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How terrorism affects political attitudes: France in the aftermath of the 2015–2016 attacks

Sylvain Brouard, Pavlos Vasilopoulos  and Martial Foucault

Sciences Po, Centre de Recherches Politiques (CEVIPOF), Paris, France

ABSTRACT

This study investigates what impact the terrorist attacks in Paris (2015) and Nice (2016) had on political attitudes in France. Drawing on nine cross-sectional surveys, it tests the premises of three major theories of opinion change that predict contrasting shifts in opinion among ordinary citizens according to their ideological position in the aftermath of terrorist attacks: the Reactive Liberals Hypothesis (RLH), the Terror Management Theory (TMT), and the Bayesian Updating Theory (BUT). In line with both RLH and BUT, the findings show that left-wing sympathisers shifted toward the right following the attacks. However, the results suggest that, in line with BUT, the attacks only had a significant impact on attitudes toward security, while they had no effect on attitudes toward immigration, or toward moral and socio-economic issues.

KEYWORDS France; terrorism; attitudes

After a period of 20 years without any major coordinated terrorist attack, France experienced a series of unprecedented attacks in 2015 and 2016. Three spectacular terrorist attacks in particular sent shockwaves throughout the country. Between 7 and 9 January 2015 17 people were killed in shootings at the offices of the satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo* and at a Jewish delicatessen in Paris. Eleven months later, in November 2015, the country faced the deadliest attacks in its post-war history when a series of coordinated attacks in bars, restaurants, a stadium, and a concert venue in Paris killed 130 people and injured more than 200. In July 2016 in Nice, a lone terrorist caused further carnage by driving a cargo truck directly into crowds celebrating Bastille Day, leaving 86 dead and more than 400 injured. Less than two weeks later, two terrorists took a priest and five parishioners hostage in a church in Saint-Étienne-du-Rouvray (Normandy). They assassinated the priest and gravely injured one parishioner. All of these events shook the French public to the core and remained the focus of attention throughout the country over a period of several weeks (Mayer and

CONTACT Sylvain Brouard  sylvain.brouard@sciencespo.fr

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Tiberj 2016). Overnight, security and terrorism became the most frequently quoted 'most important problems' and 'main concerns' for French public opinion (Brouard 2016; Mayer *et al.* 2016b).

Terrorism in France has a long history. The words 'terrorist' and 'terrorism' were first used during the French Revolution and its Reign of Terror. In 1800, shortly after the Reign of Terror ended, the first terrorist attack in the modern sense of the word occurred, when a bomb exploded on the route taken by Napoleon Bonaparte as he made his way to the Opera House. Napoleon survived, but 22 civilians died and hundreds more were injured. A number of terrorist incidents have occurred since then. Most of the more recent attacks were carried out by separatists in Corsica and Euzkadi and rarely involved casualties. Islamic terrorism struck the French army in 1983 in Beirut and in France in the middle of the 1990s. Although the attacks by Mohammed Merah in cities in south-west France, namely Toulouse and Montauban, in 2012 were deadly and inspired by jihadist motives, they were not presented or perceived as a broad threat against France by Islamic terrorism. In sum, the idea of being the target of lethal terrorism is new to French citizens, who had never experienced terrorist strikes like those of 2015 and 2016 in terms of casualties but also in terms of symbolism. While 'defining terrorism is notoriously difficult' (Fortna 2015: 522), the term applies to the events in France as Islamic State's actions in the country correspond closely to the scholarly definition of terrorism: 'a systematic campaign of indiscriminate violence against public civilian targets to influence a wider audience' (Fortna 2015: 522).

Past research has shown that terrorist attacks have a substantive impact on political behaviour (Bonanno and Jost 2006; Davis and Silver 2004; Hetherington and Suhay 2011; Landau *et al.* 2004; Vasilopoulos 2018; Van de Vyver *et al.* 2016; Vasilopoulos *et al.* 2017). Several studies argue that terrorism sways policy preferences, with most scholars arguing that actual terrorist attacks increase the endorsement of right-wing and authoritarian policy preferences (Bonanno and Jost 2006; Hetherington and Suhay 2011; Nail *et al.* 2009; Van de Vyver *et al.* 2016; Vasilopoulos *et al.* 2017). At the same time, the question over the ideological leanings of those who change opinions in the aftermath of a terrorist attack as well as the content of these shifts remains largely unresolved, and has recently been the subject of a vivid debate between political scientists, and social and political psychologists.

This article advances extant knowledge on the interplay between terrorist threats and policy preferences. Focusing on France, it investigates the main claims of three theories that make contrasting predictions regarding opinion change in the light of a terrorist attack. These are the Reactive Liberals Hypothesis (RLH), Terror Management Theory (TMT), and Bayesian Updating Theory (BUT). To this end, we use multivariate regression analyses to investigate shifts in public opinion in France. The article draws on nine nationally representative rolling cross-sectional surveys, covering the time span between

June 2014 and September 2016, which includes the January and November 2015 Paris attacks and the July 2016 Nice attacks. We are concerned with two broad aims. First, we are interested in gauging the extent to which French public opinion was swayed in the light of these events, and subsequently, what attitudes in particular changed in the aftermath of the attacks. Second, we investigate the extent to which ideology affects changes in public opinion following terrorist attacks. For this purpose, we test the premises of RLH, TMT, and BUT that make different predictions on the interplay between terrorist threats and ideological leanings.

The effects of terrorism on the endorsement of right-wing preferences have been extensively studied. However, the bulk of this work focuses on experimental methods using convenience samples. In this sense this article adds to the generalisation and external validity of extant work. Furthermore, studies that collect data before and after an attack are rare (but see Van de Vyver *et al.* 2016; Vasilopoulos 2018; Vasilopoulos *et al.* 2017). The data analysed in our study cover multiple points in time and three major terrorist attacks, providing information on public opinion trends before and after an attack, and allowing the assessment of the impact of *consecutive* terrorist events on mass publics.

Overall, in line with prior research, the results illustrate that the attacks spurred substantive changes among the French public, shifting political opinion toward the right. Further, in line both with RLH and BUT, the results suggest that this change in public opinion chiefly concerns a shift toward the right among individuals who identified with the left prior to the events. Finally, in line with BUT, the findings show that this shift to the right did not extend beyond the issue of security.

Ideology, terrorism, and issue preferences

A broad stream of research argues that the left-right cleavage is the prime determinant of political choice in France (Andersen and Evans 2003; Bélanger *et al.* 2006; Fleury and Lewis-Beck 1993a, 1993b; Lewis-Beck 1984; Lewis-Beck and Chlarson 2002; Michelat 1993; but see Converse and Pierce 1986). Lewis-Beck (1984: 446) in particular emphasises that ‘ideological identity appears generally to serve as the French voter’s compass’.

We conceive the left-right ideological divide as an organised system of inter-related political orientations that motivate citizens to endorse some policy proposals at the expense of others. Although most scholars would agree with this definition there is lively debate regarding the dimensions of ideology. On the one hand, one stream of research sees ideology as a unidimensional construct that consists of two interrelated facets: openness (versus closeness) to social change and acceptance (versus rejection) of inequality (Carney *et al.* 2008; Jost *et al.* 2003, 2009). Another stream of research argues that ideology includes

two dimensions, one economic and one social (Feldman and Johnston 2014; Stenner 2005, 2009).

