

Terrorism and the Varieties of Civil Liberties

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Abstract

How do government protections of, and infringement upon, its citizens' civil liberties influence the country's exposure to terrorism? Existing research remains divided on whether civil liberties protections increase or decrease vulnerability to terrorism, and the conditions under which violating civil liberties mitigate or exacerbate the security threats associated with terrorism. We contribute clarity to these debates by disaggregating civil liberties into component dimensions—political liberties, private liberties, and physical integrity—which we argue have distinct effects on a country's exposure to terrorism. We argue political liberties increase terrorism while physical integrity rights decrease terrorism. These countervailing effects provide an alternative explanation for the observed “inverted-U” relationship between civil liberties protections and terrorism. We isolate the effects of specific government behaviors from each other and from the effects of the state's political institutions by leveraging the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) data. We measure a country's exposure to terrorism using the Global Terrorism Database. Our sample covers 176 states from 1970-2016. We find evidence consistent with our hypotheses regarding the effects of the distinct component dimensions of civil liberties.

Do government protections of citizens' civil liberties increase or decrease the country's exposure to 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. Some suggest that civil liberties protections *increase* terrorism by constraining a government's counter-terrorism efforts, permitting violent extremist groups to mobilize, plan, and execute attacks. From this perspective, encroachments on civil liberties might reduce terrorism by giving governments the power necessary to interdict organizations threatening to perpetrate terrorism. Others, however, argue that civil liberties protections *decrease* terrorism by assuaging political grievances, thus reducing citizens' incentives to support political violence and increasing their support for counter-terror efforts. Theories in this camp, therefore, argue that the infringement of civil liberties might aggravate grievances against the state and increases the viability of anti-state political organizations, including those willing to deploy violence.

We argue that both theoretical perspectives are valid and that by focusing only on the broader concept of *civil liberties* researchers mask important dynamics concerning potentially disparate effects that the different dimensions of civil liberties may have on a state's exposure to terrorism. Therefore, we disaggregate 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) – and posit that political liberties *increase* a state's exposure to terrorism while physical integrity protections *decrease* this risk.

Though political liberties incentivize the majority to engage in peaceful political action rather than violence, they also, by design, ensure those with extreme political preferences are constrained from achieving their objectives through institutional means. Because extremists' rights to organize are protected, the environment remains permissive for them to leverage their political freedoms to plan and execute violent 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 and less willing to support the use of terrorism, enhancing counter-terror operation and starving would-be terrorists of essential support and resources.

While we are not the first to investigate the separable effects that the different dimensions of civil liberties might have on a country’s exposure to terrorism, most of these previous studies look only at one specific dimension (i.e., either political civil liberties *or* physical integrity) in isolation. Building on this previous research, especially on [Walsh and Piazza \(2010\)](#), [Chenoweth \(2007, 2019\)](#), and [Shapiro \(2013\)](#), our contribution is to provide a framework to explain how these countervailing forces work in tandem to explain the relationship between government actions and terrorism exposure, based in a logic that acknowledges governments vary in their treatment of citizens across different civil liberties dimensions. In doing so, we offer an alternative explanation for the non-monotonic (“inverted-U”) relationship between (aggregate) civil liberties protections and terrorism, positing a distinct role for each component dimension. Our findings have important implications for effective policy-making concerning the prospects for successful democratization and its consequences, as different reforms in state institutions and government practices 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 countries’ component institutions and government actions at the level of disaggregation necessary to evaluate their distinct effects on exposure to terrorism. First, we present descriptive evidence to dispel the conventional wisdom that government records on all civil liberties dimensions must go together, and that civil liberties protections are associated (nearly) exclusively with democratic institutions (clean elections). By showing that governments can and do protect some liberties while violating others, and that these patterns

can occur in procedural democracies as well as closed autocracies, we motivate an expanded research agenda to disentangle the consequences of various government behaviors from each other and from the state's political institutions. Second, we test our hypotheses in a regression framework. We measure governments' records on distinct civil liberties dimensions and states' political institutions separately using V-Dem indicators. We measure the state's exposure to terrorism using the Global Terrorism Database (LaFree and Dugan 2007). Consistent with the hypotheses, we find that political liberties increase terrorism while private liberties and physical integrity rights decrease terrorism.

