

# Don't Ban the Muslims: Security and Immigration under the Terror Threat

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## **Abstract**

Exploiting a natural experiment (*Al-Quaeda vs Charlie Hebdo*), I test whether the emergence of Islamic terrorism causes the public opinion to jointly demand (i) higher homeland security and (ii) stricter immigration policies towards Muslims citizens. Confirming a stylized fact, we show that the concern for homeland security increases following the attack: the trust in the executive power increases by about double the trust in the judicial power. Against a widely held but poorly corroborated conventional wisdom, I show that the aggregate distribution of preferences on the openness/strictness towards the immigration of Muslim citizens changes towards *more* openness with *lower* polarization, while no significant change occurs on the same issue when *Gypsies* replaces *Muslims*. There is hence no “public opinion law” associating the legitimate demand for higher homeland security with the discriminatory demand for targeted immigration policy.

# 1 Introduction

Populist leaders argue that restoring homeland security against the terror threat requires, among other interventions, to foreclose immigration movements from targeted countries. They stress that their policy orientation merely prioritizes the will of the majority, concerned about security, over the criticism of the intellectual elites, concerned about policy discrimination. But are these discriminatory policies really driven by the concern of the public opinion?

The literature does not offer a complete answer to this question. On the one hand, it is a stylized fact that terrorism triggers a generalized desire for enhanced homeland security at the expenses of freedom and human rights (Davis and Silver, 2004). On the other hand, the claim that a legitimate concern for higher security is paralleled by *suspicion and even intolerance directed at migrants, refugees and Muslims* (Washington Post, June 12, 2016) finds strong anecdotal support but no proper scientific corroboration.

I fill this lack by studying the causal effect of Islamic terrorism on the demand for both enhanced homeland security and stricter immigration policies targeting Muslim citizens. Exploiting a natural experiment based on the case of *Charlie Hebdo* shooting, I use the following approach. Firstly, I test whether terrorism increases the concern for homeland security. Then I test whether terrorism increases the concern for the immigration of the Muslims. Finally, I test whether the two movements are correlated. While simple in its construction, our design requires dealing with several challenges.

In order to test whether the public opinion prioritizes security over freedom, one must identify and detect a bias towards the discretion of the executive power, which ensures homeland security, over the constraint imposed by the judicial one, which ensures constitutional freedoms. I follow precisely this approach, based on Heterington and Husser (2012), to test whether a salient security issue causes the the public to distort check and balances towards the executive. Importantly, one should not simply observe the political trust in the executive power to increase, but to increase significantly more

than the trust in the judicial power.

In order to test whether the public demands immigration bans, one cannot simply rely on the causal effect of terror attacks in the aggregate preferences for *untargeted* immigration policies. This would be imperfect, since generic preferences for immigration policies may well reflect the concern of the public for cultural or economic issues, rather than security ones. Ideally, one should focus on the causal effect of terrorism on immigration policies *targeted* to the specific group from which terrorists are recruited, and compare outcomes across groups that are similarly stigmatized but differently involved in the terror threat. This paper does so by assessing the causal effect of terror attacks carried out by Islamic organizations on the preferences for the immigration of the Muslims, holding the immigration of the Gypsies as a placebo.

Finally, testing the causal effect of terror attacks on the preferences of the public is a complicated task. Whereas these effects are expected to be stronger in the short-run when the crisis is salient, both the low frequency at which polls are collected and the common lack of detailed individual level data disable from implementing robust causal inference methods. In addition, since terror attacks are unpredictable, the data collection effort to track political preferences starts only after the shock takes place, and counterfactuals must be constructed by pooling different surveys. I rely on the following design to overcome the highlighted obstacles. The fieldwork period for the French section of the European Social Survey (ESS7) lasted from October 31, 2014 to March 3, 2015. The headquarters of the satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo* comes under the attack of *Al-Qaeda* in the late morning of January 7, 2015. Consequently, this terror event falls inside the survey period range. The ESS7 combines random sampling, detailed individual-level information about socio-economic status, political orientations and the exact timing of interviews. Exploiting this coincidence, I study the causal effect of terrorism on related political evaluations as a natural experiment, tackling those measurement issues that arise in observational studies by relying on non-parametric pre-treatment matching techniques based on Iacus et al. (2012). Being the largest

terror attack perpetrated in Europe since London Bombing in July 2007, *Charlie Hebdo* shooting represents an exceptional case study to assess whether the emergence of the terror threat leads the public to associate security concerns with restrictive immigration policies towards Muslim citizens.