Throughout this article we refrain from conceptualising left-right ideology as unidimensional or consisting of two dimensions. However, we contend that economic egalitarianism, acceptance of ethnic and social minorities, and the protection of personal rights appeal more to left-leaning than to right-leaning individuals. On the other hand, demands for free-market policies, respect for tradition, and conformity to established social norms tend to appeal to individuals who are to the right of the political spectrum (Jost *et al.* 2003, 2007).

A second note of caution is needed here: numerous studies suggest that many people do not think of politics in ideological terms and do not necessarily maintain consistency between their ideological orientations and their political attitudes (e.g. Campbell *et al.* 1960; Jacoby 1991; Lewis-Beck *et al.* 2009; Zaller 1992). We do accept this view. However, at a very minimum we anticipate that, on average, left-leaning respondents will be more likely to endorse left-wing policies, such as increased economic redistribution and the protection of civil liberties and minority rights, compared to right-leaning respondents. Further, several studies have shown that when it comes to social issues (the main focus of this study) rather than economic ones, the correlation between ideological identification and policy attitudes remains strong (Johnston and Wronski 2016).

Political ideologies tend to be long-lasting, stemming from psychological mechanisms rooted in personality (Bonanno and Jost 2006; Carney *et al.* 2008; Jost *et al.* 2003, 2007). The psychological needs underlying ideologies may be structural, reflecting long-term personality traits that motivate individuals toward specific political ideologies. The endorsement of right-wing values partly satisfies deeper psychological motives, the most decisive of which are the high need to reduce uncertainty, and increased anxiety about death (Jost *et al.* 2003, 2007). Yet these underlying psychological needs may also be temporal and ephemeral, stemming from the momentary context (Jost *et al.* 2003). Past research has repeatedly shown that a severe exogenous shock, such as a terrorist attack, may shift aggregate political preferences toward the right end of the left-right scale (Berrebi and Klor 2008; Doty *et al.* 1991; McCann 1997; Sales 1973).

According to one stream of research, the psychological mechanism that leads to the endorsement of right-wing preferences in the aftermath of such a shock can be traced to the anxiety of coping with death (Jost *et al.* 2003, 2004, 2007; Landau *et al.* 2004). Several studies have demonstrated that anxiety about death boosts the endorsement of right-wing preferences. Using an experimental design, Jost, Fitzsimons, and Kay (2004) illustrate that priming death-related images in a word matching task boosted the endorsement of right-wing attitudes. Bonanno and Jost (2006) provide further evidence for the link between anxiety and the endorsement of right-wing preferences by illustrating a significant right-wing and patriotic shift among 9/11 survivors. Finally, drawing on

the case of Israel, Berrebi and Klor (2008) illustrate that suicide attacks trigger a significant increase in the vote share of right-wing parties.

The question of which ideological group is more likely to switch allegiance subsequent to a terrorist threat remains by and large unresolved as current literature comes up with contrasting predictions. The 'Reactive-Liberals Hypothesis' (Nail *et al.* 2009) traces aggregate-level shifts toward the right in the light of terrorist incidents to preference changes among individuals with a left-wing ideological orientation. Nail *et al.* (2009) argue that individuals who are not long-term right-wing sympathisers are more inclined to switch to the right in the aftermath of a terrorist attack. This is explained by the fact that right-leaning individuals experience higher levels of threat in general and consequently they already support policies advocating social control, regardless of situational factors. Consequently, according to RLH, threats lead left-wing individuals to behave like right-wingers. Recently, using the case of the 2005 London bombings, Van de Vyver *et al.* (2016) provided evidence for the RLH, finding that in the aftermath of the attacks the public shifted toward the right, ending up being more prejudiced toward Muslims and immigrants as well as more favourable toward their own ethnic group. On the other hand, changes in these attitudes among right-wing individuals were slight.

Terror Management Theory offers an alternative account of the relationship between ideology and threat. TMT posits that the function of easing existential fears and most importantly fear of death is not only served by the right, but by all political ideologies. Awareness of the inevitability of death produces anxiety in humans. In general, cultural worldviews and particularly ideology act as defence mechanisms, providing reassurance for a symbolic continuation of existence and functioning as a 'protective shield' against this anxiety (Landau *et al.* 2004: 1137). In short, TMT argues that 'people's beliefs about reality provide a buffer against the anxiety that results from living in a largely uncontrollable, perilous universe where the only certainty is death' (Greenberg *et al.* 1990: 308). Drawing on this framework, TMT predicts that reminders of mortality will cause anxiety about death and in turn will reinforce extant political beliefs regardless of whether these are to the political left or right. This premise has received empirical support in a number of experiments. Kosloff *et al.* (2010) argue that reminders of death anxiety increase preference for candidates who are closer to an individual's political beliefs. Castano *et al.* (2011) conducted five experiments to assess the impact of death anxiety. In all studies they find that reminders of mortality make liberals even more liberal and conservatives even more conservative. Finally, by using an experimental design once again, Weise *et al.* (2012) illustrate that mortality salience increases anti-immigrant attitudes among those who score high in authoritarianism, while reducing it among those who score low.

A third way to understand the impact of terrorism on policy preferences is to conceptualise a terrorist attack as a stream of new information that alters

pre-existing beliefs regarding the state of the world. Different theories exist regarding how individuals update their preferences with new information. Among them, Bayesian updating theory has received a lot of attention from scholars on various aspects of political behaviour, such as partisan identity, political scandals, or nuclear accidents (Achen 1992; Bartels 1993, 2002; Franchino 2014; Gerber and Green 1999). BUT states that

the degree to which the voter adjusts her beliefs in response to new information is a function of how much the new information deviates from her prior best guess, the precision of the new information and the voter's confidence in her original guess. (Gerber and Green 1999: 194)

However, the implications of BUT have been disputed. Some suggest that 'the Bayesian hypothesis holds that new information moves people with different partisan affinities (but similar levels of prior information) in the same direction and to approximately the same extent' (Gerber and Green 1999: 192). Others share the idea that

accumulating evidence will tend to produce consensus even among observers with very different prior beliefs – as long as they agree on the implications of the evidence. ... In general the characteristic pattern of opinion change suggested by the simple Bayesian model is one of converging opinion among people with different prior views. (Bartels 2002: 121–2; see also Achen 2002; Grynaviski 2006; Goodin 2002)

In the most careful investigation so far on the issue, Bullock (2009: 1122) argues that:

unbiased Bayesian learning can produce agreement between partisans even when their initial disagreement is great ... whenever partisans receive political messages so numerous and so credible that their prior beliefs are overwhelmed. However, most partisans never receive so much information of such high quality about any political question. Therefore, Bayesian updating offers no expectation of convergence to agreement: the lasting differences that we observe between real-world partisans are just what we would observe if those partisans were unbiased Bayesians.

