authoritarians have a tendency to conform to established authorities and to obey rules regardless of their legitimacy (see Altemeyer 1981); hence, the right to keep your life private from the Government (for example, Article 12 UDHR⁹) would be more likely to be defended by those at the lower end of the authoritarianism spectrum. Seemingly, most people would support the right to private life; however, the impact of terrorist threat is theorised to activate authoritarian predispositions sufficiently to decrease support for this right in instances of national security, for example, even amongst those scoring low in authoritarianism. The threat of terrorism is hypothesised to ‘activate’ authoritarian predispositions and make those previously more liberal in orientation increasingly accepting of less democratic policies.

⁹ <http://www.un.org/en/universal-declaration-human-rights/>.

Using the PROCESS modelling add-on for SPSS (Hayes 2013) Model 1, it was possible to ascertain individual and interaction effects. The outcome variable Y (Private) is predicted by X (authoritarianism) and moderated by M^{10} (pre-post). Results indicate that the model predicted nearly 10 per cent of whether people would keep their private life from the government ($R=.30$, $MSE=2.14$, $F(3,217)=6.62$, $p<.01$).

Predictor	β	p	95% CI	
Pre-post	-2.82	< .001	-.432,	-.132
Authoritarianism	-.39	.04	-.76,	-.02
Pre-post x Authoritarianism	.94	< .001	.33,	1.55

Table 2: Support for right to privacy from government predicted by pre-post and authoritarianism.

As shown in *Table 2* above, authoritarianism was significantly related to the right to privacy; pre-post 7/7 significantly moderated that relationship. The conditional effect of authoritarianism on right to privacy for pre 7/7 respondents was significant ($D=-.39$, $SE.19$; $t=-2.08$, $p=.04$; 95% CI-.76, -.02) and for the post-7/7 survey respondents ($D=-.56$, $SE.25$; $t=-2.26$, $p=.03$; 95% CI .07, 1.04). This interaction is illustrated in *Figure 2* below:

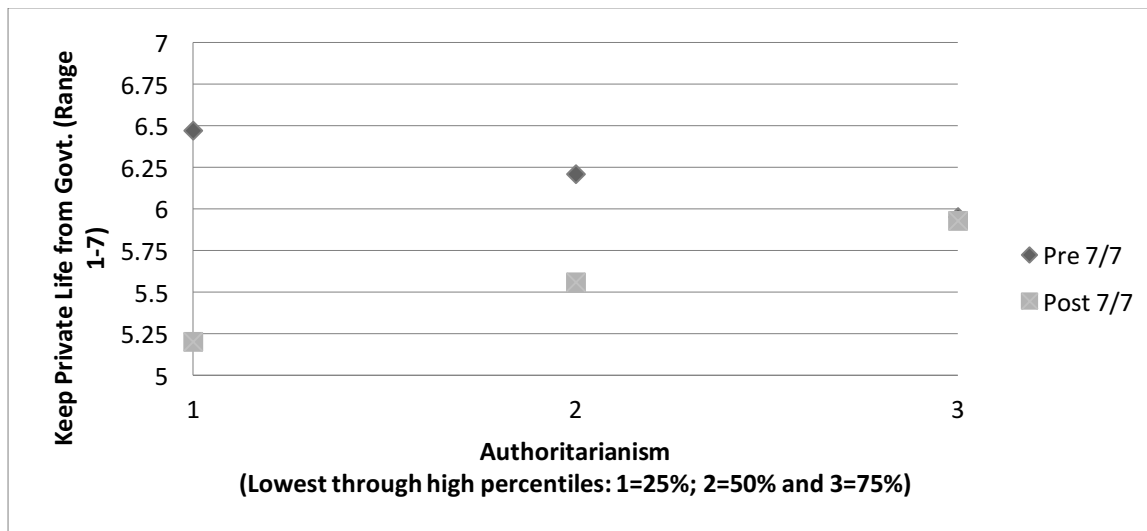


Figure 2: Comparison of pre-post 7/7 samples respect for privacy and authoritarian scores.

