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**Investigating the effects of right-wing terrorism on government satisfaction: A
time course analysis of the 2019 Christchurch terror attack**

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Abstract

We examine political attitude change using data from a large national probability sample collected over the months leading up to, and following, the 2019 March 15 terror attacks against a Muslim minority community in Christchurch, New Zealand. Satisfaction with the government declined in the months prior to the attack, rose sharply immediately following the attack, and returned to pre-attack levels roughly 3 months after the attack. Support for the ruling centre-left Labour party followed a similar trend, whereas centre-right National party support was unchanged. These results provide valuable comparison to studies focusing on the effects of Islamist attacks, and insight into the time-course of attitude change by examining the effects of far right terrorism toward a minority community.

Keywords: Terrorism; far-right, political attitudes; government satisfaction; attitude change; regression discontinuity

Introduction

Given the political motive of terrorism,¹ researchers have carefully investigated whether and how people's political attitudes shift in response to terror attacks.² In perhaps the most well-known example of shifts in political attitudes, Gallup polling showed George W. Bush's presidential approval rating soared 35 points to 86% just days after the September 11 terror attacks. Yet the 2004 terrorist attack in Madrid (which occurred just three days before the parliamentary elections) upended support for the incumbent party and gave rise to the left-wing opposition party.³ In short, terrorism can have important consequences on citizens' political attitudes, and even the subsequent political trajectory of a nation.

While September 11 represents the most notable example, many researchers have detected sizeable shifts in citizen's attitudes (and emotions) across contexts. Research has demonstrated a link between exposure to terrorism and increased voter turnout and civic engagement,⁴ which may be differentially motivated by emotional reactions such as anger and fear.⁵ While some studies showed that terror attacks led to the punishment of the incumbent political party,⁶ others found the opposite effect in the form of rallying behind the

¹ Max Abrahms, "Why terrorism does not work", *International Security* 31, no. 2 (2006): 42-78; Robert A. Pape, "The strategic logic of suicide terrorism", *American political science review* 97, no. 3 (2003): 343-361

² Leonie Huddy et al, "Fear and terrorism: Psychological reactions to 9/11", in *Framing terrorism: The news media, the government, and the public*, ed. Pippa Norris, Marion R. Just and Montague Kern (New York: Routledge, 2003); Thomas H. Sander and Robert D. Putnam, "Democracy's Past and Future: Still Bowling Alone? The Post-9/11 Split", *Journal of Democracy* 21, no. 1 (2010): 9-16

³ Valentina A. Bali, "Terror and elections: Lessons from Spain", *Electoral Studies* 26, no. 3 (2007) 669-687

⁴ Laia Balcells and Gerard Torrats-Espinosa, "Using a natural experiment to estimate the electoral consequences of terrorist attacks", *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 115, no. 42 (2018): 10624-10629; Lance Y Hunter, Wesley L Meares, and Martha H. Ginn, "Terrorism and voter turnout in seven urban centers in the United States", *Behavioral Sciences of Terrorism and Political Aggression* 10, no. 2 (2018): 110-137; Joseph Robbins, Lance Hunter, and Gregg R Murray, "Voters versus terrorists: Analyzing the effect of terrorist events on voter turnout", *Journal of Peace Research* 50, no. 4 (2013): 495-508

⁵ Pavlos Vasilopoulos, "Terrorist events, emotional reactions, and political participation: The 2015 Paris attacks", *West European Politics* 41, no. 1 (2018): 102-127

⁶ Martin Gassebner, Richard Jong-A-Pin, and Jochen O. Mierau, "Terrorism and electoral accountability: One strike, you're out!", *Economics Letters* 100, no. 1 (2008): 126-129; Arzu Kibris, "Funerals and Elections: The Effects of Terrorism on Voting Behavior in Turkey", *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 55, no. 2 (2011): 220-247; José G. Montalvo "Voting after the Bombings: A Natural Experiment on the Effect of Terrorist Attacks on Democratic Elections", *Review of Economics and Statistics* 93, no. 4 (2011): 1146-1154

government.⁷ Most studies show terrorism drives increased support for conservative parties and/or attitudes, as these are often seen as more ‘hardline’ on and competent in managing terror.⁸ However, contextual factors such as the identity of the attacker, the nature of the target, the number of victims, and the reaction of the government play an important role in the overall direction and strength of the attitudinal and behavioral reaction to terrorist attacks.⁹ For example, it is argued the incumbent Spanish conservative government lost elections in the aftermath of the 2004 Madrid attack, despite the fact the attack led to a more conservative outlook in the population, because the conservative government deliberately misguided the public as to the identity of the attackers for its own political advantage.¹⁰

In this light, it is important to underscore that almost all the aforementioned studies investigated attacks perpetrated by clear outgroups (ethnic or religious) against the majority population. Among them, studies of effects of Islamist terrorism are clearly dominant. In this case, it is argued such general and random targeting increases fear and insecurity felt by members of the ingroup (majority), who in turn tend to reduce these unpleasant feelings by

⁷ Christophe Chowanietz, “Rallying around the flag or railing against the government? Political parties’ reactions to terrorist acts”, *Party Politics* 17, no. 5 (2011): 673-698; Dag Wollebæk et al, “After Utøya: How a High-Trust Society Reacts to Terror—Trust and Civic Engagement in the Aftermath of July 22”, *PS: Political Science & Politics* 45, no. 1 (2012): 32-37