As we detail in the appendix, several observers expect the attack to foster, along a stronger concern for homeland security, a demand for restrictive immigration policies. *With public opinion already prepared to have negative thoughts on Islam...it will be a turning point*, predicts The Guardian (7th of January 2015). My results, however, undoubtedly reject this claim. I find that the trust in the executive power increases at a significantly faster rate than the trust in the judicial power: individuals are inclined to prioritize the discretionary power of the police over the respect of human rights guaranteed by the legal system. This confirms the stylized fact that terror events induce a spike in the public concern for homeland security. On the other hand, however, I find that the shooting at *Charlie Hebdo* causes the aggregate distribution of preferences on the immigration of Muslim citizens to change significantly in favor of *more* openness, resulting in *lower* polarization on this issue, whereas no significant change occurs on the preferences for the immigration of the Gypsies. No change occurs on placebo issues, including redistribution and LGTB rights.

Combining these results, robust to a comprehensive set of empirical models and to different intervals of time, I conclude that the public may reject the association between Islamic terrorism and Muslims immigration precisely when the terror threat is salient. While the public does prioritize security over the respect of human rights, it does not identify targeted immigration as a relevant counter-terror policy area.

	<i>PS</i>	<i>UMP</i>	<i>FN</i>	<i>MODEM</i>	<i>FDG</i>	<i>EELV</i>
Population	29.35	27.12	13.6	9.13	6.91	5.46
ESS7 sample	31.63	28.31	12.15	6.43	3.71	7.13
<b>Difference</b>	<b>+2.28</b>	<b>+1.19</b>	<b>-1.45</b>	<b>-2.7</b>	<b>-3.2</b>	<b>+1.67</b>

Table 1: First-round voting in the 2012 legislative elections for the main parties, French population *vs* the ESS7 sample.

## 2 Data and identification strategy

### 2.1 Data

Our data comes from Round 7 of the European Social Survey (ESS7). The survey is constructed using a strict random probability sampling and highly rigorous translation protocols, and its previous rounds have been widely used by social scientists. The field-work period for the French section of the survey involved 137 interviewers and lasted from October 31, 2014 to March 3, 2015. Consequently, the 7th of January 2015 falls inside the survey period range. Table 1 shows that the survey is very well representative of the French population with regards to the political orientations.

We study the effect of *Charlie Hebdo* shooting on concern for security and immigration as a natural experiment. In the appendix, however, we extensively deal with the common pitfalls associated to the fundamental problem of causality in observational studies by mimicking a block randomized experiment in the spirit of Iacus et al (2012), using coarsened exact matching. We compute the sample average treatment effect (SATT) according to three different approaches and varying sets of controls.

### 2.2 Literature and Hypotheses

Two separate strands of the literature analyze, respectively, the effect of terror attacks on the concern for security and on the concern for immigration.

**Concern for homeland security.** By triggering a concern for enhanced security, terror attacks emphasize the concern for security over freedom and human rights (Davis

and Silver, 2004; Huddy et al, 2005; Hetherington and Suhay, 2011), resulting in horizontal check and balance distortions that favor of the executive power over the judicial one (Merolla and Zechmeister, 2009; Dragu, 2011). Our first task is to identify whether this stylized fact, largely derived from US case studies, holds in our application. The change in the priorities of the voter following a terror attack can be traced in her trust in the main constitutional powers (Hetherington and Husser, 2012). We test:

$H_1$  : Terror attacks increase concern for homeland security.

by using the following proxy: “Do you trust the Police?” 0: *Not at all* ; -...- ; 10: *Completely*. While the Police represents the most involved operative branch of the executive, the legal system insures the respect of human rights. Consistently, I test whether the SATT is significantly higher for the trust in the police than for the trust in the legal system, using the relevant proxy for the latter: “Do you trust the Legal system?” 0: *Not at all* ; -...- ; 10: *Completely*.

**Immigration of the Muslims.** A separate strand of the literature studies the effects of terror events on the preferences for immigration policies. Finseraas et al. (2011) show that the Murder of Theo Van Gogh increases the support for restrictive immigration policies across European respondents. A similar result is found in Legewie (2013), who shows that the Bali attack on the 12 of October 2002 increases concern for immigration in 9 European countries. These works share with ours a similar focus. However, they differ on two key instances. Firstly, they focus on generic preferences for immigration rather than on the immigration of the Muslims, which disables from studying whether the public conflates Islamic terrorism and the immigration of the Muslims. Secondly, they analyze the transnational effects of terror attacks in the public opinion rather than focusing on their effects on the public opinion of the targeted country.

