

Book Review: Terrorism, Elections and Democracy: Political Campaigns in the United States, Great Britain and Russia

[Matthew Partridge](#) reviews a study of the role that terrorism played in the American Presidential election of 2004, the British General Election of 2005, and the 2003 and 2004 Russian elections.

Terrorism, Elections and Democracy: Political Campaigns in the United States, Great Britain and Russia. Sarah Oates, Lynda Lee Kaid and Mike Berry (eds). [Palgrave Macmillan](#). July 2011.

Find this book: [Amazon LSE Library](#)

The death of Al-Qaeda leader Osama Bin Laden produced worldwide relief and jubilation. However, the boost in Obama's approval rating was extremely limited, with the net numbers already starting to return to negative territory. It has also led some commentators to demand a faster withdrawal from Afghanistan. This suggests that terrorism has lost most of its power as a political issue. Therefore, *Terrorism, Elections and Democracy* by Sarah Oates, Lynda Lee Kaid and Mike Berry, a study of the role that terrorism played in the American Presidential election of 2004, the British General Election of 2005, and the 2003 and 2004 Russian elections should therefore be both interesting and pertinent.

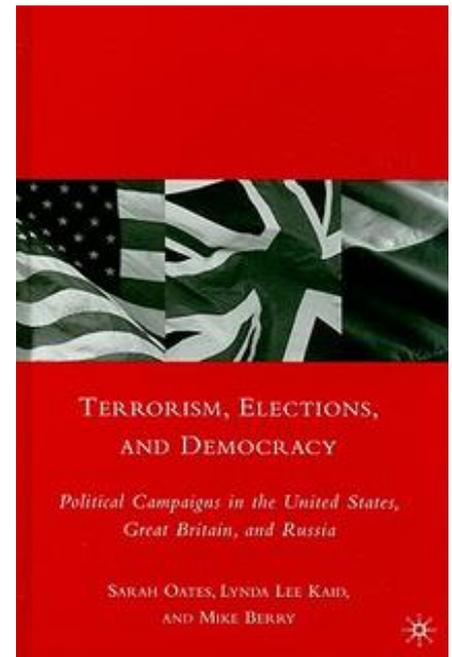
Oates et al usefully provide a substantial amount of data provided on various aspects of the three election campaigns, ranging from the number of news stories featuring items related to terrorism, to the content of election ads. Some of the more counterintuitive results include the fact that the conservative FOX news channel devoted relatively less of its news coverage to terror-related stories in the last months of the 2004 Presidential election than the liberal NBC [p. 46]. The authors also remind us that "overall advertising on behalf of the Kerry campaign outstripped the Bush campaign by almost \$100 million" [p. 26].

Unfortunately, the empirical strengths of *Terrorism, Elections and Democracy* are overshadowed by some significant flaws. The decision to include Britain in the study is strange given that the first sentence of the chapter dealing with the UK states that "Terrorism played a very minor role in the election campaign for the British Parliament in 2005" [p. 81]. Indeed, the study's analysis of campaign segments on ITV and BBC new bulletins demonstrates that it did not even make it into the top ten issues [p. 100]. Although the authors argue that "terrorism was an indirect issue that was implicitly linked to the Conservative focus on immigration and asylum" [p. 106] they provide only fragmentary evidence to back up this unconvincing statement.

Similarly, if the point of the study is to understand how terrorism shapes democratic elections, the two chapters on Russia seem relatively pointless given that Russia is not a proper democracy. Indeed, the authors themselves acknowledge that "the Russian Federation is a political puzzle because it has [nominally] democratic institutions without consistent democratic practices" [p. 142]. Unsurprisingly, the chapter dealing with the Russian focus groups bluntly states that "as the election campaign had little relevance to political reality in Russia, it was difficult to ask meaningfully about the role of [the] terrorist threat specifically in the election campaign" [p. 169].

Even the three chapters dealing with the US elections are not immune. Three out of the eleven American focus groups (representing 41 out of the 113 members) consisted of college students exclusively, a disproportionate number given that only 17% of those voting in the 2004 election were younger than 30. Even more strangely, Bin Laden's dramatic intervention in the race, through the release of a video condemning President Bush days before Americans voted, is not mentioned at all, even though some political pundits believe that Kerry's response to it sealed his fate.

The role that terrorism can play in elections and electoral outcomes, and its interaction with other issues, such as foreign policy, is clearly worthy of study. It is therefore a pity that this monograph fails to adequately address these issues. However, *Terrorism, Elections and Democracy* is still useful as a reference source.



Even if Oates, Kaid and Berry fail to follow through on the aims of their project, they still manage to provide some important pointers to those attempting similar research. In particular, they identify the Spanish election of 2004 as the classic example of an election that was swung by the issue of terrorism.

Dr Matthew Partridge has recently completed a PhD in Economic History at the London School of Economics. Read more about Matthew on our [reviewers page](#).