⁸ For example, Alpaslan Akay, Olivier Bargain, and Ahmed Elsayed, “Global terror, well-being and political attitudes”, *European Economic Review* 123, no. 2 (2020); Claude Berrebi and Esteban Klor, “Are Voters Sensitive to Terrorism? Direct Evidence from the Israeli Electorate”, *American Political Science Review* 102, no. 3 (2008): 279-301; Sylvain Brouard, Pavlos Vasilopoulos, and Martial Foucault, “How terrorism affects political attitudes: France in the aftermath of the 2015–2016 attacks”, *West European Politics* 41, no. 5 (2018): 1073-1099; Agustin Echebarria-Echabe and Emilia Fernández-Guede, “Effects of terrorism on attitudes and ideological orientation”, *European Journal of Social Psychology* 36, no. 2 (2006): 259-265; Kibris, “Funerals and Elections”; Paul R. Nail and Ian McGregor, “Conservative Shift among Liberals and Conservatives Following 9/11/01”, *Social Justice Research* 22, (2009): 231-240; Matthew C. MacWilliams, “Who Decides When The Party Doesn’t? Authoritarian Voters and the Rise of Donald Trump”, *PS: Political Science & Politics* 49 no. 4 (2020): 716-721; Jennifer L. Merolla, and Elizabeth J. Zechmeister, “Evaluating Political Leaders in Times of Terror and Economic Threat: The Conditioning Influence of Politician Partisanship”, *The Journal of Politics* 75, no. 3 (2013):599-612; c.f. Bruno C. Silva, “The (Non)Impact of the 2015 Paris Terrorist Attacks on Political Attitudes”, *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 44, no. 6 (2018):838-850

⁹ Balcells and Torrats-Espinosa, “consequences of terrorist attacks”; Silva, “2015 Paris Terrorist Attacks”; Øyvind Bugge Solheim, “Right-wing Terrorism and Out-group Trust: The Anatomy of a Terrorist Backlash”, *Terrorism and Political Violence* 32, no. 6 (2020): 1206-1224

¹⁰ Echebarria-Echabe and Fernández-Guede, “Effects of terrorism on attitudes”

adopting more conservative outlook.¹¹ Very few studies focus on right-wing terrorism, where fear and insecurity dynamics often work differently. In the July 22 Norway attack, fear among the general population of being targeted in future attacks was less relevant, since the far-right terrorist targeted members and supporters of the ruling Labour Party.¹² In this paper, we investigate a case of right-wing terrorism that targeted Muslim minority members, which likely makes fear of being attacked among the majority population even less relevant. These specific circumstances likely have important implications for the nature of attitude change in the population, including the magnitude and direction (i.e., for or against the government, or left versus right-leaning parties), in response to terrorism.

Additionally, although terrorism can shift political attitudes, the duration of these effects has received limited empirical scrutiny. In a notable exception, Gallup polling showed high presidential approval ratings for George W. Bush years following the September 11 attacks, suggesting terrorism can shift political attitudes for a considerable length of time. The September 11 terror attacks were, however, remarkable in their scale and impacts on both national and international policies. Other research assessing the effect of terrorism on political attitudes often compares the voting intentions and political attitudes of two samples before and after a terror event.¹³ Yet, the comparison of sample means collected at a single time before or after the event provides a less accurate gauge of the immediate impact on attitudes and cannot track trends over time.

One way to assess changes in political attitudes over time with detailed resolution is to use time series analysis, an approach that examines the time-ordered values of an outcome (e.g., political attitude). Arce employed time series models to detect a positive impact of

¹¹ Silva, “2015 Paris Terrorist Attacks”

¹² Niklas Jakobsson and Svein Blom, “Did the 2011 Terror Attacks in Norway Change Citizens’ Attitudes Toward Immigrants?”, *International Journal of Public Opinion Research* 26, no. 4 (2014): 475-486

¹³ E.g., Balcells and Torrats-Espinosa, “consequences of terrorist attacks”; Brouard, Vasilopoulos, and Foucault, “How terrorism affects political attitudes”; Silva, “2015 Paris Terrorist Attacks”; Vasilopoulos, “Terrorist events, emotional reactions”; Wollebæk et al, “How a High-Trust Society Reacts to Terror”

political violence on presidential approval ratings in Peru from 1985 – 1997.¹⁴ Although these models examined the ongoing acts of violence as opposed to reactions to specific acts of terrorism, results revealed left-leaning—but not right-leaning—governments experienced a decline in approval ratings following political violence. Similarly, Berrebi and Klor looked at the effect of terrorism fatalities that occurred one year, six months, and three months before an election on electoral outcomes in Israel.¹⁵ They found terror fatalities occurring within three months of an election had the largest effect on (increased) right-bloc party vote, with smaller, yet still significant, effects for fatalities occurring six months to a year before the election.

Other researchers have modelled the trajectory of attitudes before and after terrorism.¹⁶ Varying findings have been identified depending on context and terror event, with some studies demonstrating an immediate impact of terrorism on immigration preferences,¹⁷ others showing an impact on fear, but not policy preferences,¹⁸ and others still finding little general impact of terrorism on political attitudes.¹⁹ However, these studies also analyze relatively small time periods, ranging from 20-30 days surrounding the terror events, thus providing only a limited image of attitude change over time. Using similar methods, Geys and Hernæs modelled the trajectory of change in peoples' party vote intentions over several weeks before and after the July 22 Norway right-wing terror attack. They found a large increase (92%) in voting odds for the ruling Labour party in the week immediately

¹⁴ Moisés Arce, "Political Violence and Presidential Approval in Peru", *The Journal of Politics* 65, no. 2 (2003): 572-583

¹⁵ Berrebi and Klor, "Are Voters Sensitive to Terrorism?"

