

Regime Types and Terrorism Revisited: The Institutional Determinants of Terrorism

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Abstract

Relative to consolidated democracies and closed autocracies, “anocracies” are more vulnerable to terrorism. We build on this literature, especially Gaibulloev, Piazza and Sandler (2017), by disaggregating regime type into component institutions: elections, executive constraints, and civil liberties—which we further decompose into political liberties, private liberties, and physical integrity. We argue that the distinct civil liberties protections have different effects on a country’s vulnerability to terrorism: political liberties increase the risk of terrorism while physical integrity rights protections decrease this risk. These countervailing effects provide an alternative explanation for the curvilinear (“inverted-U”) relationship between regime characteristics and terrorism. Empirically, we isolate the effects of specific institutional features by leveraging the deconstructable nature of the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) data and measure a state’s exposure to terrorism using the Global Terrorism Database. Our sample covers 176 states from 1970-2016. After replicating the “inverted-U” finding using V-Dem’s Liberal Democracy Index, we find evidence consistent with the hypotheses regarding the countervailing effects of civil liberties component institutions.

Existing research suggests that, relative to consolidated democracies and closed autocracies, “anocracies” (political regimes with a mix of democratic and authoritarian institutions) are more vulnerable to terrorism.¹ By interrogating the complex relationship between regime type and terrorism, researchers have exposed both the security benefits and the vulnerabilities associated with democratization and liberalization reforms. We contribute to this research agenda by disaggregating regime type into its constituent political institutions and advancing an alternative theory to explain the non-monotonic, “inverted-U” relationship between regime type and terrorism.

We take as our point of departure the common framework that disaggregates political regimes according to three main component institutions: political selection (e.g., elections), horizontal accountability (e.g., judicial and legislative constraints on the executive), and civil liberties. We build on this existing framework by further decomposing civil liberties into its constituent dimensions: political liberties (freedoms of expression, assembly, association, and the press), private liberties (freedoms of privacy, religion, thought, and property rights), and physical integrity rights (freedom from torture, political killings, and state repression). The theory we advance posits a distinct role for each of these dimensions of civil liberties in explaining a country’s exposure to terrorism. This approach helps us provide new insights into unresolved debates in the literature concerning the relationship between civil liberties and terrorism.

While many scholars have explored the effect of civil liberties on terrorism, the literature presents countervailing claims regarding the direction of this relationship and its underlying mechanisms. This debate hinges primarily on whether scholars privilege top-down or bottom-up mechanisms. Top-down arguments suggest that civil liberties protections *increase* terrorism by permitting violent extremist groups to mobilize, plan, and execute attacks, thus constraining a government’s counter-terrorism efforts. Bottom-up theories argue that civil liberties protections *decrease* terrorism by assuaging political grievances, thus reducing citi-

¹See, among others, Gaibullov, Piazza and Sandler (2017).

zens' incentives to support political violence. Researchers that incorporate both mechanisms posit a non-monotonic relationship between civil liberties and terrorism or argue that the effect of civil liberties is conditional on the openness of elections (Gaibullov, Piazza and Sandler 2017). Each of these competing arguments treat civil liberties as monolithic whole. We argue that focusing only on the broader concept of *civil liberties* masks important dynamics concerning potentially disparate effects that each of its dimensions may have on a state's exposure to terrorism.

The theoretical framework we advance builds on recent contributions by Gaibullov, Piazza and Sandler (2017), which explains the mechanisms underlying the "inverted-U" relationship between regime type and terrorism, and Chenoweth (2007, 2019), which challenges conventional wisdom regarding the relationship between political institutions and terrorism. The conventional wisdom suggests broadening citizens' political access *decreases* support for terrorism by reducing grievances and incentivizing citizens to advance political objectives through peaceful institutional means. Chenoweth (2007, 2019), instead, argues that democratic institutions promoting political competition may *increase* terrorism. Political competition empowers majorities over minorities (drowning out minority voices). This, in turn, may aggravate minority grievances by limiting their ability to achieve political objectives through institutional means. Marginalized groups may support the use of terrorism as their only recourse to achieve political objectives rejected by the majority.

As a theoretical contribution, we posit that while political liberties increase a state's exposure to terrorism, physical integrity rights protections decrease this risk. Though political liberties incentivize the majority to engage in peaceful political competition rather than violence, they also encourage marginalized groups to engage in terrorism by aggravating their grievances and constraining their opportunity to affect change through institutional means (Chenoweth 2019). Furthermore, political liberties permit extremist groups to organize, recruit, and plan their operations. Conversely, physical integrity protections can decrease terrorism by reducing grievances against and increasing trust in the state. Citizens free from

state-perpetrated violence will be more willing to provide information on extremist activities to the government, enhancing counter-terrorism operations, and will be less willing to support the use of terrorism, starving would-be terrorists of essential support and resources. These insights, we argue, have important implications for effective policy-making concerning the prospects for successful democratization and its consequences, as different institutional reforms can have countervailing affects on the frequency of terrorism in a country.

This article makes an empirical contribution by leveraging the deconstructable nature of Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) data (Lindberg et al. 2014), the first cross-national dataset to measure specific institutions at the level of disaggregation necessary to evaluate the effects of component institutions. Finding consistent support for our theory, we first recover the “inverted-U” relationship between regime type and terrorism using V-Dem’s aggregate measure of liberal democracy, which is conceptually similar to the commonly used Polity2 score. Second, we recover the “inverted-U” pattern between aggregate civil liberties and terrorism and expose weaker results for clean elections and horizontal accountability. Finally, testing our hypotheses directly, we find that political liberties increase terrorism while private liberties and physical integrity rights decrease terrorism.

1 Existing Literature on Regime Type and Terrorism

Existing research suggests that a country’s political regime influences its exposure to terrorism through three mechanisms: (1) *strategic influence*, (2) *political access*, and (3) *protection incentives* (Eyerman 1998, Gaibulloev, Piazza and Sandler 2017). Strategic influence arguments emphasize the institutional characteristics that make terrorism effective, whether by pressuring leaders to make concessions and/or constraining leaders’ use of the state’s coercive apparatus to punish perpetrator. Arguments of this nature suggest that terrorism is more effective against, and therefore more frequently deployed within, democracies (Chenoweth 2007, 2010a, 2019, Enders and Sandler 2006, Eubank and Weinberg 1994, Eyerman 1998,

Findley and Young 2011, Li 2005, Piazza 2008, Stanton 2013, Young and Dugan 2011). Because democratic leaders are vulnerable to political punishment for civilian casualties from a terrorism-averse public (Valentino, Huth and Croco 2010), democratic leaders may be more willing to grant concessions in response to terrorism (Stanton 2013).

Some studies find that civil liberties protections may increase exposure to terrorism by constraining a government's ability to encroach on political freedoms. These constraints can frustrate counter-terrorism efforts, allowing extremist organizations the space necessary to organize and, ultimately, to carry out attacks (Crenshaw 1981, Eubank and Weinberg 1994, Li 2005, Schmid 1992). Gaibullov, Piazza and Sandler (2017, p. 97), specifically, argue that opposition groups' strategic opportunity to engage in terrorism is greater in anocracies and democracies, due to the freedom to organize, compared to autocracies where dissent is repressed. They also argue that a free press ensures that incidents of terrorism are reported, amplifying the group's political message which, in turn, increases its incentives to use terrorism.

