

Public opinions on security and civil liberties in America after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001

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Abstract

After the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, Americans had to reconsider their opinions related to security and civil liberties. How did public opinion change in the period after the attacks? Many studies have examined specific influences on this public opinion but few have provided an integrated view from a sociological perspective. On the basis of a review of the body of research existing on this topic, it is concluded that the rethinking process resulted in more support for domestic and foreign security policies, even at the expense of civil liberties. This article provides insight into the mechanisms through which these opinions became established, using the DBO theory. This theory explains how action is determined by desires, beliefs and opportunities. Opinions differ among individuals, of course, and depend on perceived threat, prior political opinions, and trust in the government. The rhetoric of the Bush administration also had an influence on public opinion.

Keywords: civil liberties, security, public opinions, public support, perceived threat.

Introduction

People normally want to feel safe and free. According to Hobbes (1651) people naturally want to make sure they can fulfill their desires forever. He states that humans seek to preserve their nature by means of their own judgment and reason. In order to be able to do this, they need to experience unrestricted liberty. The idea of Hobbes was that such desires lead to “a war of everyone against everyone” (p.91). Obviously this is not the case in contemporary American society, but Hobbes’ analysis seems valid more than three centuries after it was written, and implies a certain ongoing tension in democratic societies resulting from such a primal quest for freedom. People do desire to live their lives peacefully, and therefore people need certain civil liberties. At the same time, there also has to be a certain level of order in their societies for them to feel safe. However there is a negative relationship between freedom and safety (Davis & Silver, 2004). If freedom increases, safety decreases and vice versa. The 9/11 attacks disturbed the balance

between freedom and safety in America. The attacks caused Americans to rethink security and civil liberties (Davis & Silver, 2004). The main question for this review is as follows: How did public opinion of America regarding security and liberties change following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 and how can this process be explained?

The 9/11 attacks and subsequent established public opinion are examples of the social phenomena we seek to explain in sociology. To explain how one leads to another, it is necessary to look at what happened at the micro level. For this purpose, the Desires, Beliefs and Opportunity (DBO) theory (Hedström, 2005) will be used here in order to provide insight into the mechanism of shaping public opinion. The advantage of integrating the existing findings with this theory is that it will be possible to reconstruct the whole mechanism and to assess whether, and in which specific areas, more research is necessary. This assessment will be presented in the conclusion and discussion of this article.

Compromising security versus compromising civil liberties

A frequently addressed issue in the post 9/11 research is whether Americans are willing to give up civil rights in exchange for greater security. In fact, civil liberties were restricted in America following the attacks. The Bush administration started the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq and in 2001 enacted the USA PATRIOT Act (USA PATRIOT is an acronym for Uniting and Strengthening America by Providing Appropriate Tools Required to Intercept and Obstruct Terrorism). This Act restricted civil liberties in several ways. For example, it gave the government *inter alia* the authorization to wiretap phone calls and emails, and to access to private records.

Public opinion polls showed that Americans supported those policies (Huddy & Feldman, 2011). This support suggests that the American public generally believes that an exchange in civil rights for security is acceptable. This is consistent with the findings of Huddy, Khatib and Capelos (2002) that Americans believed restrictive security policies were necessary to combat terrorism. Additionally their data shows that the percentage of Americans holding this opinion increased after the attacks in comparison with the years before 2001. Woods (2011) reports similar findings about the willingness of Americans to make a civil liberties-security trade-off. Before the attacks, in 1997, 29% of Americans felt that a civil-liberties-security trade-off was acceptable. This percentage reached 69% after 9/11 and was still higher in 2005. Davis and Silver (2004) conclude that Americans as a whole hold a moderate position towards giving up civil liberties in exchange for greater security.

Though the results are quite clear, the statements made by scholars on the subject contain subtle differences. Because the many polls conducted

following 9/11 posed different kinds of questions, it is difficult to distinguish Americans willing to give up civil liberties in general from those who believe it is necessary to give up liberties for the specific purpose of combating terrorism. Lewis (2005) even states that, a few months after the attacks, surveys of public opinion revealed that a civil liberties-security trade-off was unnecessary. Actually these contradictory assertions resulted from relying on different data. Different questions were asked, and this resulted in disparate conclusions. Lewis furthermore argues for caution in the formulation and interpretation of survey questions. While recognizing this, the conclusion that Americans in general are willing to compromise on civil liberties for greater security seems to be a solidly established finding.