1 Existing Literature on Civil Liberties and Terrorism

Existing research suggests that constraints on government power, whether formal political institutions or informal restraints, influence the country's exposure to terrorism through two main mechanisms: (1) *strategic influence* and (2) *political access* (Eyerman 1998, Gaibullov, Piazza and Sandler 2017). Strategic influence arguments emphasize the country's features that make terrorism effective, by pressuring leaders to make concessions and/or constraining leaders' use of the state's coercive apparatus against perpetrators. For example, some suggest that terrorism is more effective against, and therefore more frequently deployed within, democracies.¹ Civil liberties protections, specifically, 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).

Political access arguments highlight the relationship between terrorism and citizens' role in the political process. Conventional wisdom suggests that access to political selection

¹See, among others, Chenoweth (2007, 2010a, 2019), Enders and Sandler (2006), Eubank and Weinberg (1994), Eyerman (1998), Findley and Young (2011), Li (2005), Piazza (2008), Stanton (2013), Valentino, Huth and Croco (2010), Young and Dugan (2011).

processes, a consequence of and distinct from political civil liberties, may *decrease* exposure to terrorism by reducing citizens' grievances against the state and broadening the peaceful strategies available to redress grievances.² In contrast, repressive autocratic regimes that, by definition, limit or eliminate citizens' opportunities to participate in the leadership- and policy-selection process may encourage marginalized groups to use terrorism as their only recourse.³ However, [Chenoweth \(2007, 2019\)](#) presents an alternative logic of political access. She argues that governments that protect broad access to political participation thereby increase competition, which essentially guarantees that groups with extreme (minority) views are barred from achieving their political goals through peaceful means. These groups may view terrorism as the only tool available to force the majority to accommodate their interests.

Others have investigated the role for physical integrity, specifically, in shaping states' exposure to terrorism. [Walsh and Piazza \(2010\)](#) find that physical integrity violations goad opposition groups into terrorism by turning the population against the government, which starves the government from valuable counter-terror intelligence. Similarly, [Piazza \(2017\)](#) finds that state repression, by restricting nonviolent means of dissent and 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 grievances against the state.

To account for these competing mechanisms, a number of scholars posit that the relationship between government constraints 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 2010b](#), [Eyerman 1998](#),

²See, especially, [Abadie \(2006\)](#), [Abrahms \(2007\)](#). [Gaibullov, Piazza and Sandler \(2017\)](#), for a recent summary of these arguments.

³See, among others, [Aksoy, Carter and Wright \(2012\)](#), [Conrad, Conrad and Young \(2014\)](#), [Findley and Young \(2011\)](#), [Piazza \(2017\)](#), [Wilson and Piazza \(2013\)](#).

Gaibullov, Piazza and Sandler 2017, Goldstone et al. 2010, Kurrild-Klitgaard, Justesen and Klemmensen 2006, Piazza 2013). Existing research supporting the “inverted-U” relationship between aggregate civil liberties and terrorism suggest two possible explanations. The effect of civil liberties on terrorism may change over its range, such that the strongest protectors and violators are less vulnerable to terrorism than those with intermediate civil liberties records. Or, the effect of civil liberties may be conditional on electoral institutions (Gaibullov, Piazza and Sandler 2017).

Building on insights from Walsh and Piazza (2010), Chenoweth (2007, 2019), and Shapiro (2013), we argue that the “inverted-U” relationship between aggregate civil liberties and terrorism can be explained by the distinct, countervailing effects of each separate dimension of civil liberties. We contribute to the literature by providing an overarching logic, drawing upon the grievance and political opportunity structure mechanisms, to explain conflicting findings and the “inverted-U” pattern. Our argument regarding the role of physical integrity draws on Walsh and Piazza (2010). However, whereas Walsh and Piazza (2010) and others investigate the effects of physical integrity protections in isolation from other government actions, we integrate physical integrity rights protections in the framework alongside the other related but distinct dimensions of civil liberties. Our argument regarding the effect of political liberties draws from Chenoweth’s (2007, 2019) proposed mechanisms, which we adapt by disaggregating *political access* into its institutional (clean elections) and government behavior (political liberties) dimensions to theorize and empirically observe the distinct roles of institutions from government action.