Political access arguments highlight the relationship between regime characteristics that determine the role citizens play in the political process and the frequency of terrorism. Political selection processes, for example whether leaders gain power through elections, can influence citizens' incentives to support or reject terrorism. They do so by structuring grievances in the population and the strategies available to citizens to address these grievances. Most scholars, Gaibullov, Piazza and Sandler (2017) included, argue that, in contrast to strategic influence, greater political access (associated with democracy) *decreases* terrorism by *assuaging grievances*. Political institutions that protect access to leadership- and policy-selection processes incentivize citizens to engage in nonviolent activism. Citizens are less willing to participate in, or support, costly violent extremism and civilian-targeting if they retain the right to affect change through institutional means. In contrast, autocratic regimes that, by definition, limit or eliminate the opportunity of citizens to participate in the leadership- and policy-selection process may promote the use of terrorism (Aksoy, Carter and Wright 2012,

Conrad, Conrad and Young 2014, Findley and Young 2011, Piazza 2017, Wilson and Piazza 2013). By silencing (often violently) opposing views, autocrats may encourage some groups to turn to violence as their only recourse. Political access mechanisms imply that civil liberties may reduce terrorism by resolving (if only partially) grievances the population might hold against the government, thus starving would-be terrorists of resources (Abadie 2006, Abrahms 2007).

Presenting an alternative logic of political access, Chenoweth (2007, 2019) argues that institutions protecting political participation increase competition, which essentially guarantees that groups with extreme (minority) views are barred from achieving their political goals through peaceful means. Therefore, these groups may view terrorism as the only tool available to force the majority to accommodate their interests. Chenoweth's (2019) theory highlights a crucial distinction between the *scope* of grievances against the state and the *intensity* of grievances among specific subsets of the population. Though political openness may reduce the scope of grievances, in line with the conventional wisdom noted above, it may also increase the *intensity* of grievances among the permanently marginalized. This increasingly marginalized population are then more likely to turn to terrorism. We build on this insight, arguing that while the intensity of grievances are especially relevant to pushing passive dissent over the edge to active support for violence (the bottom-up mechanism), the scope of grievances influences the extent to which the government can access information about extremist activity from the general population, necessary for effective counter-terrorism (the top-down mechanism).

Finally, institutional constraints, often related to political access, determine a government's incentives to invest resources to protect citizen lives and property. Gaibullov, Piazza and Sandler (2017) refer to this mechanism as *democratic protection*, arguing that because democracies are vulnerable to citizens voting them from office in response to civilian casualties, they have greater incentives to invest in protecting the population from exposure

to violence.² Moreover, because the public typically supports hawkish responses to terrorism,³ democracies may be less vulnerable to terrorism. Nevertheless, many authoritarian regimes also base their legitimacy on providing order and security, often to greater extent than democracies. Terrorism challenges an autocrat’s security credentials and may even inspire coups, if internal rivals seize on perceived weaknesses to depose the incumbent (Aksoy, Carter and Wright 2015). If so, autocrats may be motivated to invest in counter-terrorism efforts to prevent attacks, as removal from power can result in imprisonment or execution.

To account for these competing mechanisms and differing empirical observations, a number of scholars posit that the relationship between regime type and terrorism is non-monotonic, resembling an “inverted-U.” Compared to consolidated democracies and autocracies, anocratic (hybrid) regimes are more vulnerable to terrorism (Abadie 2006, Chenoweth 2010*b*, Eyererman 1998, Gaibulloev, Piazza and Sandler 2017, Goldstone et al. 2010, Kurrild-Klitgaard, Justesen and Klemmensen 2006, Piazza 2013). In consolidated autocracies, anti-regime political organizations—especially those using violence—have little strategic opportunity to organize and subsequently carry out acts of terrorism. The regime co-opts some opposition groups and utilizes the (largely unchecked) coercive state apparatus to repress the rest. Consolidated democracies are also relatively insulated from terrorism, where “the two driving forces are the lack of grievances owing to significant political access and the protection of lives and property owing to liberal democratic principles,” (Gaibulloev, Piazza and Sandler 2017, p. 497). Anocracies, in contrast, are comparatively more vulnerable to terrorism because they lack sufficient political access to assuage grievances, are less committed to protect citizens, and, yet, are still vulnerable to sanction from the population which retains adequate freedom to organize and the presence of constraints on governments’ anti-terror efforts.

²See, also, Doyle (1997), who argues that democracies’ legitimacy rests on protecting lives and property, and Valentino, Huth and Croco (2010), who argue democratic leaders are more vulnerable to political punishment for civilian casualties from a terrorism-averse public.

³See, among others, Berrebi and Klor (2006, 2008), Davis and Silver (2004), Gadarian (2010), Kibris (2011), Merolla and Zechmeister (2009).

Which institutions aggravate or reduce citizen grievances that drive support for extremist groups? Which institutions, on balance, strategically favor the use of terrorism by enabling political mobilization and/or by increasing the efficacy of its use? Gaibulloev, Piazza and Sandler (2017) suggest that electoral institutions and civil liberties, similarly, reduce grievances through political access mechanisms. They argue that these two regime characteristics reduce terrorism by depleting the supply of extremists willing to use political violence to advance their political objective, even as civil liberties protections increase the opportunity to do so. Thus, civil liberties could have a conditional effect on terrorism. Under inadequate political access, civil liberties may increase terrorism by increasing the strategic opportunity to organize violence. However, with adequate political access, civil liberties might decrease terrorism, as the effect of shrinking the supply of extremists dominates the strategic opportunity mechanism.

While the literature cited above explores the effects of political liberties, or civil liberties as a whole, others have investigated the role for physical integrity, specifically, in shaping states' exposure to terrorism. Walsh and Piazza (2010) find that states that abuse physical integrity rights are more likely to experience terrorism. Similarly, Piazza (2017) finds that state repression, by restricting nonviolent means of dissent thus exacerbating grievances, increases terrorism, while Findley and Young (2011) find that terrorism is more likely to occur when the political regime is unable to make credible commitments not to abuse their power. These findings suggest that institutions protecting physical integrity rights decrease terrorism by reducing the scope and intensity of grievances against the state.

We contribute to this research by locating the competing mechanisms in the disparate effects of each distinct dimension of civil liberties. We leverage insights from the existing literature emphasizing political access mechanisms, including Gaibulloev, Piazza and Sandler (2017), Chenoweth's (2007) critique emphasizing the terrorism-inducing effects of political openness, as well as the arguments linking physical integrity rights protections to reduced terrorism exposure. We argue, specifically, that political liberties primarily *increase* the risk

of terrorism by aggravating extremists' grievances and enabling their efforts to organize (a strategic influence mechanism), while physical integrity rights protections *decrease* terrorism by reducing grievances against the state and thereby increasing citizens' cooperation with the state on counter-terror efforts.

2 The Institutional Determinants of Terrorism

Our argument revises and refines the “inverted-U” hypothesis. We argue that institutional protections against state repression (physical integrity rights) *decrease* exposure to terrorism, while political liberties *increase* terrorism.⁴ Whereas much of the existing research emphasizes the roots of terrorism in grievances flowing from variation in political access (political liberties), we posit that physical integrity is more salient to individuals, and thus may be more important than political liberties to understand how grievances relate to a state's vulnerability to terrorism. If the state represents a threat to physical security, individuals may be more willing to support political violence and less willing to cooperate with the government's counter-terror efforts by providing information about extremists' activities.

By comparison, restrictions on political liberties may increase grievances, but, we argue, do not carry the weight equal to physical security when it comes to affecting citizens' actions regarding supporting terrorism and/or aiding the government in counter-terror efforts. Rather, political liberties are likely to trigger support for terrorism only when they generate relative deprivation across politically active groups, and therefore influence the *intensity* rather than only the *scope* of grievances against the state. This may occur, chiefly, when political access is so open that those with extreme (minority) views are blocked from achieving

⁴Of course, by pointing out this logic we do not condone governments' violations of their citizens' political or private liberties, nor do we suggest that their absence does not also facilitate nefarious government crackdowns on non-threatening political activities. Rather, we simply suggest that political freedoms, necessary for a well-functioning democracy, may have the unintended consequence of decreasing the cost associated with using terrorism.

their political objectives by dominant majorities (Chenoweth 2007, 2019). In other words, while we agree with Gaibullov, Piazza and Sandler (2017) that political access (elections and political liberties) reduces the scope of grievances in the population, we also concur with Chenoweth (2007, 2019) that political access may nonetheless increase the *intensity* of grievances for marginalized groups. Because the effect of political access on political grievances is more intense for marginalized groups than for majorities, we argue that on balance political liberties increase a state's vulnerability to terrorism. Intensely aggrieved minorities, who lack realistic options to affect change through institutional means, may be more willing to adopt violent strategies. Small groups may be unable to mobilize enough support for large-scale forms of political violence, such as violent revolution, but they may be able to organize terrorism attacks which require fewer participants.