¹⁶ Henning Finseraas, Niklas Jakobsson, and Andreas Kotsadam, "Did the Murder of Theo van Gogh Change Europeans' Immigration Policy Preferences?", *Kyklos* 64, (2011): 396-409; Henning Finseraas and Ola Listhaug, "It can happen here: the impact of the Mumbai terror attacks on public opinion in Western Europe", *Public Choice* 156, (2013): 213-228; Jakaonsson and Blom, "Terror Attacks in Norway"; Silva, "2015 Paris Terrorist Attacks"

¹⁷ Fineraas, Jakonsson, and Kotsadam, "Murder of Theo van Gogh"; Jakaonsson and Blom, "Terror Attacks in Norway"

¹⁸ Finseraas and Listhaug, "Mumbai terror attacks"

¹⁹ Silva, "2015 Paris Terrorist Attacks"

following the attack.²⁰ Moreover, this occurred despite a gradual downward trend in the ruling party vote intentions in the weeks before the attack, although a sharp downward trend also occurred after the attacks. Labour vote intentions nevertheless remained elevated from their pre-attack levels 20 weeks following the attack. By contrast, vote intentions for the remaining parties were either unchanged, or slightly decreased, in the week following the attack.²¹ Thus, data collected over a longer period of time, and investigating a broader range of terror events may contribute to a more nuanced understanding of how, and for how long, terrorism may impact political attitudes.

Christchurch terror attack and study overview

The current study contributes to the literature by examining changes in political attitudes directly following the 2019 March 15 Christchurch terror attack. The attack, perpetrated by a lone gunman, took place inside two Christchurch Mosques during time of worship, resulting in 51 deaths and an additional 40 people injured. The attack was an instance of right-wing terrorism, motivated by Islamophobia,²² and was the first (and by far the most significant) terror attack in New Zealand since the 1985 sinking of the anti-nuclear Greenpeace Rainbow Warrior boat which killed one person. The country subsequently shifted into a high terrorism threat alert level for the first time.²³

Following the attack, Prime Minister (and leader of the centre-left Labour party) Jacinda Ardern's swift response drew national and international praise.²⁴ On the one hand,

²⁰ Benny Geys and Øystein Hernæs, "Party leaders and voter responses to political terrorism", *Public Choice* (2020)

²¹ Ibid.

²² Stephen Reicher, Alex Haslam, and Jay Van Bavel, "The road to Christchurch: A tale of two leaderships", *New Zealand Journal of Psychology*, 48, (2019): 13-15

²³ Henry Cooke and Stacey Kirk, "New Zealand officially on high terror alert, in wake of Christchurch terror attacks", *Stuff*, March 15, 2019, New Zealand officially on high terror alert, in wake of Christchurch terror attacks (accessed November 15, 2020)

²⁴ Ishaan Tharoor, "New Zealand shooting: The world is praising Jacinda Ardern's response to terrorist attack", *Independent*, March 20, 2019, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/australasia/new-zealand-shooting-jacinda-ardern-video-reaction-world-praise-a8832186.html> (accessed November 15, 2020)

Ardern quickly displayed compassion to the Muslim community in New Zealand by wearing a headscarf when interacting with the community, and by her use of inclusive language (e.g., “they are us”).²⁵ Concurrently, the government immediately introduced a bill banning the possession of semi-automatic firearms, which was passed less than a month after the attack to become the Arms (Prohibited Firearms, Magazines, and Parts) Amendment Act 2019. Thus, the government’s approach reflected a blend of compassion toward the Muslim community and a bolstering national security—responses that should shape public response to terrorism.²⁶

To examine the impact of the March 15 terror attack on New Zealanders’ political attitudes, we capitalize on data from the New Zealand Attitudes and Values Study (NZAVS), a large longitudinal national probability sample of New Zealand adults. We track changes in government satisfaction, along with support for the centre-left Labour party and centre-right National party (the two major political parties in New Zealand) in the months leading up to, and following, the March 15 attack. A key challenge in assessing the effects of terrorism on political attitudes is that terror attacks are sudden and unpredictable. Because data for the NZAVS is collected on a rolling basis annually (i.e., a large number of responses collected from week-to-week), the study is uniquely positioned to track levels of satisfaction with the government and party support in the days and weeks prior to, and following, the Christchurch terror attack. Accordingly, we employ the same regression discontinuity analyses as Geys and Hernæs,²⁷ but on a day-to-day (rather than week-to-week) level, focusing on more general attitudes (satisfaction with the government and party support), and in relation to a terror event that targeted a religious minority group.

²⁵ See Reicher, Haslam, and Van Bavel “The road to Christchurch”

²⁶ See Teemu Sinkkonen, “Can Political Leaders Make a Difference? Norwegian versus Spanish Experiences in Responding to Terrorist Attacks”, *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, 39, no. 4 (2016): 204-228

²⁷ Geys and Hernæs, “responses to political terrorism”

As the government's response to the attack received national (and international) praise, we expected satisfaction with the government (a three-party coalition led by the Labour party at the time), and support for the Labour party in particular, to increase immediately following the attack. This would also be consistent with research in Norway showing increased government trust and support following the July 22 attacks.²⁸

Additionally, much research shows terrorism can lead to a shift of support to the political right, suggesting the opposition centre-right National party may also experience an increase in support. However, the National party did not politicize the attack, and instead backed the government response (consistent with political elite rally effects found in other nations such as the USA and UK)²⁹. Past research emphasized the role of fear and anger in motivating people's response to terrorism (i.e., increased support for deportation and war respectively).³⁰ This may help explain findings of increased support for right-wing parties following terrorism.³¹ However, terrorism perpetrated by majority-group members of a nation targeted toward a specific minority subgroup of the population should be less likely to elicit fear on a broader level.³² Conservative shifts in response to fear and anxiety may therefore be less likely. Thus, there may have been relatively little basis for New Zealanders to change their attitudes toward the opposition National party following the attack.