DBO-model

Now the following questions can be posed: Why are people willing to give up some of their civil liberties for greater security? And what role did the 9/11 attacks play in the shaping of this viewpoint?

The Desires, Beliefs and Opportunities theory (Hedström, 2005) will be used to explain this phenomenon. DBO theory provides a basis for analyzing what occurred at the micro level. According to this theory, “desires, beliefs, and opportunities are the components that determine particular kinds of human behavior. In the introduction of the present article, some basic desires of people were already explained. These desires can be regarded as part of the baseline conditions that prevailed prior to the 9/11 attacks. The attacks then caused a change in people’s desires, beliefs and opportunities. To explain how this happened, the factors that brought about that change need to be examined.

Perceived threat

As mentioned before, the American people are generally willing to accept restrictive security policies. There are a range of opinions among Americans regarding this issue. These opinions depend, among other things, on perceived security and perceived threat. (Huddy, Feldman & Weber, 2007; Davis & Silver, 2004).

The willingness of people to support restrictions in civil liberties for greater national security depends on interaction between perceived security and perceived threat. The perception of threat is a person's belief in the likelihood of a new terrorist attack. People who think the nation is threatened more often believe that strong security policies, like the USA PATRIOT Act, are necessary or acceptable (Hendriks & Sullivan, 2009; Huddy & Feldman, 2011).

Perceived security itself was not much influenced by the attacks. How secure a person feels in general depends mainly on his or her development of attachment during childhood. So it can be seen as an individual characteristic. The influence of perceived threat on a person can be explained by the previous level of perceived security. The less secure a person felt before, the more anxiety is triggered by perceived threat (Huddy et al., 2007). The more threat a person experiences, the more likely this person is to support restrictive national security policy (Huddy et al., 2007; Davis & Silver, 2004).

The emotional reaction to the perceived threat of terrorism is also important. If people were angry at (rather than scared of) terrorists, they were more often in favor of aggressive foreign security policies. Such individuals were in favor of military intervention, and found it less risky, than other Americans. People who were, instead, made anxious and frightened by terrorist activity saw war as involving greater risks, and were therefore

less supportive of that policy (Huddy & Feldman, 2011).

Other influences

Though the main influence on public opinion in this regard is the perceived threat of terrorism, prior political predispositions also play a role. Liberals are still less willing to trade off civil liberties than moderates or conservatives. African Americans also generally show less willingness to support restrictions in civil rights in exchange for greater security, probably because they had to fight so hard to win for those rights (Davis & Silver, 2004). Also people who had previously had more intolerant and aggressive opinions tend to hold on to those opinions (whether in support of civil rights or of compromising civil rights in favor of greater security). However, generally speaking, more people become authoritarian and support restrictive and aggressive policy in reaction to the threat of terrorism for their safety (Hetherington & Suhay, 2011), and this generally involves persons adopting opinions that they did not have before.

Trust in the government is an important predictor for support for civil liberties. Among people with low trust in the government, there is less support for restricting security policies, even if they experience high levels of perceived threat. People with high trust in the government and a high level of perceived threat are more in favor of security at the expense of civil liberties. (Davis & Silver, 2004).

Support for strong foreign action is different from the trading off between security and civil rights. Yet the support for strong foreign actions does not differ much from the support for security. Perceived threat is also an important trigger for support in the case of aggressive foreign policy. About 90% of Americans supported the military action of the government to fight terrorism (Huddy et al., 2007). Less support for aggressive

foreign policy comes from people who were personally affected by attacks because they are more anxious about terrorism (Huddy & Feldman, 2011).

An important influence on the public opinion of America comes from the administration of Bush. The president was directly at the center of public attention, for example on national television, and used speeches to influence the public to support restricting homeland security policies and strong foreign action against terrorism. With those speeches, the Bush administration set the tone for the public debate on civil liberties (Hendriks & Sullivan, 2009) and thereby influenced public opinion. This makes sense, since feeling insecure can highly influence people to expect government policy to meet their needs for security (Huddy et al., 2007). In its rhetoric, the Bush administration capitalized on the existing perceived threat of terrorism (Hill, Oliver & Marion, 2010) (Nacos, Bloch-Elkon & Shapiro, 2008).

Initially these policies worked. After the attacks, 66% of Americans believed that the government could prevent them further terrorist attacks from occurring. Bush received high approval ratings for the measures he took to prevent further terrorism (Bloch-Elkon, 2007). However, six months after the attacks, the confidence already dropped to 56% and eventually a majority of Americans expressed doubts about the policies of the administration (Nacos et al., 2008).