Drawing upon Shapiro (2013) and others, we argue that in addition to, or instead of, affecting terrorism exposure through citizens' participation and support for groups using terrorism, political grievances matter by affecting the government's access to information required for effective counter-terrorism. Extremist groups, especially those organized for political violence, require, at a minimum, passive support from a local population in order to avoid detection (Shapiro 2013). While small clandestine networks of (committed) individuals may be able to remain undetected by the law enforcement for a time, a portion of the population is bound to witness group activities. The public visibility of extremist groups is particularly high as they begin to recruit and train individuals from the communities in which they operate. If a citizen witnesses suspicious activity, they must decide whether to inform law enforcement or remain silent, tacitly accepting the actions or political agenda of the extremist group. For extremist groups to survive long enough to carry out their operations, members of the population that are likely to discover organizational activities must be unwilling to provide actionable information about these activities to the government. Therefore, the population's trust (or lack thereof) in government is of strategic importance to budding extremist organizations contemplating the use of terrorism. We argue

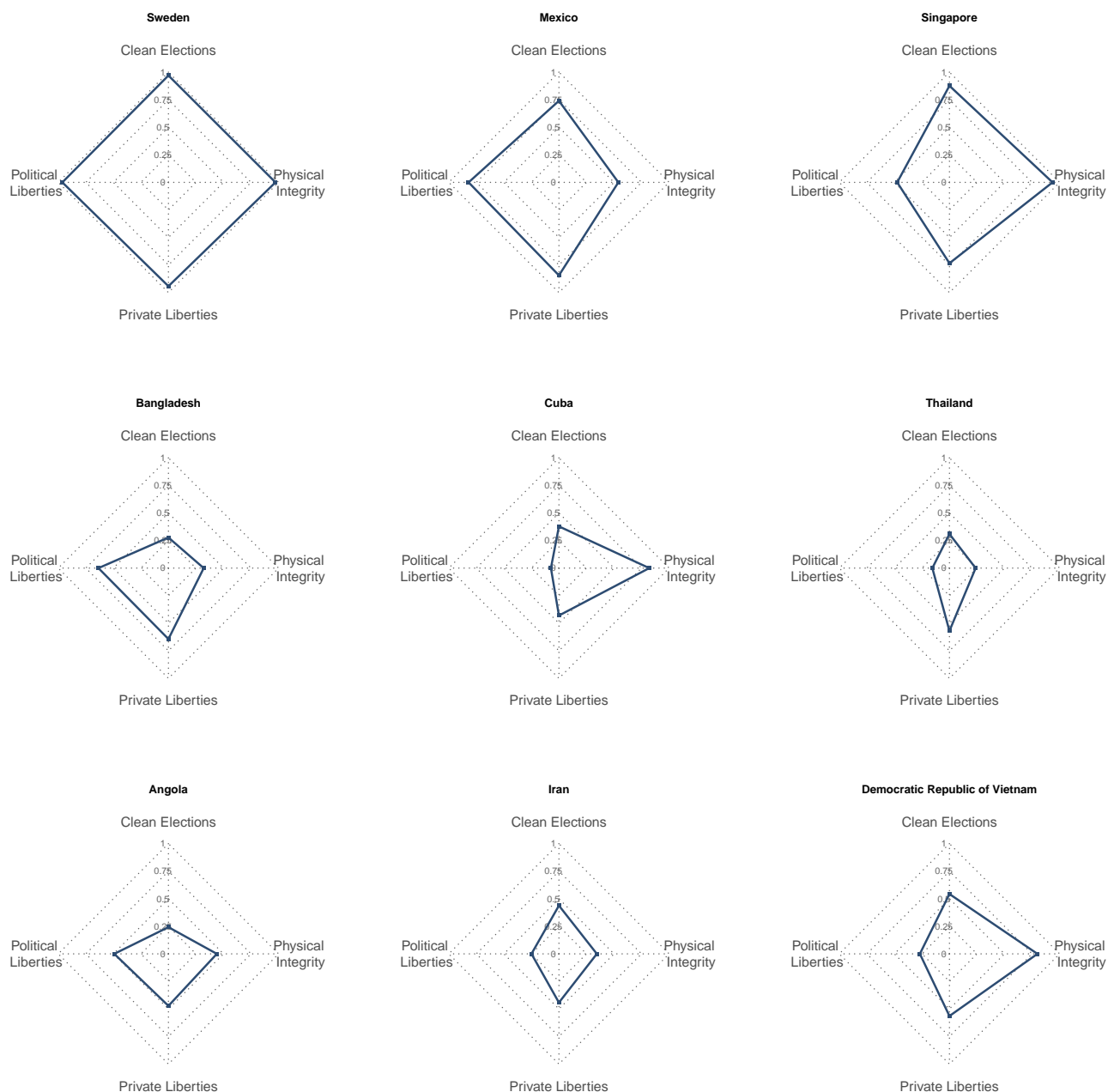
that the different dimensions of civil liberties influence the willingness of the population to say something if they see something.

As noted above, our argument builds from a conceptual framework that disaggregates regime type into three institutional characteristics: political selection, horizontal accountability, and civil liberties protections. By political selection, we mean the institutions that determine inclusion in the *selectorate*—the population that can participate in the process by which leaders ascend to and descend from political office—and the *winning coalition*—the subset of the selectorate whose support is sufficient to obtain and maintain power. This includes the procedural component of democracy, the existence of clean elections. Horizontal accountability refers to the system of checks and balances to prevent political leaders from abusing power, including institutionalized separation of powers and, most importantly, institutional constraints on the executive. By civil liberties protections, we mean the formal and informal institutions that limit the government’s ability to intrude on its citizens’ basic freedoms.

While taking into account political selection and horizontal accountability, our theory focuses on the effects that each dimension of civil liberties—political liberties, private liberties, and physical integrity—have on the frequency of terrorism. Political liberties include freedoms of expression, assembly, association, and the press. Private liberties include property rights as well as freedoms of religion and movement. Physical integrity rights protect citizens from abuse by the state—protections against politically motivated imprisonment, disappearance, and extrajudicial killings.

Under the reasonable assumption that elections are rendered meaningless without adequate civil liberties protections and vice versa, some scholars have examined clean elections and civil liberties together as dimensions of the larger concept of *political participation*. Certainly, the ability of citizens to hold their representatives accountable through elections is limited if they are prevented from organizing politically or if they fear retribution for whether or how they vote. Similarly, the freedoms of association and assembly may permit expression,

Figure 1: Clean Elections and Civil Liberties Components in 9 Countries



but cannot easily be translated into policy outcomes if citizens cannot pressure politicians by threatening to vote them out of office. Though each of these claims are true at the extremes, we argue that treating political selection and civil liberties as distinct dimensions is critically important for theoretical, empirical, and policy reasons.

There are, of course, many examples of states in which elections and civil liberties (or lack

thereof) go hand-in-hand (Sweden and Iran, on opposite extremes). Nevertheless, there is also a great deal of variation in between these extremes. Figure 1 illustrates this for a select set of countries using their scores in 2016 for our various V-Dem measures described in the research design section. Some states mix clean elections with comparatively weak protections for political liberties protections (Singapore) or low physical integrity rights (Mexico and Thailand). While imperfect democracies, these regimes are clearly different from complete autocracies like Iran. Autocratic regimes also vary in their institutional make-up. Though Iran and Cuba have similar levels on the clean elections index, Iran provides at least some political liberties while Cuba’s record is abysmal. However, Cuba performs much better than Iran on protecting its citizens’ physical integrity.