There is no work at the best of our knowledge that focuses on targeted immigration policies that discriminates a specific group. Instead, I analyze the public demand for stricter immigration policies *vis-à-vis* both the Muslims and the Gypsies. The results

using these two questions allows us to compare the impact of the event on the preferences towards the immigration of the Muslims to the effect on the preferences towards the immigration of another discriminated minority, and thus to control for the fact that the overall concern of French respondents about immigration may have changed because of omitted time-varying factors. We test:

$H_2$  : Terror attacks increase concern for the immigration of the Muslims.

by using the following proxy: “To what extent you think France should allow *Muslims* from other countries to come and live in France?” *1: Allow many to come and live here; 2: Allow some; 3: Allow a few; 4: Allow none.* I then test whether the sample average treatment effect on the treated (SATT) resulting from testing  $H_2$  differs significantly with respect to the one obtained by using the following placebo-proxy: “To what extent you think France should allow *Gypsies* from other countries to come and live in France?” *1: Allow many to come and live here; 2: Allow some; 3: Allow a few; 4: Allow none.*

Finally, we should expect no changes in the preferences for unrelated policy issues, such as redistribution and LGTB rights. I tackle this issue by using the following proxies: “The government should take measures to reduce differences in income levels.” *1: Agree strongly ; -...- ; 5 Disagree strongly;* and “Gay men and lesbians should be free to live their own life as they wish.” *1: Agree strongly ; -...- ; 5 Disagree strongly.*

### 3 Results

We find that trust in the police increases by about double the trust in the legal system. Table 3 reports the SATT after 30 days. The *Z-test* reveals that the increase of trust in police is always significantly higher than the one in the legal system. The appendix provides also the SATT after 15 and 45 days, showing a similar pattern. We back therefore  $H_1$  : Terror attacks increase concern for homeland security.

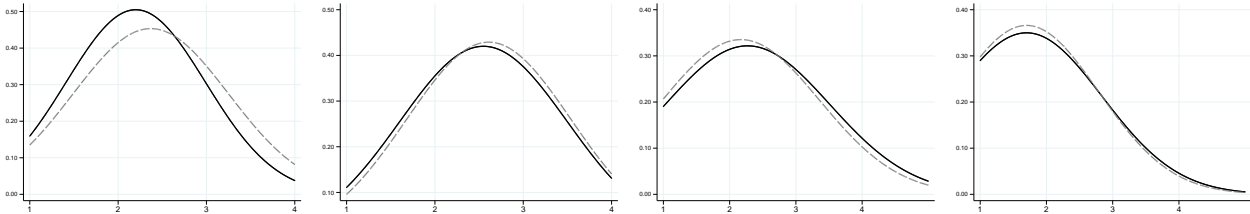
Table 2 shows that the preferred strictness for the Muslim immigration is significantly lower in the treated group. This suggests that the public aligns behind the left-

	<i>Muslim immigration</i>		<i>Gypsy immigration</i>	
	<i>T=0</i>	<i>T=1</i>	<i>T=0</i>	<i>T=1</i>
<b>Mean</b>	2.37	2.21	2.61	2.54
$H_0 : \text{Mean}_{(T=0)} - \text{Mean}_{(T=1)} = 0$	rejected <sup>1</sup>		not rejected	
<b>Sd. deviation</b>	.874	.799	.925	.962
$H_0 : \frac{\sigma(T=0)}{\sigma(T=1)} = 1$	rejected <sup>2</sup>		not rejected	
<b>N. Obs</b>	1573	284	1579	285

<sup>1</sup>Two sample t-test on equal mean with unequal variances. \*\*\*  $t\text{-stat}=t = 3.0539$

<sup>2</sup>Two sample robust t-test on equal variance. \*\*\* Levene's robust test statistic:  $\text{Pr} > F = 0.0003$

**Table 2:** Dependent variable and placebo: descriptive statistics and test.



**Figure 1:** Normal approximation of the distribution of preferences for the (i) immigration of the Muslim (1: no restriction - 4: complete ban), (ii) immigration of the Gypsies (1: no restriction - 4: complete ban), (iii) redistribution (1: large redistribution - 4: no redistribution) and (iv) LGTB rights (1: in favor - 4: opposed) before (gray-dashed) and after (black-regular) 15 days from the *Charlie Hebdo* attack.

wing incumbent, who holds more open stances on immigration than his mainstream and populist rightwing challengers. Furthermore, the significant reduction of the variance in the aggregate distribution of the preferences of the public towards the immigration of the Muslims suggests that the terror attack unifies rather than polarizing the public on key issues. Consistently, the appendix shows that our main result is driven by the sympathizers of right-wing voters rather than by an intensification of the immigration-friendly leftwing respondents. Figure 1 shows the normalized distribution of the aggregate preferences of the public in four issues before (gray dashed) and after (black regular) the attack. It provides visual evidence that the only issue where a change can be observed is the immigration of the Muslims.