We unify these logics and help to resolve persistent debates regarding the effects of civil liberties by theorizing how each component dimension influences a country’s vulnerability to terrorism through distinct mechanisms papered over in the existing literature. One set of existing arguments focuses on the role of grievances against the state in generating support for groups willing to use terrorism. We make explicit the crucial distinction between the *scope* of grievances in society in general and the *intensity* of grievances among specific subsets

of the population. Factors that reduce the scope of grievances may nonetheless increase the *intensity* of grievances for some. The other primary set of arguments focuses on the opportunity structure which either restricts or permits organized groups' ability to plan and carry out acts of violence. We separate the opportunity structure mechanisms based in restrictions on the government's scope of action (constraints on governments' ability to infringe upon political liberties to prevent political violence) from the mechanisms based in citizens' willingness to cooperate with the government's counter-terror operations, as in Shapiro (2013). Governments that can leverage broad cooperation from even marginalized populations will access the information necessary for effective counter-terrorism without having to infringe upon political liberties, for example. Parsing these distinct mechanisms, and clarifying which civil liberties affect the country's exposure to terrorism through which mechanism(s) allows us to contribute new insights into this unresolved debate.

2 Terrorism and Distinct Civil Liberties Components

We argue that government protections for 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/or less willing to cooperate with the government's counter-terror efforts by providing information about extremists' activities.

By comparison, while restrictions on political liberties may increase grievances, we argue

⁴Of course, by pointing this out we do not condone violations of political or private liberties, nor do we suggest that their absence does not also facilitate government crack-downs 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.

that these restrictions do not carry the weight equal to infringements of physical integrity as it relates to a citizen's decision to supporting the actions of an extremist organization or the government's counter-terrorism efforts. Rather, political liberties are likely to trigger support for terrorism only when they generate horizontal inequalities across politically relevant groups. Political liberties, therefore, influence the *intensity* of grievances against the state, not only the *scope* of grievances in the population. For example, political openness may increase the intensity of grievances within extreme (minority) groups blocked from achieving their political objectives by dominant majorities (Chenoweth 2007, 2019). In other words, while we agree with Gaibulloev, Piazza and Sandler (2017) that political access (clean elections) and political liberties (freedoms of expression, assembly, association, and the press), which make elections meaningful, reduce 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.

Drawing upon Shapiro (2013) and others, we argue that 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). 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 willing to conceal actionable information about these activities from 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.

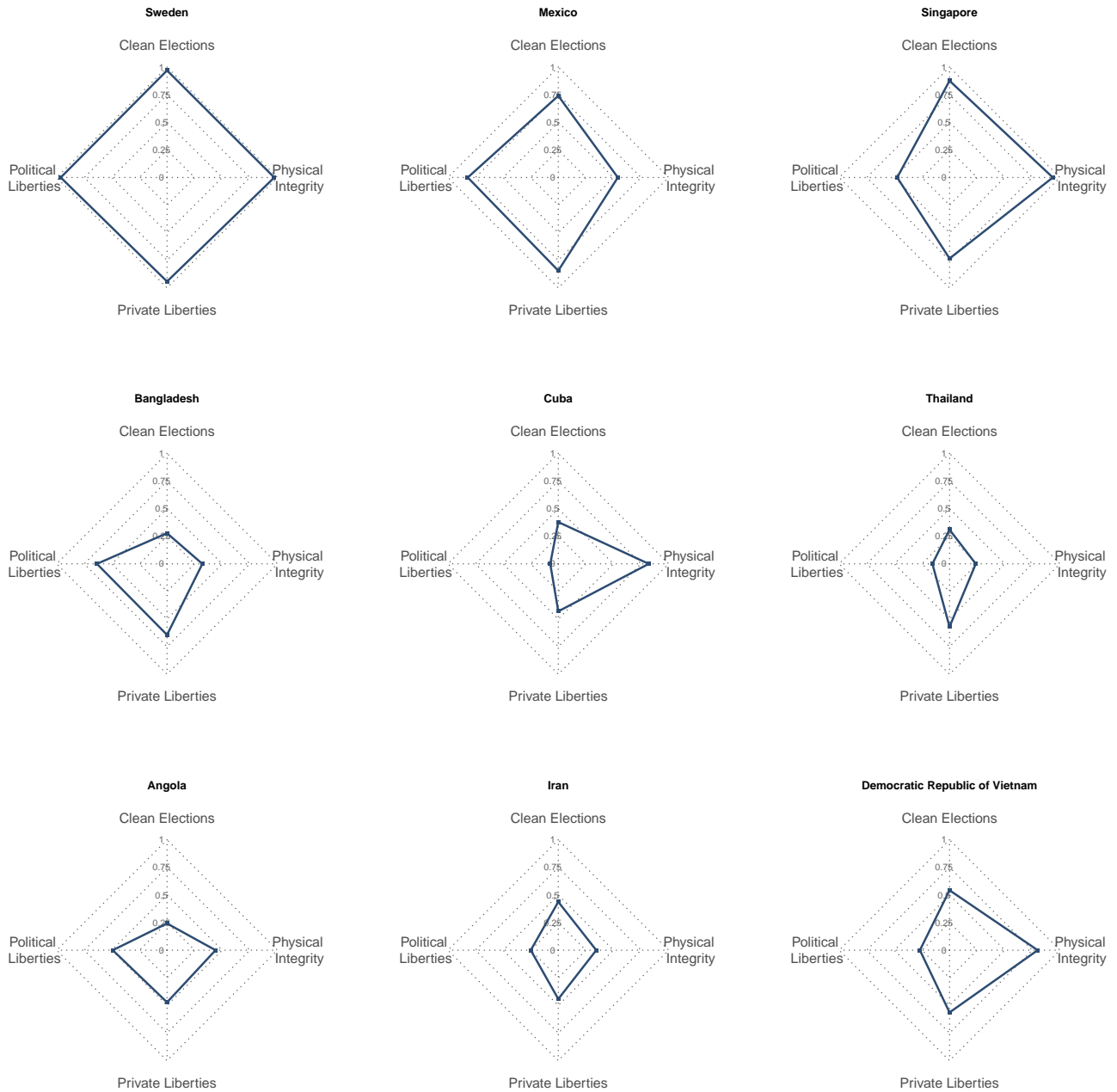
2.1 Distinguishing the Roles of Specific Government Actions and Political Institutions