Method

Participants

²⁸ Ibid.; Wollebæk et al, "How a High-Trust Society Reacts to Terror"

²⁹ Chowanietz, "Rallying around the flag"

³⁰ Linda J. Skitka, Christopher W. Bauman, Nicholas P. Aramovich, and G. Scott Morgan, "Confrontational and Preventative Policy Responses to Terrorism: Anger Wants a Fight and Fear Wants "Them" to Go Away", *Basic and Applied Social Psychology*, 28, no. 4 (2006): 375-384; see also Aarti Iyer, Joanna Webster Matthew J. Hornsey, and Eric J. Vanman, "Understanding the power of the picture: the effect of image content on emotional and political responses to terrorism", *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, 44, no. 7 (2014): 511-521

³¹ E.g., Berrebi and Klor, "Are Voters Sensitive to Terrorism?"

³² See Jakaonsson and Blom, "Terror Attacks in Norway"

The sample size for our focal analysis examining satisfaction with the government was 47,703 adults. Of those who reported the relevant demographic, the average age was 48.60 years (range = 17 – 99, $SD = 13.86$), 62.6% were women, and 78.2% were born in New Zealand. In terms of ethnicity, 88.7% reported they were New Zealand European, 9.8% Māori, 2.2% Pacific, 5.3% Asian, and 3.8% reported some other ethnicity. Finally, 36.3% of the sample were religious, with 120 participants (0.3% of the sample) specifically identifying as Muslim.

Sampling procedure

We use data from Time 10 of the New Zealand Attitudes and Values Study (NZAVS), an annual, longitudinal probability sample of New Zealand adults. Time 10 of the NZAVS contained responses from 47,951 participants, of which 18,658 were retained from previous waves of the NZAVS, and 29,293 were obtained from booster sampling from the electoral roll. The electoral roll is the main sampling frame for the NZAVS, and contains contact details of all New Zealand adults, with registration on the electoral roll being compulsory from age 18. Data collection for the Time 10 NZAVS began in October 2018 and continued through to September 2019.

The NZAVS was approved by The University of Auckland Human Participants Ethics Committee on 03 June 2015 until 03 June 2018 and renewed on 05 September 2017 until 03 June 2021. Reference Number: 014889.

Measures

Participants were asked to rate their level of satisfaction with “the performance with the current New Zealand government” on a scale from 0 (*completely dissatisfied*) to 10 (*completely satisfied*; $M = 5.56$, $SD = 2.51$). In addition, participants rated their support for

the Labour Party ($M = 4.58$, $SD = 1.73$) and the National Party ($M = 3.94$ $SD = 1.91$) on a scale from 1 (*strongly oppose*) to 7 (*strongly support*).

Model estimation

Regression discontinuity analysis is an application of multiple regression that has classically been used to test whether there is a significant treatment effect or ‘step’ at a given threshold of a continuous predictor associated with a continuous outcome. Regression discontinuity is particularly useful in quasi-experimental designs where random allocation is not possible, as it provides a method for assessing a treatment effect while also adjusting for the overall trend in the relationship between a continuous predictor and outcome.³³

We used regression discontinuity analysis to test whether there was a significant “step” (or point of discontinuity) in satisfaction with the government, as well as Labour and National party support, among participants completing the NZAVS in the days immediately before and after the Christchurch terror attack. Regression discontinuity analysis is superior to a simple *t*-test of participants completing the NZAVS just before the attack with those completing the NZAVS just after the attack, as it also adjusts for possible trends over time, and simultaneously models a possible recovery function or return to baseline. The analysis is therefore a between-participants design that compares participants who complete the survey before and after the attack.

We tested for a step effect by constructing a time series in which the day each participant completed the questionnaire was used to predict political attitudes. Our day-by-day series was centered so that the day following the attack represented day 0 (or March 15th, 2019; -1 represented March 14th 2019; 1 represented March 16th 2019, and so on). Day 0 therefore represented the threshold in the model. The discontinuity variable was represented

³³ See Guido W. Imbens and Thomas Lemieux, “Regression discontinuity designs: A guide to practice”, *Journal of Econometrics*, 142, no. 2 (2008): 615-635

by a dummy code where $d = 0$ for values of $\text{day} < 0$, and $d = 1$ for values of $\text{day} \geq 0$. The value of d in the regression model therefore represents the difference in predicted values of the outcome based on the trend before the attack, and immediately following the attack. Critically, the model assumes participants who completed the questionnaire in the days before the attack do not differ in other key ways from those who completed the questionnaire after the attack, and thus any significant discontinuity (or difference pre/post the attack) is likely due to the Christchurch terrorist attack.

To provide further confidence that this is the case, Table 1 displays the demographic and voting details of respondents to the survey before and after the attack. Comparisons indicated minimal differences between respondents. Those who completed the survey before the attack tended to be slightly younger ($t_{(8618)} = -14.58, p < .001$). They also tended to be more likely to be NZ European or Asian ethnicity ($\chi^2 = 43.68, p < .001$), and slightly less likely to have been born in New Zealand ($\chi^2 = 6.06, p = .014$). However, crucially, there were no differences in the proportion of party votes across parties between respondents to the survey before versus after the attack ($\chi^2 = 2.64, p = .853$). These comparisons suggest any changes in political attitudes following the mosque attack were unlikely to have arisen due to demographic differences in the respondents over time, or differences in party preference.