	Mean-Difference	Basic		Augmented		Full	
	NE	CEM	OLS	CEM	OLS	CEM	OLS
<b>Executive (0-10)</b>	<b>.860</b>	<b>.874</b>	<b>.855</b>	<b>.899</b>	<b>.886</b>	<b>.937</b>	<b>.934</b>
St. Dev	(.124)	(.152)	(.146)	(.152)	(.146)	(.159)	(.150)
N. Obs	1891	1064	1754	1064	1754	1064	1754
<b>Judiciary (0-10)</b>	<b>.420</b>	<b>.404</b>	<b>.319</b>	<b>.442</b>	<b>.380</b>	<b>.550</b>	<b>.484</b>
St. Dev	(.160)	(.177)	(.167)	(.173)	(.164)	(.170)	(.213)
N. Obs	1890	1059	1646	1059	1646	1059	1646
<b>Z-Test <math>H_1</math></b> (Executive vs Judiciary)	<b><math>z = 2.17</math></b>	<b><math>z = 2.01</math></b>	<b><math>z = 2.42</math></b>	<b><math>z = 1.98</math></b>	<b><math>z = 2.30</math></b>	<b><math>z = 1.66</math></b>	<b><math>z = 1.73</math></b>
<b>Imm. Muslims (1-4)</b>	<b>-.171</b>	<b>-.165</b>	-.115	<b>-.170</b>	-.131	<b>-.134</b>	-.121
St. Dev	(.068)	(.074)	(.074)	(.074)	(.070)	(.077)	(.071)
N. Obs	1721	936	1608	936	1608	936	1608
<b>Imm. Gypsies (1-4)</b>	<b>-.062</b>	<b>-.080</b>	<b>-.021</b>	<b>-.087</b>	<b>-.040</b>	<b>-.105</b>	<b>-.064</b>
St. Dev	(.082)	(.083)	(.078)	(.081)	(.076)	(.083)	(.077)
N. Obs	1728	945	1614	945	1614	945	1614
<b>Z-Test <math>H_2</math></b> (Muslim vs Gypsies)	<b><math>z = 1.02</math></b>	<b><math>z = .76</math></b>	<b><math>z = .87</math></b>	<b><math>z = .76</math></b>	<b><math>z = .88</math></b>	<b><math>z = .26</math></b>	<b><math>z = .54</math></b>
<b>Redistribution (1-4)</b>	<b>.092</b>	<b>-.059</b>	<b>.013</b>	<b>-.077</b>	<b>-.009</b>	<b>-.036</b>	<b>.015</b>
St. Dev	(.104)	(.109)	(.101)	(.107)	(.099)	(.110)	(.102)
N. Obs	1767	961	1644	961	1644	961	1644
<b>LGTB Rights (1-4)</b>	<b>.002</b>	<b>.102</b>	<b>.072</b>	<b>.087</b>	<b>.054</b>	<b>.098</b>	<b>.046</b>
St. Dev	(.096)	(.089)	(.092)	(.089)	(.091)	(.091)	(.092)
N. Obs	1767	959	1642	959	1642	959	1642

Bold: Significant at .05. NE: Natural Experiment. CE: Coarsened exact matching. OLS: Ordinary Least squares.

Basic: Include main socio economic covariates: Income decile, Education attainment, sex, age, household status, employment status, immigration status.

Augmented: Add a dummy equal to one if the unit voted one of the main party (PS, UMP and FN) during the last election (Legislative, 2012)

Full: Add region fixed effects.

Table 3: Sample average treatment effect on the treated through different approaches for all dependent variables and an interval of 30 days.

Table 3 reports the SATT coefficients for all our specifications and all our dependent variables. While confirming visual inspection, it shows that different approaches lead to a similar result across all dependent variables, periods and number of controls. This means that the degree of sample imbalance hardly induces spurious results. The most important result is that we reject  $H_2$  : Terror attacks increase concern for the immigration of the Muslims. While the stances on the immigration of the Muslims decrease significantly, a simple coefficient *Z-Test* reveal that the SATT is not significantly different from the one of the Gypsies. Hence, our result is strong enough to reject doubtlessly the null hypothesis but not strong enough to not reject the opposite hypothesis of inverse correlation between homeland security and demand for restrictive immigration policies.

We confirm that terror attacks induce an executive bias:  $H_1$  not rejected. However, the public requires *less* rather than *more* restrictive policies towards Muslim citizens, hence we reject  $H_2$ . The correlation between the two tends to be surprisingly negative following a terror attack.

Several idiosyncratic factors, and the lack of similar opportunities to answer our research question, disable from exporting our main result *mutatis mutandis* to other contexts and countries. But it undoubtedly constitutes a strong counter-example to the conventional wisdom that terror attacks lead the public to demand discriminating policies and, as such, to prize populist leaders that supply them. There is not yet a universal “public opinion law” correlating the demand for higher homeland security with the demand for discriminatory immigration policies. As we further detail in the appendix, in contrast to a widespread view, the emergence of terrorism does not help the French populist movement *Front National*, but rather the leftwing incumbent.

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