Recognizing that these institutions can co-occur differently in space and time and interrogating their distinct consequences has taken on theoretical importance with the attention to varieties of democracies and autocracies—for example, the distinction between liberal and electoral democracy and between electoral and closed autocracies. The dimensions of civil liberties are highly correlated (see research design section), which makes the aggregate concept reasonable for many purposes. However, there is significant variation in how the dimensions co-occur. This is especially true in countries with middling levels civil liberties protections, which the literature suggests are most vulnerable to terrorism. For example, Bangladesh, Vietnam, and Cuba have similar aggregate civil liberties scores. But Bangladesh has high levels of political and private liberties but low physical integrity, while the opposite is true in Vietnam and Cuba. Aggregate measures of civil liberties mask these important differences. These factors motivate our decision to consider the effect that each dimension of civil liberties have on terrorism.

2.1 Disaggregating Civil Liberties: Component Institutions and Terrorism

While civil liberties protections, broadly defined, can reduce the scope of grievances by giving opposition groups a peaceful outlet, they also permit budding violent groups to organize,

recruit, train, and exchange ideas. Which dimensions of civil liberties decrease, and which dimensions increase, countries' exposure to terrorism? To answer this question, we break civil liberties into its constituent parts: physical integrity, political liberties, and private liberties. Here, we explain the countervailing effects that these distinct dimensions may have on the frequency of terrorism, and then leverage these insights to explain the "inverted-U" relationship between the aggregated concept of civil liberties protections and vulnerability to terrorism.

Physical Integrity Rights

We argue physical integrity rights decrease a state's vulnerability to terrorism by reducing the scope and intensity of political grievances. Restrictions on the government's ability to (ab)use the state's coercive apparatus increase citizens' willingness to provide timely actionable and reliable information on budding extremist groups and their activities, and otherwise cooperate with the government. This enhances the government's counter-terrorism capabilities, making over-reliance on the state's coercive apparatus unnecessary.

Citizens are more trusting of and potentially more politically aligned with a government that surrenders absolute control over the state's coercive apparatus. Protected from state repression, citizens are more likely to associate a state-based political order with security rather than fear and resentment. Furthermore, restrictions on the government's use of coercion against political opponents lead most citizens to see non-violent political activism as an appropriate mechanism through which to achieve their political goals. In countries with physical integrity rights protections, citizens need not fear political imprisonment or extra-judicial killing for voicing dissent. Even if non-violent means were to take longer to extract concessions from the government, most citizens may opt for this strategy, as it avoids the risks associated with political violence. As a consequence, the population is, generally, more inclined to cooperate with the government on counter-terrorism. By strengthening the population's political alignment and trust in the government, physical integrity rights

thereby serve to *constrain* extremists' ability to mobilize, and as a consequence constrains their ability to orchestrate acts of terrorism.

A skeptic may argue that, by reducing the costs associated with participating in violent opposition, protections against physical integrity violations decrease the costs associated with using terrorism. Given that physical integrity rights protections constrain the government from using excessive violence, extremists may not fear exposure to state repression to the same extent as in states without institutionalized protections for physical integrity rights. However, we argue that physical integrity rights protections reduce citizens' tolerance of extremist groups and political violence, which raises a violent group's costs of operating within a hostile population. This increased operating cost and risk of exposure overshadows the comparatively minor effect that physical integrity rights have on the potential participants' cost-benefit calculus regarding government punishment of their extremist activity.

Political Liberties

Political liberties protections can empower citizens to affect change through nonviolent political advocacy, which can put political pressure on democratic and non-democratic leaders alike. Civil society organizations provide information, influence political discourse, set political agendas, stage protests, and impose material and reputation costs on leaders. This may reduce the *scope* of political grievances in the population. This dynamic may decrease terrorism by reducing the willingness of the population to support the use of violence, increasing their willingness to cooperate with the government on counter-terror efforts.

However, as [Chenoweth \(2007, 2019\)](#) makes clear, political access that comes with enhanced political liberties may have adverse effects on the frequency terrorism in a country by increasing the *intensity* of grievances in marginalized minorities. While strong political liberties can help nonviolent groups form large coalitions, this structure of political competition drowns out the voices of those with extremist views. This, in turn, makes extremists *more* likely to turn to terrorism, as they might see violence as the only way to get the majority to

address their grievances. In short, the commonly cited role of political liberties in alleviating the scope of grievances in society does not necessarily have the desired effect of decreasing the risk of terrorism. It can also increase the intensity of grievances among marginalized groups. Thus, while political liberties may shrink the proportion of the population willing to engage in violence, they also increase the *intensity* of grievances for marginalized minorities and make their members more willing to participate in or support violent organizations as their only recourse.

Furthermore, just as political liberties, by definition, enable peaceful political mobilization, they also *necessarily* allow frustrated extremists to organize and mobilize resources. They enable extremist organizations to mobilize, plan, and execute acts of terrorism. Institutionalized political liberties protections constrain the government's ability to monitor and punish extremists within the population. Under liberal traditions, the government must ascertain proof (or at a minimum prove reasonable suspicion) that an organization is in violation of a specific law before it can act. Thus, extremist organizations are more likely to survive government counter-terror efforts to interdict their organizational development. Together, we posit that these characteristics of political liberties generate an overall positive effect on the state's exposure to terrorism.

Private Liberties

Private liberties encompass an individual's right to privacy, property, religion, thought, and freedom of movement. On the one hand, private liberties protections may increase terrorism. Like political liberties, private liberties may constrain government monitoring, thereby allowing nascent violent groups the space to mobilize and eventually perpetrate acts of terrorism. Extremist organizations that intend to carry out acts of violence rely on secrecy, both from the government and from unsympathetic members of the public. Private liberties protections prevent law enforcement and intelligence agencies from infringing on privacy without sufficient cause, even if an organization's activities are illegal. By contrast, for regimes in

which the government retains the power to arbitrarily search private property and persons, the law enforcement personnel can interdict extremists' organizational development.

Alternatively, privacy rights protections may reduce terrorism by assuaging grievances and encouraging cooperation with the government, similar to the effect of physical integrity rights. As long as individuals enjoy secure property rights, may observe their religious and cultural customs, and express themselves freely in their homes, citizens may prefer the status quo to political violence. By extension, citizens will be willing to cooperate with the government by providing information about extremist activity in their communities. We are agnostic about which of these competing logics regarding the effect of private liberties on terrorism dominates, and test between them in the data.

Our argument implies three testable hypotheses regarding the relationship between distinct component dimensions of civil liberties and a country's vulnerability to terrorism:

Hypothesis 1. *Physical Integrity:*

Countries with greater protections against state repression will experience fewer terrorism incidents.

Hypothesis 2. *Political Liberties:*

Countries with greater political liberties protections will experience more terrorism incidents.

Hypothesis 3. *Private Liberties:*

- A. Countries with greater private liberties protections will experience more terrorism incidents.*
- B. Countries with greater private liberties protections will experience fewer terrorism incidents.*

2.2 Explaining the “Inverted-U” Relationship between Aggregate Civil Liberties and Terrorism

These three empirical implications, together, provide a new explanation for the curvilinear relationship between aggregated civil liberties and terrorism (the inverted-U). Existing re-

search suggests that either the effect of civil liberties on terrorism changes over its range or that its effect is conditional on electoral institutions. We offer an alternative explanation: the countervailing effects of each dimension of civil liberties may generate the non-monotonic relationship observed. As a note of caution, we do not wish to over-emphasize the theoretical predictions here, as the theory is designed to explain the distinct effects of the component civil liberties institutions on a country's exposure to terrorism. Rather, we suggest a plausible logic for how these countervailing effects can explain the observed inverted-U relationship between aggregate civil liberties and terrorism.