Some scholars stress that shifts in partisanship are congruent with BUT (Gerber and Green 1999). A recent study by Franchino (2014) underlines that belief updating after a nuclear accident is congruent with BUT in most European countries. Nonetheless, other researchers (Bartels 2002; Fischle 2000) deny that evidence supports BUT and underscore the relevance of other theories.

Far from considering BUT ineffective in understanding how terrorist attacks affect issue preferences, we contend that it is precisely the nature of these events that renders them suitable to test the expectations of the theory: 'Even when partisans receive the same information and interpret it in the same way, Bayesian updating will lead them to agreement only if the information is of extraordinary quantity or quality' (Bullock 2009: 1122). We contend that the extreme conditions needed to estimate the specific empirical implications of

BUT in Western democracies are unambiguously fulfilled by terrorist attacks. A terrorist attack is a ‘focusing event’:

an event that is sudden; relatively uncommon; can be reasonably defined as harmful or revealing the possibility of future harms; has harms that are concentrated in a particular geographic area or community of interest; and that is known to policymakers and the public simultaneously. (Birkland 1998: 54)

There is no debate about the fact that terrorism is consensually perceived negatively and as a security threat for the citizens in the country where the terrorist attack occurs. Consequently, a terrorist attack is an event where people agree on the implications of the evidence regardless of their ideological differences. Moreover, terrorism induces media storms, i.e. ‘an explosive increase in news coverage of a specific item (event or issue) constituting a substantial share of the total news agenda during a certain time’ (Boydston *et al.* 2014: 511). The specific media impact of terrorism has been documented for 9/11 in the US (Boydston 2013; Boydston *et al.* 2014). The specificity of the media storm is that it exposes each individual to an extraordinary amount of information with a common content in all media. Studies have also underscored that media storms strongly shape the ‘public’s perceptions of what is important in the world around them’ (Boydston *et al.* 2014: 525). Therefore, terrorist attacks lead to the uncommon case ‘when partisans receive the same information and interpret it in the same way’ and where ‘the information is of extraordinary quantity or quality’ (Bullock 2009: 1122). Thus, we contend that the specific expectations of convergence drawn from BUT should apply. We expect a more pronounced shift toward the right among left-leaning citizens on the security issue alone following a terrorist attack.

To sum up, RLH, TMT, and BUT make contrasting assumptions on the impact of a major terrorist attack on public opinion. RLH argues that public opinion will shift to the right following a terrorist attack not only at the expense of protecting civil liberties, but also of issues that are unrelated to the terrorist threat. Moreover, RLH anticipates that the shift to the right will be significantly higher among those without a prior ideological identification with the right. BUT also hypothesises a significantly more pronounced shift to the right among those who lean to the left, but only on the specific issues which the overwhelming new information focuses on. Finally, TMT suggests that terrorism will reinforce attitudes in line with the individual’s current ideological beliefs on various issues, including those that are not necessarily related to the threat.

Data and methodology

The article relies on survey data gathered in France by the ‘Policy Priority Barometer’ and ‘Local Elections’ project. Nine waves of the survey were fielded by Kantar TNS Sofres between June 2014 and September 2016. In line with standard practices in France, the sample selection is based on quota sampling.

The quotas are: age \times gender, occupation of the head of household, region, and type of residential area. The sample of registered voters consisting of at least 1500 respondents¹ was surveyed online three times per year. The surveys study the shifts in policy preferences in France using relative preference question formats (Soroka and Wlezien 2010). This cross-sectional data includes many questions on the most relevant issues in French politics. The timing of the terrorist attacks and of the survey waves offers a unique opportunity to empirically test the effect of all major attacks on issue preferences in France. Table 1 presents an overview of the field dates for each survey.

Since both the RLH and TMT anticipate that terrorist attacks have a generalised impact on attitudes that extends beyond preferences over security, the studied shifts in preferences across issues related to the left-right divide in France must include items that are and that are not related to terrorism. For this reason, we chose to construct our analyses around four types of issues.

First, we assess preference change on the issue of security. The trade-off between security and civil liberties is central in Western political systems (Feldman 2003; Hetherington and Weiler 2009). At the same time, the tightening of security measures at the expense of civil liberties is the standard policy response following a terrorist attack (Davis and Silver 2004; Hetherington and Suhay 2011; Hetherington and Weiler 2009). This was the case in France in the aftermath both of the *Charlie Hebdo* attack and also the 13 November attacks. The measures included increased online surveillance of suspects as well as restrictions on participating in public demonstrations. Moreover, the national budget was adjusted in order to increase spending on security and policing at the expense of other domains. One could claim that attitudes toward spending on security are motivated by concerns regarding the size of government. However, we consider this unlikely as past research has indicated that security spending preferences are shaped by social rather than economic concerns. For example, Kam and Kinder (2007) show that ethnocentrism and attitudes toward ethnic minorities are the key ideological determinants of individual differences

Table 1. Dates of terrorist attacks and data collection.

Terrorist attacks	Wave number	Field date
Attacks at <i>Charlie Hebdo</i> & Hyper Casher	1	11–20 June 2014
	2	26 September–6 October 2014
	3	5–15 December 2014
		7–9 January 2015
	4	30 January–9 February 2015
	5	13–26 May 2015,
Attacks at Stade de France & Bataclan	6	2–12 October 2015
		13 November 2015
	7	14–22 December 2015
Attacks at Nice Bastille Day fireworks	8	5–15 February 2016
		14 July 2016
	9	9–16 September 2016

in attitudes toward spending on security. At the same time they find that there is no link between ethnocentrism and broader attitudes toward government spending. Data from the 2017 French election study also confirm that being in favour of more spending on security issues is associated with being right-wing, intolerant toward ethnic minorities, authoritarian, and *against* economic redistribution (see Appendix A).

The second set of issues concerns preferences toward immigration. Although the vast majority of perpetrators in the 2015 and 2016 terrorist attacks were French or European, a number of political elites (mostly on the right and far right) attempted to make a connection between immigrants and refugees living in France and terrorism. Further, past research suggests that terrorist threats increase preferences for more restrictive measures toward immigration (Huddy *et al.* 2005), even though this does not appear to be the case in France, at least with respect to the first terrorist event, the *Charlie Hebdo* attacks (Mayer *et al.* 2016a; Vasilopoulos *et al.* 2017). Overall, we believe that immigration is an issue with possible indirect links with the terrorist threat in France.

Finally, in order to assess whether there has been a generalised shift to the right in France, we researched possible changes of attitude on two sets of issues that have neither a direct nor an indirect connection with terrorism: the first concerns socio-economic issues, while the second assesses opinion change on moral issues.

With regard to opinion change on these four issue domains (security, immigration, socio-economic, and moral issues) following the terrorist attacks, TMT anticipates that the French public will be polarised on all issues, with left- and right-wing voters adopting more extreme positions on all four issues in line with their ideological leanings. On the other hand, RLH predicts that left-wing respondents will end up being more right-wing in their preferences on all issues but that there will be no change among right-wing voters. Finally, BUT anticipates that the terrorist attacks will result in a decrease of polarisation on the issue of security alone, with left-wing respondents converging towards right-wing respondents.