[Table 1 near here]

The model also included 2nd, 3rd and 4th order polynomials representing Day^2 , Day^3 and Day^4 . This allowed us to model potential non-linear trends in mental health and subjective wellbeing both before the attack (which we did not expect) and also a trend representing a recovery phase or potential return to baseline or a new set point following the attack (the post-attack trend was estimated by solving the interaction between the 1st to 4th order polynomials for day effect and values of $d = 1$). The regression discontinuity model

was estimated in *Mplus* version 8.4 using Maximum Likelihood, and the full syntax for our model and equations are provided in the technical documents section of the NZAVS website:

www.nzavs.auckland.ac.nz.

Results

The results for the regression discontinuity models predicting satisfaction with the government, support for the Labour party, and support for the National party are reported in Table 2. Separate regression discontinuity models were estimated for each outcome. For each outcome, we estimated both 4th and 3rd order polynomial models, and opted for 3rd order polynomial solutions as in no case were the 4th order terms significant (when predicted values and discontinuities for 4th order models were solved, the trends and magnitudes of these discontinuities looked extremely similar to the 3rd order ones, with no notable differences).

[Table 2 near here]

The critical parameter of interest in each model is d , as this represents the extent to which a discontinuity in the series occurred at the point of the attack. As reported in Table 2, there was a significant increase in both satisfaction with the government and Labour party support immediately following the terrorist attack. The d parameter for satisfaction with the government indicated there was a 1.349-unit increase (government satisfaction is scored on a scale from 1-10, indicating a 15% shift across the scale) immediately following the attack. The increase in Labour party support was smaller, with the d parameter indicating an increase of .358 units (this scale ranged from 1-7; indicating a 7% shift across the scale). In terms of effect size, the standardized d parameters for these respective effects were .154 and .071. Thus, these results represent fairly small sized effects, but are nevertheless reliable immediate changes at the population level.

By contrast, the d parameter for centre-right National party support was not significant. This indicates that there was no reliable discontinuity, or immediate shift in population levels of support for the party following the Christchurch terrorist attack.

Slopes representing the rate of change (or relative consistency) in satisfaction with the government for the 150 days preceding the attack to the 150 days following the attack are presented in Figure 1, with slopes for Labour and National party support presented in Figure 2. These slopes were derived from the regression parameters for each outcome, as reported in Table 2. Satisfaction with the government was declining at an increasing rate before the terror attack, yet jumped significantly immediately following the attack and maintained a downward trend. Likewise, support for the Labour party was gradually declining prior to the attack and exhibited a spike following the attack, followed by a gradual decline. In both cases, satisfaction with the government and support for the Labour party returned to pre-attack baseline levels roughly 2 – 3 months after the attack.

[Figure 1 near here]

[Figure 2 near here]

National party support had been gradually increasing prior to the attack, and, although the step following the attack was not significant, the trajectory in National party support became negative for roughly a month, before resuming the upward trend.

Discussion

The March 15 Christchurch terror attack was an unexpected extreme display of intolerance toward the Muslim community in New Zealand. In this study, we used national probability data collected over several months leading up to, and following, the attack, to examine changes in New Zealanders' political attitudes. Results revealed an immediate increase in satisfaction with the government, which had been on a gradual downward trend,

in the days preceding the mosque attack. This was followed by a gradual downward trend toward pre-attack levels of satisfaction (approximately 2-3 months after the attack). A similar pattern emerged in support for the ruling centre-left Labour party, whereas support for the opposition centre-right National party was unchanged following the attack. Together, these results show satisfaction with government and support for governing parties respond sharply to instances of terrorism.

Although past research reveals that terrorism impacts political attitudes, our analyses provide important insights into attitude change following acts of right-wing terrorism, which have seen little empirical analysis to date. Our results are consistent with Geys and Hernæs' finding that support for left-wing political parties can increase following acts of right-wing terrorism.³⁴ Our analyses complement and extend on this research by focusing on an instance of terrorism targeting a religious minority group with no political affiliation. Indeed, the March 15 terror attack specifically targeted Muslims—a group often portrayed as perpetrators of terrorism,³⁵ and who are viewed more negatively than other groups in New Zealand.³⁶ As such, these findings suggest support for left-wing parties can increase in response to right-wing terrorism not only directed at parties themselves, but toward a minority religious group (i.e., Muslims). Our results also demonstrate that satisfaction with the government increased more than support for the Labour party itself. While many researchers focus on party vote-share in relation to terrorism, our results indicate satisfaction with the government increases independently of party support.³⁷ In other words, some citizens respond to terrorism with

³⁴ Geys and Hernæs, “responses to political terrorism”

³⁵ Lynne Cameron, Robert Maslen, and Zazie Todd, “The dialogic construction of self and other in response to terrorism”, *Peace and Conflict: Journal of Peace Psychology*, 19, no. 1 (2013): 3-22; see also Diala Hawi, Danny Osborne, Joseph Bulbulia, and Chris G. Sibley, “Terrorism Anxiety and Attitudes toward Muslims”, *New Zealand Journal of Psychology*, 48, no. 1 (2013): 80-89

³⁶ Chris G. Sibley, M. Usman Afzali, Nicole Satherley, Anastasia Ejova, Samantha Stronge, Kumar Yogeeswaran, Michael Grimshaw, Diala Hawi, Zahra Mirnajafi, Fiona K. Barlow et al. “Prejudice toward Muslims in New Zealand: Insights from the New Zealand Attitudes and Values Study”, *New Zealand Journal of Psychology* (2020)

³⁷ See also Wollebæk et al, “How a High-Trust Society Reacts to Terror”

increased satisfaction with their government, without necessarily changing their party preferences.