In countries at the lowest end of the civil liberties spectrum, political and private liberties and physical integrity rights are all low. The government faces no barriers to infringing on the political and privacy rights of citizens. It can, therefore, interdict the organizational development of political opposition, including extremists willing to use terrorism. The downside for governments in this range is that the threat of state repression and the lack of political and private liberties may increase the scope and intensity of political grievances. These factors can increase the willingness of the population to support or participate in violent political opposition and can reduce their willingness to pass information to the government, a blow to counter-terrorism efficacy. However, by restricting the space for political organization and maintaining the coercive tools that help prevent organizations from carrying out operations, the state raises the cost for extremists to carry out acts of terrorism, deters citizens from providing the necessary support, and gives the government the autonomy to conduct effective (if also brutal) counter-terror operations.

Countries at the highest end of the civil liberties spectrum, with strong protections for political and private liberties and physical integrity, are similarly insulated from exposure to terrorism. On this end of the spectrum, the government's counter-terror advantages come not from the ability to infringe upon the rights and liberties of their citizens, but rather from greater cooperation from the population. Though institutions that protect citizens' civil liberties may constrain a government's ability to interdict extremist groups' organizational

development, they also help ensure a loyal population that is more willing to share information with the government. Information of this nature can help the government prevent terrorism through means consistent with the liberal laws that constrain them.

At middling levels of civil liberties protections, however, the risk of terrorism is higher. A country with middling levels of aggregate civil liberties may have (1) introduced only partial reform on each civil liberties dimension, (2) introduced greater political liberties protections while retaining government control over the coercive apparatus to violate citizens' physical integrity, or (3) constrained the government's ability to violate physical integrity but continued to restrict political liberties.

In the first scenario, we suspect partial reform across multiple component dimensions will, on balance, increase terrorism. Partial reform on political liberties increases extremists' ability to organize compared to the political environment prior to reform, but does little to change the aggrieved population's prospects for obtaining political objectives through institutional means, increasing vulnerability to terrorism. Partial reform on physical integrity rights protections may increase citizens' willingness to support government counter-terrorism, but we suspect may still leave the population skeptical of the government's efforts to crack-down on political opponents.

In the second scenario, the government faces greater constraints on its ability to thwart groups organizing violence, since extremists can mask illegal activities under legitimate political organization. Additionally, robust protection of political liberties generate intense grievances in the marginalized minority, who recognize they will never be able to achieve political objectives through institutional means. Furthermore, the government cannot rely on information from citizens to support its counter-terrorism, since violations of physical integrity alienates the population. We expect this is the most terrorism-prone combination of civil liberties institutions, because it can generate intense political grievances *and* barriers to effective counter-terrorism through both coercive and informational means.

In the third scenario, the government may access information about extremist activities

from citizens *and* retain the ability to interdict opposition groups’ organizational development, both of which contribute to counter-terrorism. Therefore, we expect that this type of middling civil liberties is least terrorism-prone, approaching the regimes with very robust and very weak aggregate civil liberties protections. Because restrictions on civil political liberties may generate broad, low-intensity grievances in the population, the counter-terrorism challenges that governments in this middling category face may be more complex than the counter-terrorism challenges faces by those with very high or low civil liberties, and therefore may be slightly more vulnerable to terrorism.

Overall, the presence of the first two types of middling civil liberties in a sample of countries, especially the second (low physical integrity, high political liberties), will skew towards generating the “inverted-U” relationship between aggregate civil liberties and terrorism.

3 Research Design

We test the hypotheses in a sample of 176 states from 1970 to 2016, totaling 7330 country-year observations. We describe the terrorism measure drawn from GTD, the V-Dem measures of variation in institutions, and the control variables used in our analyses. Because our dependent variable is a count of terrorism incidents with a variance that far exceeds the mean, we use negative binomial regression models to assess the influence of political institutions on terrorism. Because the panel structure builds in dependencies across observations within countries over time, we cluster standard errors by country to adjust uncertainty estimates.

3.1 Dependent Variable: Terrorism

We define terrorism as “the systematic use of intentionally indiscriminate political violence against public civilian targets to influence a wider audience” (Fortna, Lotito and Rubin

forthcoming).⁵ This definition distinguishes terrorism from violence against the state’s military personnel and resources, including guerrilla attacks.⁶ Attacks on government entities are often colloquially labeled “terrorism,” and some scholars have included such attacks in their definition of terrorism. Nevertheless, we follow Fortna, Lotito and Rubin (forthcoming) and others in distinguishing guerrilla attacks against the government and military from attacks on non-combatant bystanders contributing nothing (other than taxes) to the counterinsurgency/counter-terror operations. These are distinct tactics with different efficacy in conflict and constraints on their use, and therefore may have distinct causes and consequences.

We also distinguish terrorism from two types of violence against civilians: collateral damage—unintentional civilian deaths resulting from attacks on military targets—and discriminate forms of civilian-targeting—deliberate attacks designed to punish specific individuals for specific actions.⁷ In distinguishing terrorism from discriminate civilian-targeted violence, we do not condone the latter, which is also reprehensible. Rather, we simply suggest that terrorism follows a different strategic logic than other forms of civilian-targeted violence.⁸ Furthermore, this definition emphasizes that what makes terrorism so terrifying is that civilians are at risk of being targeted with violence regardless of their individual actions or their proximity to the battlefield. Finally, we distinguish terrorism from other types of

⁵Young and Findley (2011) and Phillips (2015) discuss the lack of consensus over defining *terrorism* in the literature, and the conceptual and empirical implications for researchers.

⁶While our definition excludes attacks that are clearly targeted at a state’s security sector (the government’s police and military services), other attacks against the government (its civilian personnel, institutions, and infrastructure) are less clear cut. We explore a range of operational definitions to accommodate these conceptual and measurement challenges in our robustness checks.

⁷Discriminate targeting includes “intimidation” (Kydd and Walter 2006, p. 66-67) and/or “control” (Stan-
ton 2009, p. 17). For example, if an armed non-state actor kills specific civilians found to have provided aid or information to the government.

⁸See Kalyvas (2006), Weinstein (2007), and Arreguin-Toft (2001, 2005), among others.

violence based on the perpetrator’s targeting a political message to a wider audience beyond those attacked directly; what others have referred to as the “symbolic” nature of terrorism.⁹

The dependent variable is the number of terrorism incidents recorded in GTD that occur within a country in a given year. GTD uses a broad definition of terrorism, erring on the side of inclusion. Therefore, to construct a measure that corresponds our more narrow definition of terrorism, we use the GTD’s incident-level information to refine the counts. First, incidents must meet all three of GTD’s inclusion criteria, which roughly correspond to: 1) the attack serves a political objective, 2) with an intention to influence a broader audience, and 3) is outside the context of legitimate warfare.¹⁰ Next, we use GTD’s attack- and target-type variables to filter out incidents that are not directed specifically at civilians or are not indiscriminate. We privilege attacks that are less precise, such as those using bombs and explosives, and those that occur in public spaces where selective targeting is unreliable. We report the full list of attack and target types in the appendix. Because reasonable minds may disagree on the definition of terrorism, and data collection based on media reports may yield biases, we conduct robustness checks across a range of operationalizations—from a very inclusive to a very restrictive set of criteria for labeling an incident an act of terrorism.