In summary, the main influence on public opinion is the perceived threat of terrorism. The more anxious an individual is and the more likely a person considers the possibility of new attacks, the more this person is willing to support security policies which restrict civil liberties. So, in fact, fear appears to be a reason to exchange liberties for security.

Anger towards terrorists causes people to support aggressive and strong actions of the government to protect the

country and prevent terrorism. In this regard, the Bush administration set the tone for debating and assessing such issues.

Opinions about security and liberties in the context of the threat of terrorism vary among people who experience different levels of threat, anxiety, and anger, and also among liberals and conservatives, and ethnic groups like African Americans.

Integration findings and theory

Previously the question was addressed as to how the attacks exactly brought about the change in desires, beliefs and opportunities of people. One direct effect of the attacks was an increase in perceived threat among Americans (Huddy et al., 2007). This set in motion the change under examination; in comparison with the situation before 9/11, in its aftermath, more people felt that terrorist attacks were probable. Because of the greater perceived threat, the desire for security grew. How people seek to satisfy that desire depends on the beliefs in their opportunities to do so. The belief in the higher probability of further attacks led to an increased belief that restricting civil rights was necessary to ensure security (Huddy et al., 2002). It can thus be concluded that people believe that the opportunity to restrict civil rights can satisfy their desire for greater security.

It can also be assumed that people desire to remove the threat they perceive. Because this threat comes from terrorists, it logically follows that if those terrorists are defeated, the threat will be diminished or extinguished altogether. Another opportunity to fulfill these desires is by defeating the enemy by military action.

The previously mentioned measures cannot be enacted by any one person. In other words, people do not have the opportunity to—all by themselves—fight terrorism or restrict civil rights in order to attain greater security. If people want those things, they naturally turn to the

government. Long ago this was already acknowledged by Hobbes (1651) when he stated that “there is no other way by which man can secure his life and liberty” (p.72). This explains why trust in the government is also an important predictor for public support. This is because, before people will choose to support the government, they need to believe in the government, and trust that it is capable of fulfilling (or, in the language of DBO theory, “has the opportunity to fulfill) their desires for greater security and less perceived threat.

The difference between people who react with anger or anxiety can be explained by their different desires. A more angry person wishes primarily to defeat the enemy, and a more anxious person desires first of all the preservation of rights. The above-mentioned preference of African Americans can be explained the same way.

Conclusion

The terrorist attacks of 9/11 caused Americans to rethink the subjects of security and civil liberties. The question posed in the present paper was how American public opinion regarding security and liberties changed following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 and how that could be explained. The rethinking process was set in motion by the increase in Americans’ perceived threat. The process resulted in more support for domestic and foreign security policies, even at the expense of restricted civil liberties (Huddy & Feldman, 2011; Huddy et al., 2002; Woods, 2011).

People desire to feel safe and free (Hobbes, 1651) and this desire grew in the US in the aftermath of 9/11 because of the increased threat. Americans believed this desire could be fulfilled by restricting civil liberties in exchange for greater security (Woods, 2011), and by defeating the enemy through military intervention (Huddy et al., 2002). Since no single person can achieve such goals, people

needed to turn to the government. Whether people actually turn to the government in any given circumstance depends on their trust in the ability of the government to satisfy their desires. Since Americans did display such trust (Bloch-Elkon, 2007) they showed greater support for domestic and foreign security policies, even at the expense of restricted civil liberties.

Discussion

In general, DBO theory seems a useful tool in explaining the mechanism whereby public opinion in America changed in the aftermath of 9/11. The findings in the existing research and the assumptions derived from the theory were quite consistent. However not all assumptions could be confirmed, especially the link between desires and support. Certain aspects could be addressed in further research. For example, people could be questioned as to whether they indeed feel more desire for security after 9/11; if they desire to remove perceived threats by defeating the enemy or reduce it by restrictive security policies; and if they believe they have no individual opportunities to fulfill those desires.

This study depends mainly on sociological research. The methods used in such research are quantitative and the statements made are generalized to the entire American population. The present study also focused on the micro level, and therefore the analysis also included psychological components. In order to fill the gaps in existing research and answer the questions posed at beginning of this paper, additional input from psychological research could be beneficial. Also an approach including more qualitative research could provide more answers. By means of such an approach, the connections among desires, beliefs and opportunities could be clarified.

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