In sum, we test the following hypotheses:

TMT HYPOTHESIS – H1: The terrorist attacks increase attitude polarisation between those who identify with the left and those who identify with the right on security, immigration, socio-economic, and moral issues.

RL HYPOTHESIS – H2: The general shift toward the right on security, immigration, socio-economic, and moral issues in the light of the attacks is significantly more pronounced among respondents who do not identify with the right.

BUT HYPOTHESIS – H3: Terrorist attacks are followed by a shift to the right on the security issue alone and significantly more pronounced among respondents who do not identify with the right.

The empirical tests rely on four dependent variables measuring attitudes toward security, immigration, socio-economic, and moral issues. Higher values on the four scales indicate right-wing preferences. To facilitate the comparability of results, all dependent variables have been recoded running from 0 to 1.

The attitudinal scale on security (*Security scale*) is a Likert scale that uses four items to measure preferences on security:²

- According to you, should there be much more, somewhat more, the same or somewhat less, much less government spending on (1) police and law enforcement? (2) monitoring borders between France and other EU countries? (3) the army and defence?
- According to you, should there be a strong decrease, a slight decrease, no change, a slight increase, or a strong increase in the severity of sentences for offenders.

The attitudinal scale on immigration (*Immigration scale*) is a Likert scale that uses two questions about relative preferences regarding immigrants:³

- ‘According to you, should there be much more, somewhat more, the same or somewhat less, much less government spending on welfare benefits for documented foreigners in France?’
- ‘According to you, should there be a strong decrease, a slight decrease, no change, a slight increase, or a strong increase in the number of foreigners legally allowed to live in France?’

The attitudinal scale on socio-economic issues (*Socio-economic scale*) is a Likert scale that uses nine questions about relative preferences on socio-economic issues:⁴

- ‘According to you, should there be much more, somewhat more, the same or somewhat less, much less government spending on (1) reimbursement of medical acts? (2) pensions? (3) unemployment benefits? (4) welfare benefits for the poorest families?’
- ‘According to you, should there be a strong decrease, a slight decrease, no change, a slight increase, or a strong increase in (1) the budget deficit? (2) the level of the minimum wage? (3) the capacities for companies to fire employees? (4) the number of working hours for employees? (5) the number of civil servants?’

Finally, the attitudinal scale on moral issue (*Moral scale*) is a Likert scale that uses two questions about relative preferences on gay rights and gender equality:⁵ ‘According to you, should there be a strong decrease, a slight decrease, no change, a slight increase, or a strong increase in (1) the homosexual rights and (2) the efforts to foster gender equality in society?’

We run OLS regressions with robust standard errors for each dependent variable. In order to test our hypotheses, we include interaction terms between the

timing of the survey and respondents' left-right self-positioning (*ideology*). Two specifications relative to the timing of the survey have been operationalised.

A first variable – *Wave ID* – is used to control for the date of the respondent's answer as we are interested in how people's answers vary across time depending on the timing of the terrorist attacks. The third wave of the survey that was conducted in December 2014, i.e. before the 2015 and 2016 terrorist attacks, is used as the reference. If a terrorism-induced shift to the right is to be observed, the survey wave that took place in February 2015 (Wave 4) after the *Charlie Hebdo* attacks, in December 2015 (Wave 7) after the 13 November Paris attacks, and in September 2016 (Wave 9) after the Nice killings, should be associated with a statistically significant and positive coefficient in all models.

Our second operationalisation of wave timing – *Wave type* – distinguishes between three types of waves. The first type – *2014 waves* – includes the three surveys (June, September, and December 2014) that were conducted before the first terrorist attack and is used as the baseline. We coded in the second type – *2015 & 2016 post-attack waves* – the first survey online after each of the three 2015 and 2016 terrorist attacks: in February 2015 after the *Charlie Hebdo* attacks, in December 2015 after the November 13 Paris attacks, and in September 2016 after the Nice attacks. Under the third type of survey wave – *Other 2015 and 2016 waves* – we coded all surveys that were conducted in 2015 and 2016 but not directly after a terrorist attack. If a terrorism-induced shift to the right is to be observed, the *2015 and 2016 post-attack wave* should be associated with a statistically significant and positive coefficient in each model. If the terrorism-induced shift to the right has a lasting effect, *Other 2015 and 2016 waves* should also be associated with a statistically significant and positive coefficient in each model.

Ideology has been measured using a scale ranging from 0 (extreme left) to 10 (extreme right). It should be noted that 13% of the sample did not answer this question.⁶ We expect more right-wing respondents to shift further to the right on all issues. Therefore, *Ideology* should be associated with a statistically significant and positive coefficient in each model.

The key tests for our analysis are the interactions between *Wave ID* and *Ideology* as well as *Wave type* and *Ideology*. To test our four hypotheses we need to be able to check whether and, if so, how the timing of terrorist attacks impacts on the effect of ideology on the dependent variables. TMT contends that terrorism reinforces pre-existing ideological commitments and induces polarisation. Consequently, the coefficient of the interaction term should be in the same direction as ideology – i.e. positive – in all four models. The RLH expects a general shift to the right among those who place themselves to the left on the ideology scale. Hence, the coefficient of the interactive term should be in the opposite direction than ideology – i.e. negative – in the four models. Finally, the expectation from the BUT hypothesis is that the coefficient of the interactive term should be significant and should have the opposite sign of

ideology (i.e. negative), but only in the model using the security scale as a dependent variable.

Apart from ideology and period, as scholars (for example Stimson *et al.* 2012) usually underscore that issue preferences are also shaped by socio-demographic factors, particularly age, gender and occupation for security, immigration and moral issues, we also control for a full range of demographics that includes age, education, urbanity, gender, and occupation.⁷

Results

Table 2 reports the results for the models including *Wave ID with the four dependent variables*. The reference period is December 2014. The table has been estimated using all waves, yet to facilitate comprehension we only report the result of waves before and after each terrorist attack. As expected, the *Ideology* coefficient is positive and significant throughout the analysis, illustrating that in December 2014 (our reference period) right-wing respondents are in favour of more security, are more market oriented on socio-economic issues, more opposed to immigration, and more traditional on moral issues. The four scales used as dependent variables appear to reliably reflect the left–right differences on the four issues studied. Starting with the impact of the three major attacks on attitudes toward security, the findings indicate a negative and significant interaction between ideology and the study waves conducted during the key periods (i.e. in the aftermath of the *Charlie Hebdo* attack in February 2015, of the Bataclan attack in November 2015, and the Nice attacks in September 2016 respectively) with the overall effect having the same magnitude throughout. On the other hand, the respective coefficients for the immigration scale fall short of reaching statistical significance. The same is true for the scale on moral and socio-economic issues.

Given that interaction coefficients alone cannot inform us over statistically significant differences for specific meaningful values of the moderating variable (Brambor *et al.* 2005), we graphically illustrate the comparison of the effect of ideology on the security scale prior to and after the January 2015, November 2015, and July 2016 terrorist attacks by plotting the predicted values on the security scale for the pre- and post-attack waves according to left–right self-positioning (Figure 1⁸). By way of reminder, RLH and BUT both anticipate that the attacks will lead left-wing respondents to endorse right-wing policies. On the other hand, TMT predicts that a polarisation effect should take place where right-leaning respondents will end up more supportive of restrictive security measures, while those on the left will become even more opposed to the same measures as a result of the attacks.