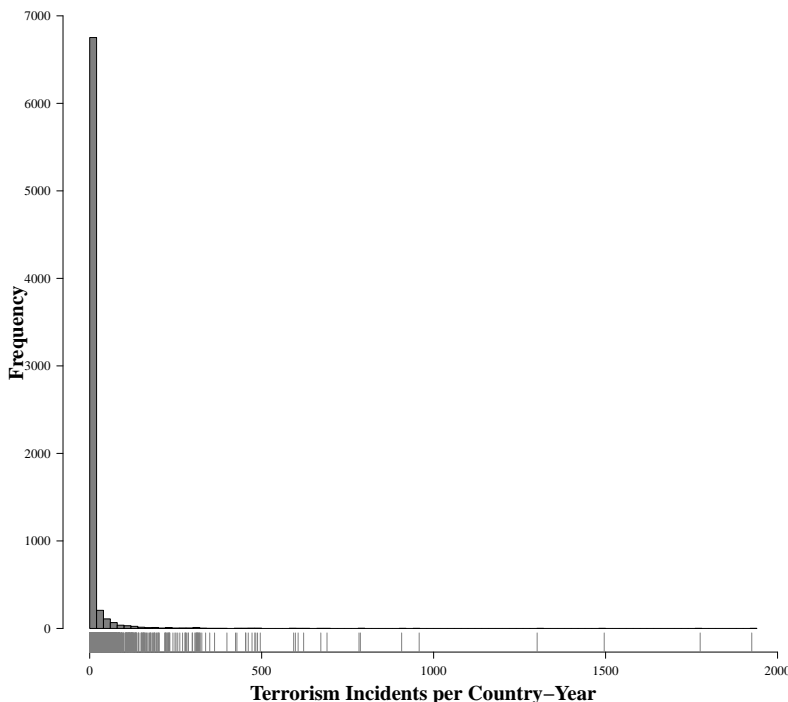
Figure 2 presents the heavily skewed distribution of the country-year terrorism counts. Terrorism is, in most countries, a rare event: 64.5% country-years experienced 0 incidents, and 84.6% suffered fewer than 5 incidents. However, the range is huge. The mean number of attacks in a country-year is 9.73 and the standard deviation is 57.31. Iraq experienced the 4 most active years in the sample during its recent conflict with the Islamic State (2016, 2014, 2015, and 2013, in that order), with a peak of 1925 terrorism incidents in 2016. Pakistan in 2013 fills out the top five.

Because our argument emphasizes how institutions—the dimensions of civil liberties, in particular—influence the ability of the government to identify and suppress violent extrem-

⁹See Crenshaw (1981, p. 379), McCormick (2003, p. 474), Cronin (2009, p. 7), Hoffman (2006, p. 40).

¹⁰See the Global Terrorism Database Codebook for more details.

Figure 2: Terrorism Incidents per Country-Year (1970-2016)



ists, we do not expect the effects apply differently to domestic and transnational terrorism. With rare exceptions, such as 9/11, most transnational attacks are committed by individuals or organizations based abroad, but operating and carrying out attacks through local cells. The government’s monitoring capacity is partly a function of the degree to which the it can infringe on the civil liberties of its citizens and partly a function of the extent to which members of the population living under these institutions are willing to either support (if only tacitly) or reject (and report to the authorities) the presence and actions of a potentially violent extremist group.

Nevertheless, we explore the robustness of our analysis to various alternative, but admittedly imperfect, incident counts that separate domestic from transnational terrorism.¹¹ Existing publicly available terrorism data, including GTD, are ill-suited to distinguish domestic from transnational terrorism incidents. Scholars have domestic from transnational terrorism by examining whether the target’s nationality matches the country in which the

¹¹Results are reported in the appendix.

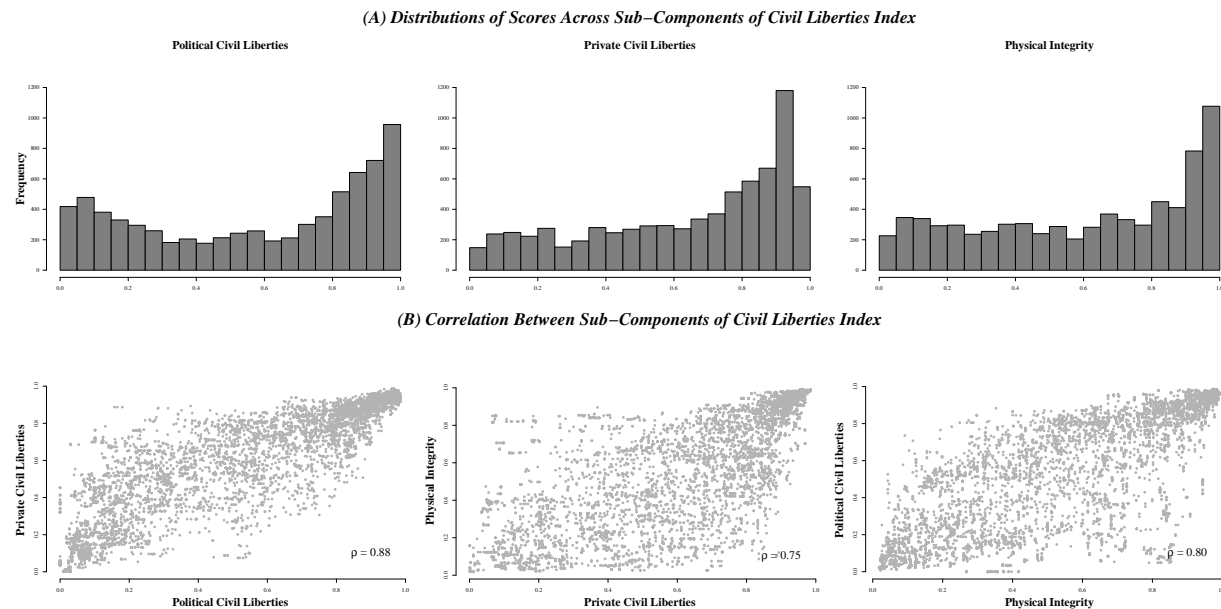
attack occurred attack and/or whether the reported nationality of the attacker matches the location and target (Enders, Sandler and Gaibulloev 2011). If the target or attacker is from a country other than the one in which the event occurred, then researchers code the event as transnational. These methods for classifying attacks represent critical advances for the empirical study of terrorism. Nevertheless, procedures of this nature are, however, problematic. For example, they would mis-classify cases in which a citizen of a country swears allegiance to an international organization and then commits an act of terrorism within the borders of their home country.

3.2 Explanatory Variables – Political Institutions

We measure variation in political institutions using V-Dem version 8.1 Coppedge et al. (2017). Before we test the hypotheses, we first replicate the inverted-U relationship between aggregate regime type and terrorism found in prior studies using V-Dem’s liberal democracy index (LDI). LDI aggregates the component institutional characteristics of interest—clean elections, horizontal accountability, and (aggregate) civil liberties—into the umbrella concept of liberal democracy measured on a continuous scale from 0 to 1. Conceptually, LDI is comparable to Polity 2’s composite score; the correlation coefficient between them is 0.86.

Next, we check whether existing findings that support a curvilinear relationship between (aggregate) civil liberties and terrorism holds using V-Dem data. We disaggregate LDI into its components: clean elections, horizontal accountability (executive constraints), and civil liberties. The clean elections index (CEI) measures voter fraud, systematic election irregularities, government intimidation of the opposition, vote buying, and electoral violence in the country’s last election. It ranges from 0 to 1, with a mean of 0.48 and a standard deviation of 0.35 in our sample. All closed autocracies (that do not hold elections) are scored as zero. The horizontal accountability index includes institutionalized judicial and legislative power to constrain the executive and the presence of independent government agencies with the power, and *de facto* capability to investigate and report unethical or illegal executive

Figure 3: Distributions of and Correlation Between Components of the Civil Liberty Index



actions. The civil liberties index (CLI) is an aggregate index that captures the political liberties, private liberties, and physical integrity rights afforded to citizens within a country. It ranges from 0 to 1, with a mean of 0.6 and a standard deviation of 0.28. We find CLI and its squared term captures the inverted-U relationship.