Our framework separates the role of the state’s political *institutions* from government *behavior*—specifically, the government’s record on protecting or violating civil liberties. Political institutions include those governing political selection and horizontal accountability across branches of government. Political selection institutions 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.

The main reason efforts to disaggregate the distinct roles for specific institutions and behaviors remains under-explored in existing research is that treating them together, as part of an aggregate concept such as regime type or political access, makes sense for many applications. After all, elections lose much of their meaning without adequate civil liberties protections, and vice versa. Citizens’ ability to hold their representatives accountable through elections is limited if they are prevented from organizing politically or if they fear retribution regarding whether or how they vote. Similarly, the freedoms of association and assembly may permit expression, but cannot easily be translated into policy outcomes without the power to vote incumbents out of office. Though each of these claims are true at the extremes, we argue that treating political institutions and a government’s respect for civil liberties as distinct dimensions is critically important for theoretical, empirical, and policy reasons.

Figure 1 illustrates the V-Dem measures on cleanliness of elections and the government’s record on civil liberties dimensions for a select set of countries using their scores in 2016.

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



There are, of course, many examples of states in which the presence or absence of elections and civil liberties go hand-in-hand (Sweden and Iran, on opposite extremes). Nevertheless, there is also a great deal of variation in between these extremes. Some states mix clean elections with comparatively weak protections for political liberties protections (Singapore) or low physical integrity rights (Mexico). Countries without clean elections also vary in

their records on civil liberties. While Iran, Cuba, Thailand, and Bangladesh all have low to moderate scores across the clean elections index, their records with respect to the various dimensions of civil liberties are distinct. For example, 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. Further, while Bangladesh and Thailand are relatively similar when it comes to clean elections and the protection of private civil liberties and physical integrity, Bangladesh provides greater protections of political civil liberties than does Thailand.

Certainly, the dimensions of civil liberties are highly correlated (see research design section), which makes the aggregate concept reasonable for many purposes; however, as Figure 1 illustrates, 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 and 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 how each dimension of civil liberties affects terrorism.

2.2 How do Political Liberties, Private Liberties, and Physical Integrity Influence Terrorism Exposure?

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.

2.2.1 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.

Protected from state repression, citizens are more likely to support their government's counter-terrorism operations and 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 extrajudicial 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.

2.2.2 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 can reduce the *scope* of political grievances in the population. That is, this dynamic may decrease terrorism by reducing the willingness of the population to support the use of violence and increasing their willingness to cooperate with the government's 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.

Further, 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.