The results support the predictions of RLH and BUT. All three figures indicate a significant and substantial shift to the right in opinions toward security in the aftermath of all attacks among those who identify with the left and centre.

Table 2. The effect of ideology on issue preferences treating each wave as a dummy variable.

	Security scale	Immigration scale	Socio-economic scale	Moral scale
February 2015	0.11** (0.02)	0.05* (0.02)	-0.02 (0.01)	0.02 (0.02)
October 2015	0.06** (0.02)	0.00 (0.02)	-0.02 (0.01)	0.01 (0.02)
December 2015	0.11** (0.02)	-0.03 (0.02)	-0.03* (0.01)	0.00 (0.02)
February 2016	0.06** (0.02)	-0.00 (0.02)	-0.02 (0.01)	-0.02 (0.02)
September 2016	0.13** (0.02)	-0.01 (0.02)	-0.06** (0.01)	0.01 (0.02)
Ideology	0.03** (0.00)	0.04** (0.00)	0.01** (0.00)	0.02** (0.00)
February 2015 × Ideology	-0.01** (0.00)	-0.01* (0.00)	0.00 (0.00)	-0.00 (0.00)
October 2015 × Ideology	-0.00 (0.00)	-0.00 (0.00)	0.00* (0.00)	-0.00 (0.00)
December 2015 × Ideology	-0.01** (0.00)	0.00 (0.00)	0.01** (0.00)	0.00 (0.00)
February 2016 × Ideology	-0.00 (0.00)	-0.00 (0.00)	0.00* (0.00)	0.00 (0.00)
September 2016 × Ideology	-0.01* (0.00)	-0.00 (0.00)	0.01** (0.00)	-0.00 (0.00)
Constant	0.42** (0.02)	0.55** (0.02)	0.40** (0.01)	0.29** (0.02)
Observations	10261	10599	9716	10640
R ²	0.227	0.223	0.213	0.125

Notes: Whether or not control variables are included in the models does not change the substantive results on the key variables. We also tested media preference variables as well as interactive terms between the media variables and Wave ID. Results remain unchanged. Control variables are not displayed due to space constraints.

Entries are OLS coefficients (with robust standard errors in parentheses). The reference period is December 2014.

* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; All models control for age, gender, professional activity, education, and urbanity. All dependent variables have been recoded running from 0 to 1.

In line with the premises of BUT, attitude change appears to be particularly augmented among those who were least likely to endorse right-wing preferences, i.e. those who place themselves on the far-left end of the left-right scale. Further, results suggest a weaker shift toward more security among centre-right respondents, while the attacks did not produce an opinion shift among those who place themselves on the far-right end of the left-right scale. Although, all three cases show a statistically significant opinion change in the light of the attacks among left-wing voters, the effect is substantively stronger in the light of the first attacks in January 2015.

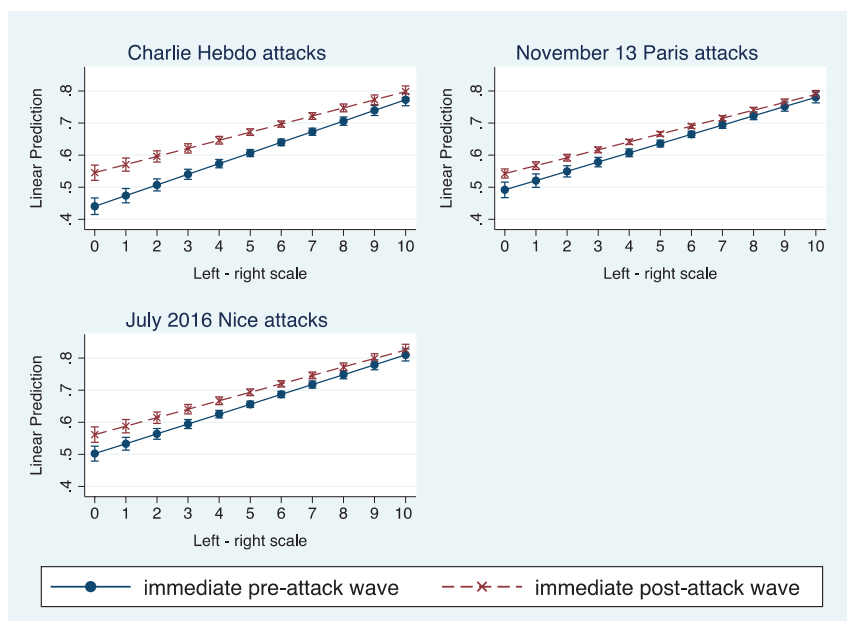


Figure 1. Predictive values of the security scale before and after *Charlie Hebdo*, 13 November, and Nice attacks for different ideological self-placements.

Note: In the figure are reported the predicted values on the security scale for the pre- and post-attack waves: for the *Charlie Hebdo* attacks, the pre and post attack waves are respectively wave 3 (December 2014) and wave 4 (February 2015); for the November 2015 attacks, they are respectively wave 6 (October 2016) and wave 7 (December 2016); for the Nice attacks, they are respectively wave 8 (February 2016) and wave 9 (September 2016).

Figures 2–4 show the predicted values on the immigration, moral, and socio-economic scales respectively for each immediate pre- and post-attack wave along different values of the left-right scale. Starting with immigration, Figure 2 illustrates the absence of any significant policy preference change in the light of any of the three terrorist attacks. Figure 3 on the other hand suggests that right-wing respondents became more conservative on moral issues in the light of the November 2015 attacks. This finding appears in only one instance and it is not replicated following the *Charlie Hebdo* or the Nice attacks. This finding may be attributable to factors external to the terrorism context of the period. Finally, Figure 4 illustrates the absence of any effect of the *Charlie Hebdo* and November 2015 attacks on the French public's socio-economic preferences. That said, we do observe a statistically significant yet substantively very weak effect of the Nice attacks on the socio-economic scale that again is in contradiction with the predictions of all three theories examined here and could be explained by factors unrelated to the attacks.