The bolstering of support for the left-wing Labour party, and unchanged support for the right-wing National party may be suggestive of a bolstered resistance among New Zealanders in response to the attack.³⁸ Specifically, the response may have been driven by affirmations of national values that contrast with the values of the terrorist. Indeed, New Zealanders tend to be supportive of multiculturalism, and view liberal democratic values (e.g., believing in equality and respecting other cultures and ethnic groups) as important aspects of national character.³⁹ Consistent with this thesis, research also shows that warmth toward Muslims increased following the March 15 attack.⁴⁰ Thus, increases in government satisfaction may represent a defense of such values, which were emphasized by Prime Minister Ardern following the attack, in contrast to the values of the terrorist. More generally, ‘rally around the flag’ effects are widely hypothesized in times of national crises, and the increased satisfaction with the government may have reflected such an effect. That is, a general bolstering of support to steer through the terror attack.⁴¹ Indeed, the immediacy in which satisfaction increased suggests the response was based less on critical analysis of the government’s actions, but more a symbolic gesture of unity.

³⁸ See Solheim, “Anatomy of a Terrorist Backlash”

³⁹ Nicole Satherley, Kumar Yogeeswaran, Danny Osborne, and Chris G. Sibley, “Differentiating between pure patriots and nationalistic patriots: A model of national attachment profiles and their socio-political attitudes”, *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 72 (2019): 13-24; Chris G. Sibley, William J. Hovard, and James H. Liu “Pluralistic and monocultural facets of New Zealand national character and identity”, *New Zealand Journal of Psychology*, 40, no. 3 (2011): 19-29; See also Kumar Yogeeswaran, M. Usman Afzali, Nadia P. Andrews, Elizabeth A. Chivers, Meng-Jie Wang, Thierry Devos, and Chris G. Sibley “Exploring New Zealand National Identity and Its Importance for Attitudes toward Muslims and Support for Diversity”, *New Zealand Journal of Psychology*, 48, no. 1 (2019): 29-35

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⁴¹ E.g., Skitka, Bauman, Aramovich, and Morgan, “Confrontational and Preventative Policy Responses to Terrorism”; but see Bali, “Terror and elections”

By pinpointing a shift in government satisfaction immediately following an act of terrorism, we provide a detailed image of how much, and how quickly, attitudes can change. This is desirable relative to comparing samples collected weeks or months before or after the attack, which are likely to identify a more diluted effect of terrorism. Our findings show attitude change is not particularly short lived. Like Geys and Hernæs' analysis of vote intentions following right-wing terrorism in Norway,⁴² we find satisfaction with the government gradually returns to pre-attack levels over a period of weeks-months. That said, a large amount of drop-off occurred within the month following the attack. Presenting the time-course of government satisfaction in this manner provides a useful guide for other research assessing attitude change following terrorism. For example, our results suggest that researchers who examine pre- and post-terrorism attitudes need to assess post-attitudes relatively quickly following the event to capture the height of attitude change. That said, the rate at which attitudes revert to 'baseline' levels over time may depend on the specific attitude examined, as well as the initial magnitude of attitude change (i.e., attitudes that change sharply may also rapidly return to baseline levels).

Our results demonstrate clear increases in government satisfaction, along with left-wing Labour support, following right-wing terrorism in New Zealand. However, some of the response to terrorism captured by our analyses may be influenced by the specific political context. In particular, New Zealand has a very limited history of terrorism, and thus the political parties are not known for their handling of terrorism, particularly whether they respond in a 'harsh' or 'light' manner. Rather, right-wing shifts may be more common in nations with a history of more prevalent terrorism.⁴³ A limited history of terrorism may also lead to specific events being more impactful, compared to when terrorism is more common.⁴⁴

⁴² Geys and Hernæs, "responses to political terrorism"

⁴³ E.g., Kibris, "Funerals and Elections"

⁴⁴ Silva, "2015 Paris Terrorist Attacks"

Additionally, our analyses focus on an instance of right-wing terrorism targeting a minority group within the population, and the effects observed would likely differ had the majority of the population been the target, or if the perpetrator of the terrorism differed.

Although we could speculate on the nature of attitude change, we cannot say specifically *why* satisfaction with the government increased following the attack. Similarly, we were unable to assess attitudes toward the Prime Minister specifically. Analyzing such attitudes may provide a greater indication of whether increased satisfaction was due to the conduct of the Prime Minister immediately following the attack, for which she received praise. Our results also do not speak specifically to within-person change, but instead compare independent responses over time. However, we have no reason to believe that those who responded after the attack differed systematically from those who responded before, which could have influenced our observed effects. Indeed, we found no change in support for the National party following the attack, who were not part of the government at the time, giving us more confidence that the changes observed in satisfaction with the government and support for the Labour party were a direct result of the attack.

Conclusion

The current study identified a noticeable increase in satisfaction with the government following the March 15 Christchurch terror attack. Although this increase disrupted a gradual decline in satisfaction before the attack, satisfaction reverted to pre-attack levels approximately 2 – 3 months after the attack. These results highlight the magnitude, immediacy, and time course of political attitude change in response to terrorism. In addition, they demonstrate that government satisfaction can increase following right-wing terrorism targeted toward a specific minority group (i.e., Muslims), providing important insights into the under-studied effects of right-wing terrorism.