To test our argument directly, we disaggregate CLI into its component sub-indices—political liberties (freedom of association, expression, and the press), private liberties (freedom of religion, private property rights, and freedom of movement), and physical integrity (freedom from political killings and torture/political violence committed by government agents). Panel A in figure 3 presents the distribution of scores for each of these component indicators. The political liberties index has a mean of 0.57 and a standard deviation of 0.33; the private liberties index has a mean of 0.64 and a standard deviation of 0.29, and the physical integrity index has a mean of 0.6 and a standard deviation of 0.31.

Civil liberties component indicators are, unsurprisingly, highly correlated with each other (Figure 3, Panel B). This degree of collinearity can complicate interpretations of regression outputs, making it difficult to separate out the effects of individual indicators. This problem

is more severe if the true relationship between each indicator and the outcome variable is in the same direction. If, instead, the components have countervailing effects, as we theorize, then the correlation between these dimensions is less problematic; these countervailing effects generate attenuation bias in coefficient estimates. To check this assumption, we estimate a regression model on each of these sub-components alone, in addition to a model using all three simultaneously. Consistent with theory, we find countervailing effects remain stable across all models, which reduces concerns about the validity of inferences.¹² Panel B illustrates there are plenty of country-years off the best-fit lines—with either relatively high political liberties and low physical integrity rights or vice versa—which permits estimation of separate coefficients.¹³

3.3 Control Variables

In our main specifications, we also include variables that may affect both terrorism and civil liberties. Because Gross Domestic Product (GDP) is positively correlated with counter-terror capabilities and democratization, we include the (log) GDP (in 2010 US dollars) per capita, as reported by the United Nations.¹⁴ We also include UN population figures, as country size influences institutional development and exposure to terrorism. To adjust for states' foreign policy (Savun and Phillips 2009), we control for North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) for membership.

Because social discrimination is (negatively) correlated with liberal democratic institutions and may influence domestic actors' use of terrorism, we include a V-Dem indicator measuring the degree to which political power is distributed across politically relevant social groups. The variable ranges from 0 to 4, where 0 reflects a minority with monopoly of political power and 4 reflects equal access to power across social groups. Because civil war

¹²Reported in the appendix.

¹³See Figure 1 above for examples.

¹⁴<https://unstats.un.org/unsd/snaama/dnllist.asp> Accessed: April 1, 2018

increases exposure to terrorism and may influence political institutions, we include a dummy variable for civil war exceeding 1,000 battle deaths, as reported by the Uppsala Conflict Data Project (UCDP).¹⁵

We include regional geographic controls for Sub-Saharan Africa, Middle East/North Africa, Americas, and Asia, leaving Europe as the reference category. We lag all variables one year to help address endogeneity concerns. To account for changes in GTD reporting procedures, we include collection-period dummy variables.

3.4 Robustness Checks

We conduct a variety of robustness checks to ensure the results are not sensitive to model choice or covariate adjustment. First, we estimate the effect of the main civil liberties component institutions using the sample and controls used in [Gaibulloev, Piazza and Sandler \(2017\)](#). Next, we allow each component institution to have a non-monotonic effect (include its squared term) and interact each with the clean elections index to allow the effect to be conditional on political selection institutions. We then fit the negative binomial model using more and less restrictive measures of terrorism, and using domestic terrorism only. We also check the robustness of results to including alternative control variables. Finally, because terrorism is rare, we also fit a zero-inflated negative binomial model. The results are largely consistent across specifications. We discuss the results at greater length in the Appendix.

4 Replicating Existing Findings

Before testing the hypotheses directly, we first confirm the “inverted-U” relationship detected in the existing literature is validated using V-Dem’s Liberal Democracy Index (LDI). First we replicate [Gaibulloev, Piazza and Sandler \(2017\)](#) directly. Second, we use their model and data but replace their regime measures with LDI. Figure 4 illustrates the results graphically,

¹⁵Introduced by [Gleditsch et al. \(2002\)](#) and expanded by [Allansson, Melander and Themnér \(2017\)](#).

Figure 4: Aggregate Regime Type/Civil Liberties Measures and Terrorism

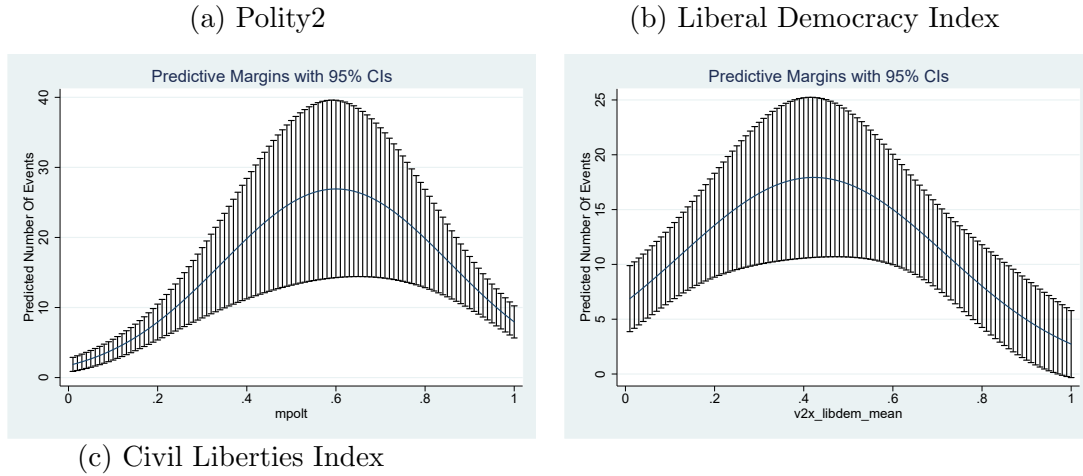


Figure 4a reports the predicted number of transnational terrorism events over the range of Polity2 and Figure 4b reports the predicted number of transnational terrorism events over the range of V-Dem’s LDI score, using the replication data and model specification from Gaibulloev, Piazza and Sandler (2017). Figure 4c reports the predicted number of terrorism incidents using our definition and covariate profile. All other covariates are set to their observed values across the range of the civil liberties component variable. The shaded region represents the 95% confidence interval for predictions.

the complete results are reported in the appendix. These results correspond well with the findings Gaibulloev, Piazza and Sandler (2017) present. Note the magnitude of the effect detected using LDI appears weaker than the results in Gaibulloev, Piazza and Sandler (2017). However, we note that the underlying measures are different, though correlated, and are on different scales. Crucially, LDI places a higher proportion of country-years within the middle of the regime type continuum compared to Polity2, which may influence the changes in predicted number of terrorism events.

Next, we investigate the effect of (aggregate) civil liberties on terrorism separately, controlling for clean elections, horizontal accountability, and the same covariates. The results

indicate that the relationship between civil liberties and terrorism follow the “inverted-U” curvilinear pattern. Both the Civil Liberties Index (CLI) and its squared term are statistically significant (complete results reported in the Appendix). The expected number of terrorism incidents is greatest for country-years with an intermediate score of approximately 0.4 (less than one standard deviation below mean CLI score), approximately 8 incidents. By contrast, the model predicts about 2 incidents for country-years at the minimum CLI score and close to 0 incidents at the maximum CLI. Here, again, we find that while moving towards liberal-democratic norms and institutions increases the risk of terrorism, countries that continue these policy progressions are better off (see a subsequent drop in exposure to terrorism) compared to those that remain stagnant or revert back to an authoritarianism.

5 Findings

To test the hypotheses directly, we estimate a series of negative binomial models, substituting aggregate regime type with the relevant variables measuring component institutions for clean elections, horizontal accountability, and all three distinct dimensions of civil liberties. Models 1-2 use our preferred terrorism measure, country-year observations, and battery of covariates described above. Models 3-4 include V-Dem’s variables measuring component institutions, but use the terrorism measure, country-(five-year) period observations, and covariates in [Gaibullov, Piazza and Sandler \(2017\)](#). Table 1 reports the coefficient estimates and standard errors from each model. Because the coefficient estimates do not inform the substantive effects, Figure 5 presents the predicted number of terrorism events across the range of each explanatory variable, using Model 1 and holding all covariates constant.