We now move on to assess the cumulative effect of all attacks during the 2015–2016 period on French public opinion. Specifically, we performed

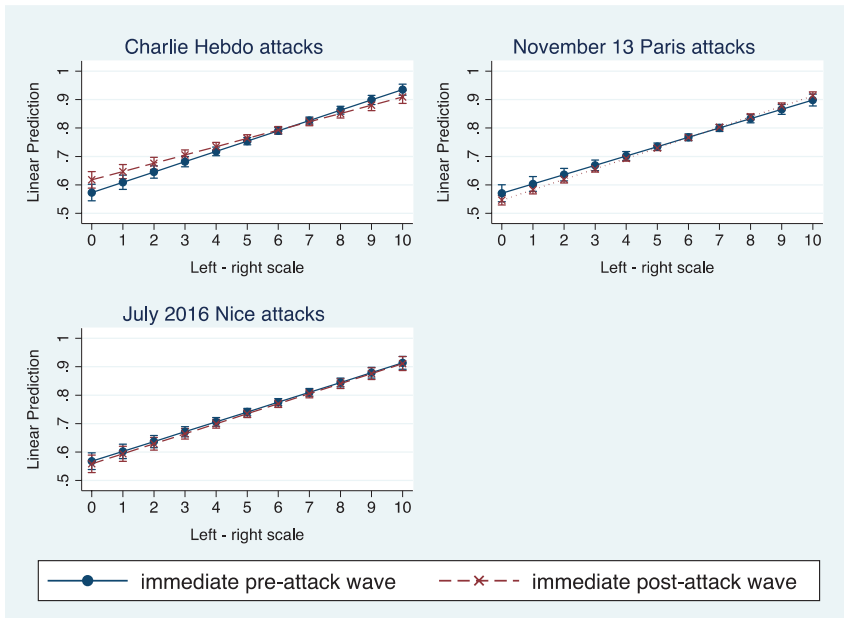


Figure 2. Predictive values on the immigration scale before and after *Charlie Hebdo*, 13 November, and Nice attacks for different ideological self-placements.

Note: In the figure are reported the predicted values on the security scale for the pre and post attack waves: for the *Charlie Hebdo* attacks, the pre and post attack waves are respectively wave 3 (December 2014) and wave 4 (February 2015); for the November 2015 attacks, they are respectively wave 6 (October 2016) and wave 7 (December 2016); for the Nice attacks, they are respectively wave 8 (February 2016) and wave 9 (September 2016).

additional analyses, including *Wave type* as an independent variable to account for the timing of the survey as a function of the timing of the terrorist attacks.

Figure 5 illustrates the results for the different dependent variables. The models on which the figures are based are presented in Table 3. The results confirm the conclusions of the previous analyses. Overall the 2015–2016 attacks shifted French public opinion to the right yet only on the issue of security. Moreover, in line with BUT predictions this shift is a product of the attitudinal transition among left-leaning, centrist, and centre-right respondents. On the other hand, when the different immediate post-attack periods are taken as a whole, there is no statistically significant attitudinal change on immigration, socio-economic and moral issues. Furthermore, this aggregated analysis reveals an additional noteworthy finding on the duration of the effect of terrorist attacks. Our results indicate that non-right-wing citizens tend to adopt right-wing security attitudes more strongly in the aftermath of a terrorist attack and this shift persists for several months following an attack, albeit reduced.

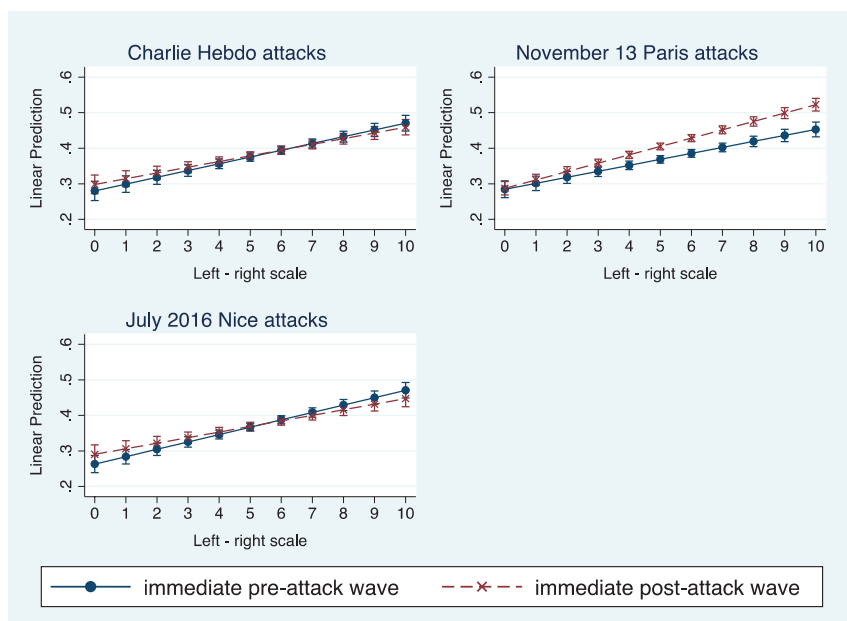


Figure 3. Predictive values on the moral scale before and after *Charlie Hebdo*, 13 November, and Nice attacks for different ideological self-placements.

Note: In the figure are reported the predicted values on the security scale for the pre and post attack waves: for the *Charlie Hebdo* attacks, the pre- and post-attack waves are respectively wave 3 (December 2014) and wave 4 (February 2015); for the November 2015 attacks, they are respectively wave 6 (October 2016) and wave 7 (December 2016); for the Nice attacks, they are respectively wave 8 (February 2016) and wave 9 (September 2016).

To summarise, our analysis points to the conclusion that the multiple terrorist attacks lead to attitude convergence toward more right-wing preferences rather than polarisation. Further, results suggest that there was no significant right-wing shift in attitudes toward immigration as a result of the attacks despite their severity and the fact that some of those involved were not French citizens or were French citizens with an immigrant background. This result is in line with the conclusions of other studies using different survey data (Mayer *et al.* 2016a). The same is the case with policy preferences regarding moral and economic issues. Overall, our findings by and large suggest that the attacks did not cause a generalised right-wing shift among the French public, and the attitude change was mostly focused on the issue of security. Further, left-wing respondents were those most likely to change. Finally, the right-wing shift on the security issue reaches its peak immediately following an attack but also remains significant in the months following the attack compared to the baseline of the pre-terrorist attacks period.

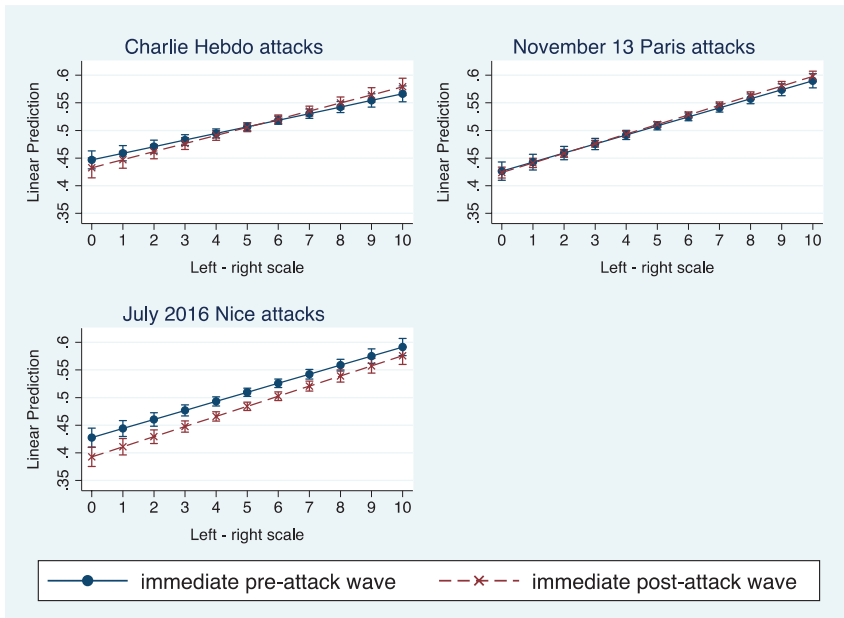


Figure 4. Predictive values on the socio-economic scale before and after *Charlie Hebdo*, 13 November, and Nice attacks for different ideological self-placements.