What we can see from *Figure 2* is that for those people scoring higher in authoritarianism (those on the right of the chart), there was virtually no change in their belief that their private life should be kept from the government (mean scores: pre=5.95; post=5.93). For middle and lower scorers on authoritarianism (data points in the middle and left of the graph), we can see that there is an impact upon their commitment to civil liberties; in particular, people scoring in the lowest 25th percentile of authoritarianism in the sample see their belief that the government should respect private life fall from 6.5 to 5.2 (on a scale of 1-7, disagree to agree). In contrast to the higher scoring authoritarians (top 25 per cent), the shift in attitudes is quite striking; not only has there been a significant change in their outlook following the presence of a terrorist threat, but

¹⁰ Pre-post (M) is dichotomous scored 0 (pre-7/7 interview date) and 1 (post-7/7 interview date).

the presence of this threat now indicates that they would be less likely to resist invasion of their private life by the government *more* than those whom had identified themselves as authoritarian at the outset.

The results reported here concur with the effects reported by Hetherington and Suhay (2011: 557) in that: “When ordinary people perceive a great threat to their safety, they are susceptible to adopting antidemocratic preferences regardless of whether they score high in authoritarianism.” In other words, the correlation between authoritarianism and any outcome variable representing antidemocratic principles is largely irrelevant; people will still score low on authoritarianism, but are likely to endorse much different behaviours when in a low threat condition than in a high threat scenario. The findings of the current study go some way in plugging a gap in the literature relating to the impact of terrorism upon civil liberties and the link with authoritarianism. Previous papers have either utilised perceptions of terrorist threat (e.g. Hetherington and Suhay 2011), hypothetical experimental designs (e.g. Merola et al. 2006) and/or examined related measures such as ethnocentrism (e.g. Kam and Kinder 2007) and political ideology (e.g. Van de Vyver et al. 2016). Whereas these articles reference authoritarianism and terrorism, the unique data-set analysed here examined how terrorism moderates the link between authoritarianism and the reduction in beliefs about individual freedom and privacy. It was demonstrated that for those scoring high in authoritarianism, the presence of terrorist threat did little to change their opinions about the sanctity of civil liberties. In contrast, those scoring low on authoritarianism showed a marked shift in attitudes towards keeping their lives private from the government following the July 7/7 London bombings. Terrorism was shown to have a significant interaction with authoritarianism and moderated the link between the acceptances of less privacy from government agencies.

Methodologically, there are several key limitations that need to be clarified. Firstly, those familiar with *The Authoritarian Personality* (Adorno et al. 1950) will recognise the presence of potential acquiescent response set in relation to the six items drawn together to measure this construct. Secondly, the ‘scales’ as defined here are based on a relatively small number of items; the alpha coefficients are regarded as being acceptable rather than optimal (Cohen 1988); hence, the findings should be interpreted with potentially large error variances in mind. Exploratory Factor Analysis was employed here to indicate scale structure, although further development of these 6 items into a reliable scale would require additional data collection and Confirmatory Factor Analysis. Finally, the analysis of secondary data should always contain the caveat that there is a potential interpretation mismatch and a blind assumption over the integrity of the collection and recording. However, the BSA is considered to be a highly professional survey that is now in its 29th year and is widely published and cited. Future research should look to model additional demographic data, including age, gender, SES, and education; all have been previously implicated in previous research (see Martin 2001 for a review).

Conclusion

Shortly after his inauguration, US President Donald Trump imposed a travel embargo on citizens from five ‘rogue states’ accused—predominantly—of supporting terrorism. Although there were protests around the US (and overseas) opposing this move, there was also widespread support. The most interesting aspect of the apparent rationale for the imposition of the travel ban were the Trump administration’s claims that the majority of [US] domestic terrorists came from outside the US; a claim which has since been refuted. In essence, Trump’s rhetoric was designed to enact a strong in-group/out-group reaction to the potential for foreign terrorists to engage in activities on US soil. One other fact that remains unanswered in this discussion is whether or not the threat of terrorism is greater when it is experienced on home soil or whether observing terrorist activities overseas. For example, do the recent attacks in France have more impact to citizens in the UK, US, Spain, and Australia, than attacks committed on home soil (London, New York/Pentagon, Madrid, Bali respectively). In other words, does the urge to prevent terrorism ‘happening here’ outplay the fear created by domestic terrorist attacks? The limited evidence presented here indicates that UK authoritarian levels increased after 9/11 and more so than for the 7/7 attacks. There was no relevant data in the 2001 BSA

survey to examine the impact upon policies, but we could assume that given the trends reported here (and by others) that a decrease in support for privacy amongst those scoring low in authoritarianism would also be present. Hence, the global issue of terrorism does not just extend to physically protecting our own countries and reactions from events overseas could feasibly impact upon civil liberties in the UK.

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