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Table 1. *Comparison of demographics and voting intentions in the pre- and post-March 15 attack samples.*

| | Pre-March 15 attack sample | Post-March 15 attack sample |
|---------------------------------|-------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| Age ^{***} | $M = 48.74$ ($SD = 13.91$) | $M = 51.37$ ($SD = 13.30$) |
| Gender | | |
| Women | 62.7% | 63.0% |
| Men | 37.3% | 37.0% |
| Ethnicity ^{***} | | |
| NZ European | 83.0% | 81.6% |
| Maori | 9.8% | 12.1% |
| Pacific | 1.8% | 2.1% |
| Asian | 5.3% | 4.2% |
| Religion | | |
| Religious | 36.2% | 37.0% |
| Not religious | 63.8% | 63.0% |
| Birth place [*] | | |
| Born in NZ | 78.0% | 79.4% |
| Not born in NZ | 22.0% | 20.6% |
| 2017 Party vote | | |
| Did not vote | 5.1% | 5.1% |
| Unsure/unreported | 5.1% | 5.2% |
| National | 34.1% | 34.3% |
| Labour | 35.9% | 36.3% |
| Greens | 11.1% | 10.4% |
| NZ First | 4.6% | 4.6% |
| Other | 4.2% | 4.1% |

Note. *** test statistic $p < .001$, ** test statistic $p < .01$, * test statistic $p < .05$. $N_{\text{pre-March 15}} = 41,596$. $N_{\text{post-March 15}} = 6,355$.

Table 2. *Regression coefficients estimating the trajectory of satisfaction with the government, and Labour and National party support.*

| Satisfaction with Government | <i>B</i> | <i>SE</i> | <i>B</i> | <i>T</i> | <i>p</i> |
|---|----------|-----------|----------|----------|----------|
| Day | -.874 | .183 | -.447 | -4.775 | < .001 |
| Day ² | -.542 | .123 | -.589 | -4.390 | < .001 |
| Day ³ | -.090 | .025 | -.303 | -3.561 | < .001 |
| d | 1.136 | .169 | .154 | 6.711 | < .001 |
| d x Day | -.807 | .511 | -.125 | -1.579 | .114 |
| d x Day ² | 1.349 | .492 | .301 | 2.744 | .006 |
| d x Day ³ | -.022 | .142 | -.008 | -.155 | .877 |
| Support for The Labour Party | | | | | |
| Day | -.394 | .128 | -.293 | -3.078 | .002 |
| Day ² | -.270 | .086 | -.427 | -3.138 | .002 |
| Day ³ | -.053 | .018 | -.260 | -3.018 | .003 |
| d | .358 | .119 | .071 | 3.015 | .003 |
| d x Day | .147 | .358 | .033 | .410 | .682 |
| d x Day ² | .132 | .344 | .043 | .383 | .701 |
| d x Day ³ | .146 | .099 | .080 | 1.473 | .141 |
| Support for The National Party | | | | | |
| Day | .683 | .142 | .459 | 4.823 | < .001 |
| Day ² | .518 | .095 | .739 | 5.428 | < .001 |
| Day ³ | .100 | .020 | .440 | 5.103 | < .001 |
| d | -.113 | .131 | -.020 | -.863 | .388 |
| d x Day | -1.405 | .396 | -.285 | -3.548 | < .001 |
| d x Day ² | .477 | .381 | .139 | 1.252 | .210 |
| d x Day ³ | -.421 | .110 | -.208 | -3.828 | < .001 |