Note: In the figure are reported the predicted values on the security scale for the pre and post attack waves: for the *Charlie Hebdo* attacks, the pre- and post-attack waves are respectively wave 3 (December 2014) and wave 4 (February 2015); for the November 2015 attacks, they are respectively wave 6 (October 2016) and wave 7 (December 2016); for the Nice attacks, they are respectively wave 8 (February 2016) and wave 9 (September 2016).

Discussion and conclusion

Extant research agrees that terrorist attacks exert an important influence on policy preferences, yet the question over the ideological direction, the policy domains, and the ideological dispositions of opinion changers has not yet been resolved. RLH suggests that in light of terrorist events, people without a right-wing disposition will shift toward the right on both relevant and non-relevant issues. TMT argues that the mortality salience induced by terrorist acts will lead individuals to reinforce their pre-existing ideological beliefs across issues regardless of whether these are left- or right-wing. Finally, BUT anticipates that, following a terrorist attack, voters will update their prior preferences and shift toward the right but only on issues that are relevant to the attacks. This article directly tested the claims of these three major theories that help to explain attitude change in the aftermath of a terrorist incident in the case of France, by drawing on nine cross-sectional studies covering a time span of two years and three major terrorist attacks.

Three main findings stem from our analyses. First, in line with a broad stream of past research the French case illustrates that the terrorist attacks spurred a

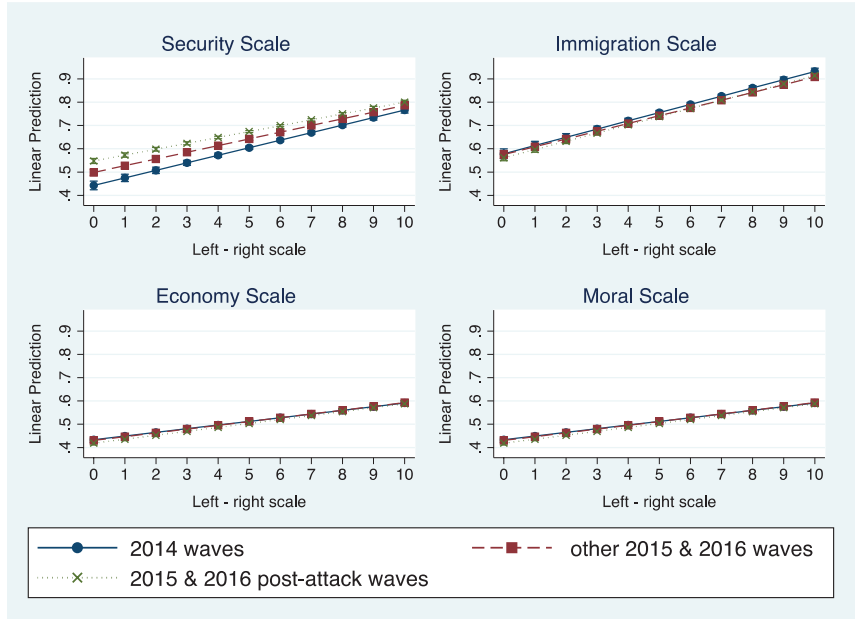


Figure 5. Predictive values on each scale for different ideological self-placements according to different periods.

Table 3. The effect of ideology on issue preferences for different terrorist threat periods.

	Security scale	Immigration scale	Moral scale	Socio-economic scale
Other 2015–2016 waves	0.06*** (0.01)	–0.00 (0.02)	–0.01 (0.01)	–0.00 (0.01)
Immediate post-attack waves	0.11*** (0.01)	–0.02 (0.01)	0.00 (0.01)	–0.02* (0.01)
Left–right scale	0.03*** (0.00)	0.04*** (0.00)	0.02*** (0.00)	0.02*** (0.00)
Other 2015–2016 waves × Left–right scale	–0.00** (0.00)	–0.00 (0.00)	–0.00 (0.00)	0.00 (0.00)
Immediate post-attack waves × Left–right scale	–0.01*** (0.00)	–0.00 (0.00)	0.00 (0.00)	0.00 (0.00)
Observations	10,261	10,599	10,640	9,716
R-squared	0.22	0.22	0.12	0.21

Entries are OLS coefficients (with robust standard errors in parentheses). The reference period is the 2014 waves.

All models control for age, gender, professional activity, education, and urbanity. All dependent variables have been recoded running from 0 to 1.

* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$.

significant shift toward the right among the French. However, contrary to the expectations of both RLH and TMT and in line with the premises of BUT, this switch was not broad and undifferentiated but was by and large concentrated on the most relevant issue, government action to ensure security and public safety. Second, our evidence suggests that the attacks had a long-lasting effect on political attitudes and that French public opinion was swayed to the right more strongly immediately following each terrorist attack. These results are consistent with previous work that investigates authoritarianism in periods of high and low threat (Doty *et al.* 1991). The third major finding concerns the ‘who’ of this switch. Results from both analyses show that, in line with BUT, it is non-right-wing respondents who shift to more right-wing positions in the light of a terrorist incident, while the shift among those already on the right is far smaller, and in the case of far-right respondents it is non-existent. Therefore, for the first time, the article displays evidence clearly congruent with the expectations derived from the most stringent theoretical understanding of BUT and in conditions that allow these expectations to be separated from those derived from other theoretical perspectives. A terrorist attack is one instance ‘when partisans receive the same information and interpret it in the same way’ and when Bayesian updating ‘leads them to agreement’ because ‘the information is of extraordinary quantity or quality’ (Bullock 2009: 1122). Terrorist attacks are far from everyday politics. Thus, so far, BUT can only offer alternative predictions for a limited number of cases. Nonetheless, as patterns of Bayesian adjustment have also been empirically documented for nuclear accidents (Franchino 2014), evidence suggests that BUT might be a relevant and specific theoretical perspective to understand how preferences change in the broad class of rare but key instances loosely defined as focusing events ‘whenever partisans receive political messages so numerous and so credible that their prior beliefs are overwhelmed’ (Bullock 2009: 1122).

A potential limitation is that due to the cross-sectional nature of the data we cannot control for change in the individual-level ideological orientations of the French public as a result of the attacks. We do not believe that this poses a threat to the validity of our findings for two main reasons. First, past research has indicated that due to the fact that they constitute the prime psychological anchor among French voters, ideological preferences remain fairly stable across time (Bélanger *et al.* 2006). Therefore it is not a surprise that in our dataset, empirical evidence does not support the hypothesis of a significant shift to the right among respondents⁹ following the terrorist attacks. Second, past research has found that although terrorist incidents alter policy and candidate preferences, they do not lead to a change in ideological orientations (Greenberg *et al.* 1992; Landau *et al.* 2004; McGregor *et al.* 1998; but see Thorisdottir and Jost 2011). Yet even if ideological self-positioning changed as a consequence of the attacks, this offers a much stricter confirmation of our main finding: that the 2015–2016 terrorist attacks spurred a shift toward the right on security among

left-leaning citizens regardless of whether some of them had switched their ideological beliefs toward the right or not.