We find robust support for Hypothesis 1 (physical integrity rights decrease incidents of terrorism) and Hypothesis 2 (political liberties increase incidents of terrorism). Across all specifications the coefficient estimate on physical integrity protections remains negative, the coefficient on political liberties are positive, and both are consistently statistically distin-

Table 1: Negative Binomial Model Results

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Political Civ. Lib.	5.22*** (0.98)	5.26*** (1.00)	4.79*** (0.97)	4.73*** (0.96)
Private Civ. Lib.	-1.64 (0.93)	-1.77 (0.93)	-1.66* (0.75)	-1.78* (0.75)
Physical Integrity	-4.40*** (0.63)	-4.41*** (0.62)	-3.70*** (0.81)	-3.57*** (0.79)
Clean Elections	-0.91* (0.46)	0.21 (0.90)	-0.77 (0.52)	0.41 (0.97)
Clean Elections ²		-1.35 (1.04)		-1.35 (1.00)
Horiz. Accountability	1.54* (0.71)	1.78* (0.71)	1.19 (0.85)	1.29 (0.85)
Residual Deviance:	5081.52 on 7156 DF	5080.32 on 7155 DF	903.53 on 867 DF	902.72 on 866 DF
Country-Level Clustered Standard Errors in Parentheses Predictors Lagged One Year Statistically significant at: * = $p \leq 0.05$; ** = $p \leq 0.01$; *** = $p \leq 0.005$				

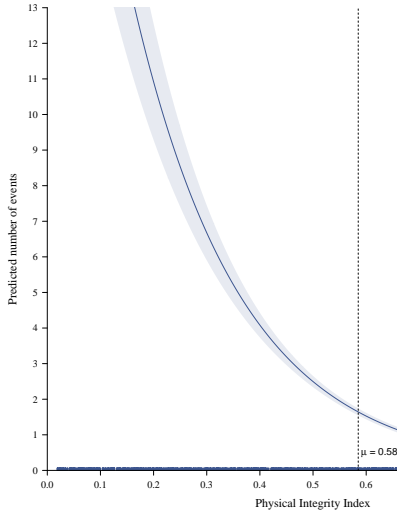
All Models include the following controls: log GDP per capita, log Population, NATO membership, Discriminated population, civil war incidence, regional controls, GTD data collection period, and an Intercept (results reported in Appendix).

guishable from zero. The expected number of incidents decreases precipitously over the range of the physical integrity index: from approximately 5.98 incidents at one standard deviation below its mean to approximately 1.52 incidents at its mean value and 0.39 incidents at one standard deviation above its mean. The expected terrorism incidents in a country-year increases exponentially over the range of the political liberties index: from approximately 0.27 incidents at one standard deviation below its mean to approximately 1.52 incidents at its mean value and 8.63 incidents at one standard deviation above its mean.

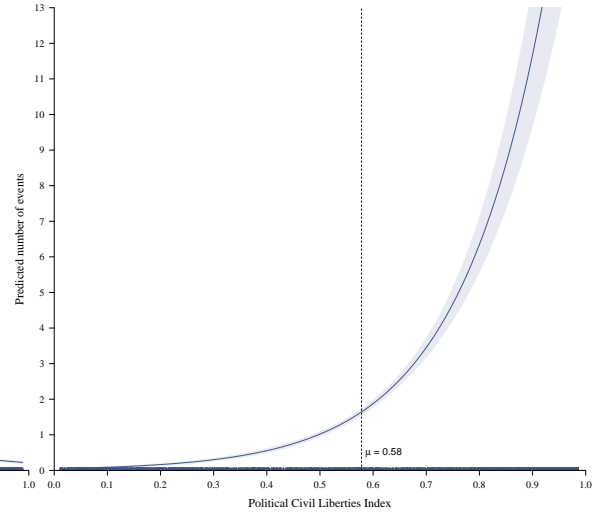
The coefficient estimates on private liberties are consistently negative, consistent with Hypothesis 3.2. But the estimates are statistically distinguishable from 0 only using the Gaibullov, Piazza and Sandler (2017) data. The expected number of incidents decreases over the range of the private liberties index, though the rate of change is less dramatic than for the other two civil liberties dimensions: from approximately 2.43 incidents at one

Figure 5: Civil Liberties Components & Predicted Terrorism

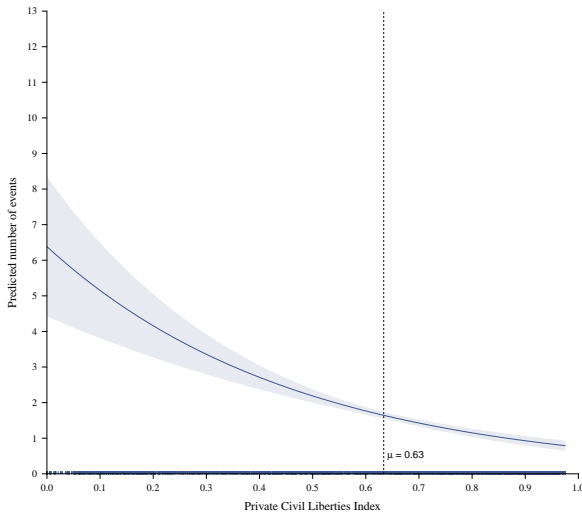
(a) Physical Integrity (H1)



(b) Political Liberties (H2)



(c) Private Liberties (H3)



Predicted terrorism events are calculated using Model 1. Note: all other covariates are set to their observed values across the range of the civil liberties component variable. The shaded region represents the 95% confidence interval for predictions.

standard deviation below its mean to approximately 1.52 incidents at its mean value and 0.95 incidents at one standard deviation above its mean. These results suggest that private civil liberties function more like physical integrity. Rather than influencing terrorism exposure through enabling extremists to organize, private liberties protection appear to reduce the scope of grievances in the population, thereby reducing terrorism.

6 Discussion

This article contributes to debates regarding the relationship between regime type and terrorism by disaggregating regimes and offering a novel argument emphasizing the effects of component political institutions. The empirical findings are consistent with research supporting a non-monotonic relationship between a country’s civil liberties protections and its exposure to terrorism. The article advances beyond existing research by disaggregating civil liberties to identify which institutions increase, and which decrease, terrorism. In doing so, we contribute to a new debate regarding the sources of political grievances that drive political violence exposed by (Chenoweth 2007, 2019). The data suggest that while protecting political organization, speech, and action increases incidents of terrorism in a country, protections against state repression reduce terrorism. These results are consistent with our theoretical framework: political civil liberties protections increase extremists’ opportunity to organize and reduce the costs associated with adopting terrorism, while protecting citizens’ physical integrity reduces the population’s willingness to tolerate extremists in their midst.

The article suggests that researchers investigating the use of terrorism, as well as other dimensions of international security, may do well to theorize the effects of distinct political institutions rather than focus on aggregate concepts such as regime type. V-Dem’s data collection effort provides new leverage to revisit these questions and test them empirically. Just as a country’s political institutions influence opposition organizations’ ability to operate and states’ vulnerability to terrorism, they may influence other actors’ organizational capabilities and development—for example their own military or security sector, other states, warlords, militias, NGOs, and INGOs—and render the country vulnerable to certain conflict strategies and impervious to others.

Further research is required to verify theoretical mechanisms. Untested in the country-level analysis, the theory carries implications for the non-state actors’ emergence and tactical decision-making during conflict. Recent data innovations connecting the GTD to UCDP/PRIO Armed Conflict Dataset (ACD) intrastate conflict actors allow researchers

to test these additional empirical implications in an actor-centric framework (Fortna, Lotito and Rubin forthcoming, Polo and Gleditsch 2016).

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