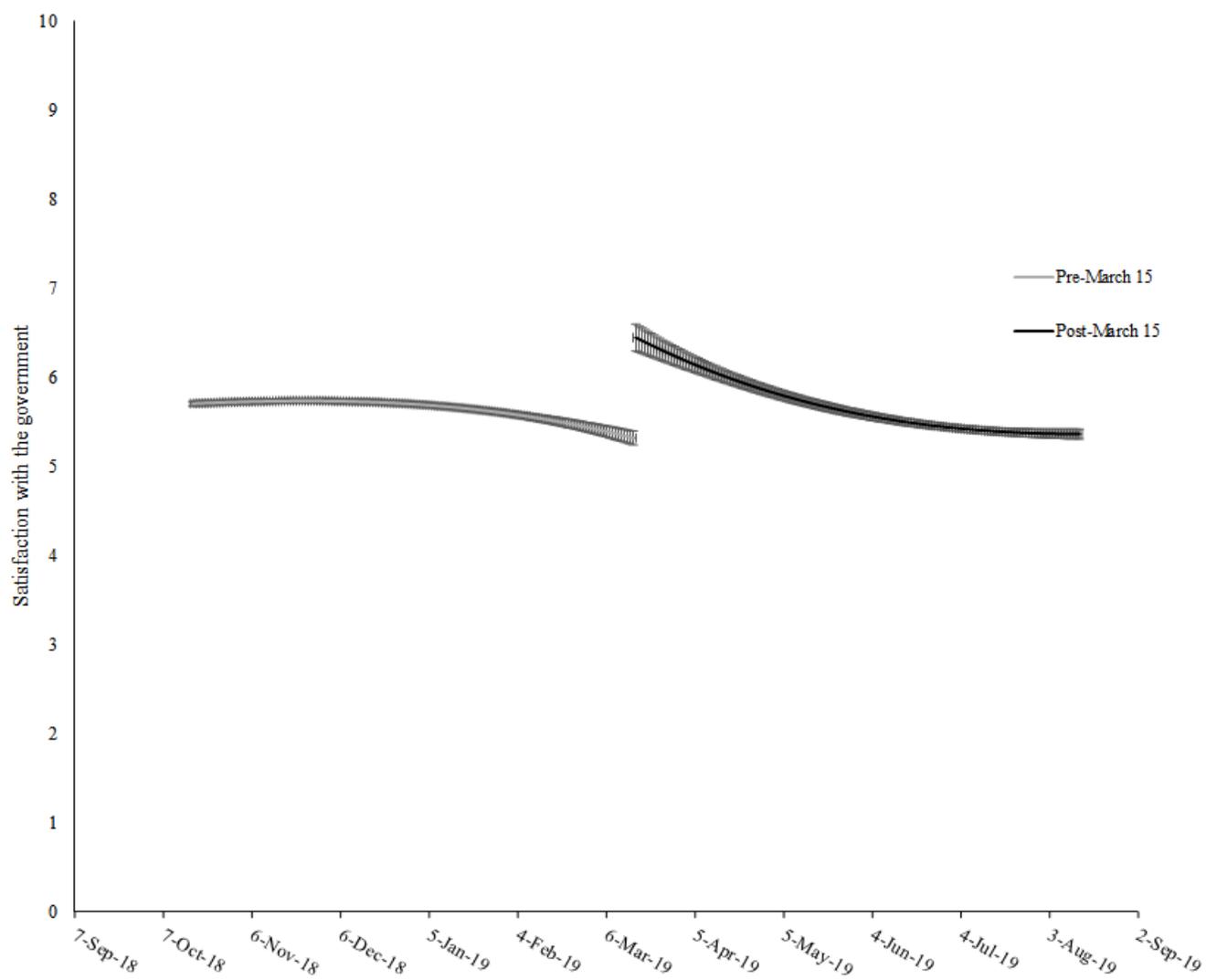


Figure 1. Satisfaction with the performance of the government (y-axis) in the days (x-axis) before and after the March 15 attack.

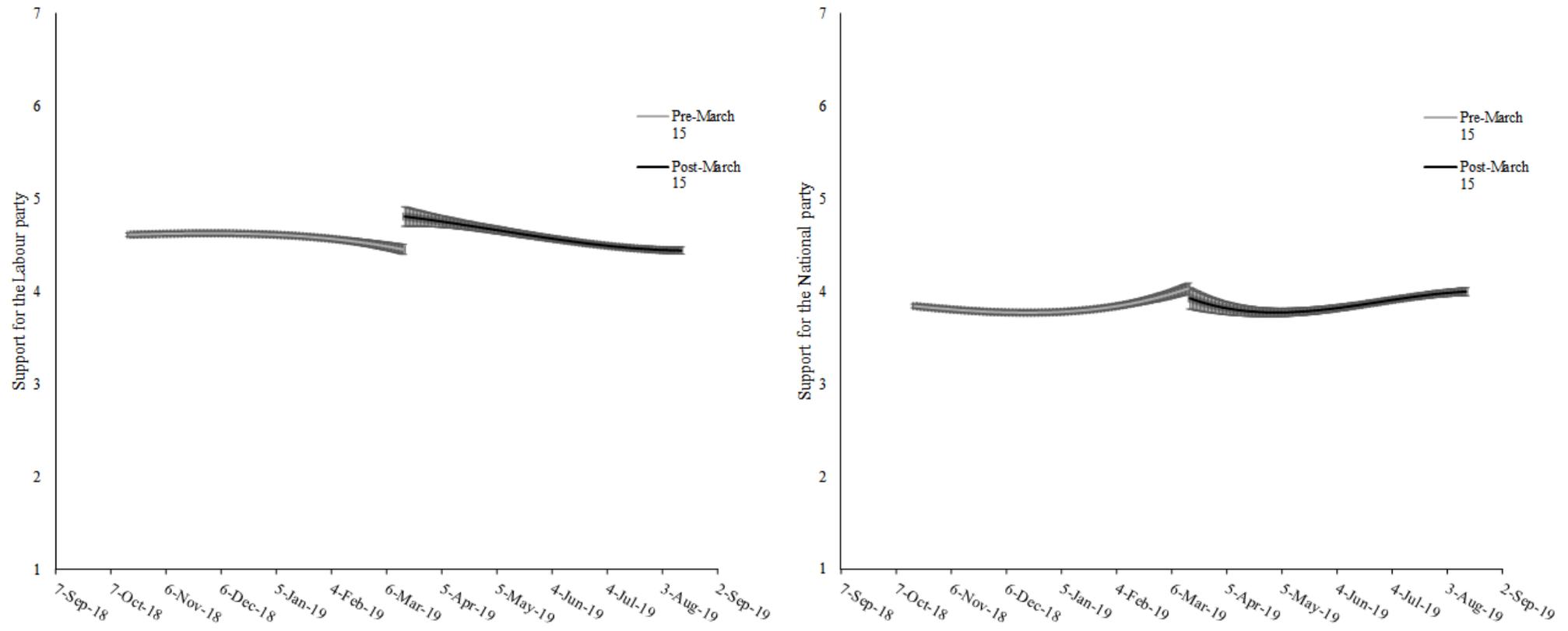


Figure 2. Levels of support (y-axis) for the Labour party (left) and National party (right) in the days (x-axis) before and after the March 15 attack.

Figure captions:

Figure 1. Satisfaction with the performance of the government (y-axis) in the days (x-axis) before and after the March 15 attack.

Figure 2. Levels of support (y-axis) for the Labour party (left) and National party (right) in the days (x-axis) before and after the March 15 attack.