Future research could shed additional light on the precise psychological procedure that sways voters in the light of terrorist attacks. Even though we control for ideological differences between respondents in our analysis, one limitation of our data is that it does not take into account additional factors that could delve deeper into the precise psychological mechanism that causes the updating of preferences among left-wingers. For example, one stream of research has highlighted the potent role of fear in the endorsement of right-wing or authoritarian policies in the light of terrorist threats by individuals who are left-wing and non-authoritarian (Hetherington and Suhay 2011; Huddy *et al.* 2007; Vasilopoulos *et al.* 2017). These findings are in line with our results. Future research could assess the extent to which preference updating is facilitated by emotional reactions.

Moreover, and despite common beliefs among pundits, journalists, and scholars, our findings illustrate that opinion change in the aftermath of a terrorist attack is solely confined to the most relevant issue at hand (security) and does not express itself as a generalised right-wing or authoritarian switch. This finding has implications for policy-making in the light of terrorist events, as it helps to understand the well-reported surge in support for the restriction of civil liberties following a terrorist attack. On the other hand, this finding indicates that terrorist events committed by Islamist groups are not necessarily accompanied by a surge of anti-immigrant sentiment. This result is also in line with, and helps explain, the little reported change in support for the far-right *Front National* in the light of the multiple terrorist attacks in France (Vasilopoulos *et al.* 2016). Terrorist events do have a powerful impact on policy preferences, but their effect tends to be concentrated on specific aspects of policy-making rather than triggering a blind, undifferentiated authoritarian or right-wing shift among mass publics that extends beyond targets and policies directly relevant to the terrorist threat.

Notes

1. In the post-regional wave in December 2015, the sample size (4827) was substantially higher than 1500 individuals.
2. Cronbach's alpha for these four items is 0.72. A factor analysis of the four items displays only one significant factor.
3. Cronbach's alpha for these two items is 0.76. A factor analysis of the two items shows that all items load on one significant factor.
4. Cronbach's alpha for these nine items is 0.71. A factor analysis of the nine items shows that all items load on one factor.
5. Cronbach's alpha for these two items is 0.71. A factor analysis of the two items displays only one significant factor.
6. Details about this segment of the sample are provided in the Appendix A.

7. Whether or not control variables are included does not affect the substantive results on the key variables. We also tested media preference variables and interactive terms between the media variables and Wave ID. The results remain unchanged. Control variables are not displayed for reasons of space.
8. We generated the predicted values on the security scale for the pre- and post-attack waves associated to each terrorist attack.
9. Two types of analyses were carried out. First, we ran t-tests on the mean left-right self-positioning according to the date of the survey wave: the mean left-right self-positioning has never been significantly higher – i.e. more on the right – since December 2014. Second, we specified a regression analysis with the left-right self-positioning as a dependent variable and survey wave, age, gender and occupation as independent variable: field surveys after December 2014 were never associated with a positive and significant coefficient that would have indicated a drift to the right after December 2014.

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Notes on contributors

Sylvain Brouard is Senior Research Fellow FNSP at CEVIPOF, Sciences Po and Associate Researcher within the Laboratoire Interdisciplinaire d'Evaluation des Politiques Publiques (LIEPP). His research focuses on political competition, political institutions, and law making. Recent publications include (with Vincent Tiberj) *As French As Everyone Else? A Survey of French Citizens of Maghrebin, African, and Turkish Origin* (Temple University Press, 2011), as well as articles in the *European Journal of Political Research*, *Comparative Political Studies*, *Political Research Quarterly*, *Journal of Public Policy*. [sylvain.brouard@sciencespo.fr]

Pavlos Vasilopoulos is a postdoctoral researcher at the Centre of Political Research of the Sciences Po (CEVIPOF) working on the project 'Emotions, Voting, Attitudes and Radicalism'. His research interests are political psychology and political behaviour. His work has been published in several international political science journals including

Political Psychology, Party Politics, Acta Politica, and Environmental Politics. [pavlos.vasilopoulos@sciencespo.fr]

Martial Foucault is full Professor in Political Science at Sciences Po Paris, Director of the CEVIPOF (CNRS), and Associate Researcher within the Laboratoire Interdisciplinaire d'Evaluation des Politiques Publiques (LIEPP). His interests are political economy and political behaviour. His work has been featured in international political science journals including the *American Journal of Political Science*, *British Journal of Political Science*, *Political Psychology*, and *Electoral Studies*. [martial.foucault@sciencespo.fr]

ORCID

Pavlos Vasilopoulos  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-1626-3150>

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Appendix A

Table A1. Correlations between traits and attitudes toward spending in security and other domains.

	Left-right scale	Authoritarianism	Ethnic intolerance index	Against economic redistribution	More spending on border control	More spending on police and maintaining order	More spending on unemployment benefits
Left-right scale	1.00						
Authoritarianism	0.23	1.00					
Ethnic intolerance index	0.53	0.34	1.00				
Against economic redistribution	0.37	0.05	0.18	1.00			
More spending on border control	0.41	0.29	0.53	0.15	1.00		
More spending on police and maintaining order	0.32	0.23	0.37	0.13	0.55	1.00	
More spending on unemployment benefits	-0.31	-0.13	-0.22	-0.27	-0.13	-0.05	1.00
More spending on social aid	-0.42	-0.20	-0.36	-0.32	-0.28	-0.18	0.62

Notes: Entries are Pearson's r correlation coefficients. All correlations are significant at the 0.01 level. Data: French National Election Study. $N = 8322$. Authoritarianism has been measured using child-rearing values (Stenner 2005). Respondents were called to choose which characteristic they considered most important for children to have: being independent or respectful of their parents or grandparents, to have an enquiring mind or be well-mannered, to be well-behaved or creative, and to be obedient or autonomous. Respectful, well-mannered, well-behaved, and obedient are the authoritarian responses. The ethnic intolerance scale is estimated by a battery of questions that tap attitudes toward immigration and Islam, that ask respondents whether they agree or disagree with the following statements: 'Islam is a threat to the West', 'Children of immigrants born in France are as French as anyone else', 'Immigration is a source of cultural enrichment', and 'There are too many immigrants in France'. Cronbach Alpha is 0.84. For the economic redistribution questions, respondents were asked on a five-point Likert scale the extent to which they agree or disagree with the statement 'In terms of social justice, we should take from the rich and give to the poor'.

Table A2. Descriptive statistics of the four scales for the respondents and non-respondents of the left–right autoposition scale.

	Left–right self-placement	<i>N</i>	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min.	Max.
Security scale	no	1285	0.69	0.17	0	1
	yes	11945	0.67	0.18	0	1
Immigration scale	no	1409	0.83	0.19	0	1
	yes	12370	0.76	0.22	0	1
Socio-economic attitudes scale	no	1051	0.49	0.12	0	0.94
	yes	11192	0.51	0.13	0	1
Moral scale	no	1407	0.38	0.20	0	1
	yes	12472	0.39	0.21	0	1