2.2.3 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 are intent on carrying 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. 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. Thus, among the three distinct dimensions of civil liberties, deciphering the influence private civil

liberties have on terrorism is the most difficult. As such, 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 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.*

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

Our argument suggests an alternative explanation for the non-monotonic relationship between aggregate measures of civil liberties and terrorism based in the countervailing effects of each dimension of civil liberties. The argument’s logic for why the most egregious civil liberties violators and the strongest civil liberties protectors are both comparatively invulnerable to terrorism is similar to existing explanations. However, the argument implies distinct mechanisms underlying this relationship, and distinct implications for the conditions under which countries with intermediate aggregate civil liberties records experience more terrorism.

In countries at the lowest end of the civil liberties spectrum, where 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. 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. Although 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. Therefore, contrary to some of the findings in the literature, our theory suggests that autocracies will have a higher base-level threat of terrorism than liberal democracies.

Nevertheless, at middling levels of civil liberties protections, the risk of terrorism is higher. In a country with middling levels of aggregate civil liberties, the government may (1) provide on partial protection on each civil liberties dimension, (2) provide greater political liberties

protections while retaining control over the coercive apparatus to violate citizens' physical integrity, or (3) exercise restraint on violating physical integrity but encroach on 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.

Hypothesis 4. *Aggregate Civil Liberties:*

Countries with intermediate records on aggregate civil liberties protections will experience more terrorism incidents than those with very weak and very strong records.

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.

3.1 Dependent Variable: Terrorism

We define terrorism as intentionally indiscriminate civilian-targeted violence in pursuit of a political objective.⁵ This definition distinguishes terrorism from violence against the state’s military personnel and resources, including guerrilla attacks.⁶ Attacks on military personnel

⁵Our definition draws upon established definitions in the literature. See Crenshaw (1981), McCormick (2003), Hoffman (2006), Cronin (2009), and Fortna, Lotito and Rubin (2018).

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,

are often colloquially labeled “terrorism,” and some scholars have included such attacks in their definition of terrorism. Nevertheless, like many scholars we distinguish guerrilla attacks against the government’s military forces from attacks on non-combatant bystanders. These are distinct tactics with different efficacy in conflict and constraints on their use, and therefore may have distinct causes and consequences.

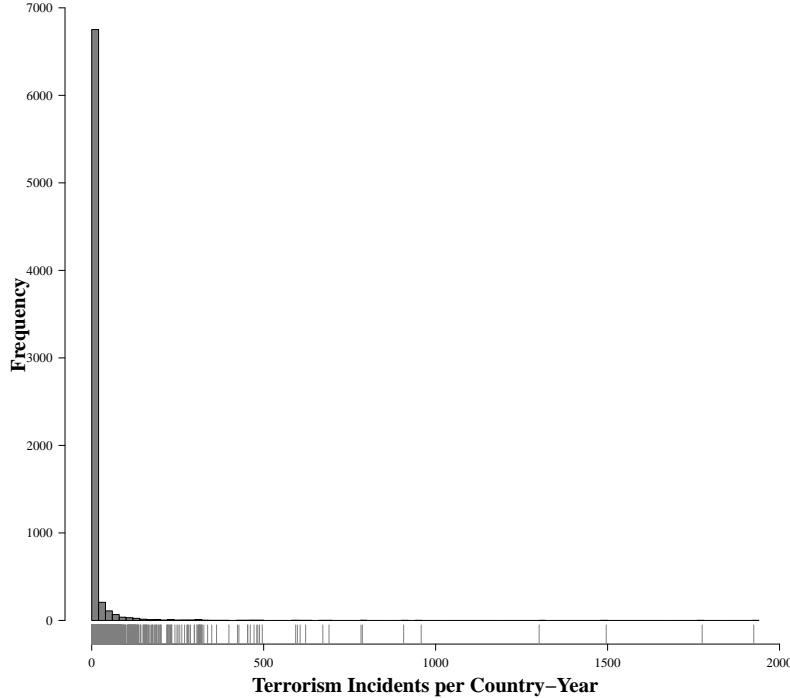
Following Kydd and Walter (2006), Stanton (2009), and others, we also distinguish terrorism from two types of violence against civilians: collateral damage and selective forms of civilian-targeting. Collateral damage involves unintentional civilian deaths resulting from attacks on military targets. Belligerents perpetrating selective violence do deliberately attack civilians, but the use of violence is designed to punish specific individuals for specific actions.⁷ For example, the killing of specific civilians found to have provided aid or information to the government constitutes selective violence, but not terrorism. In distinguishing terrorism from selective 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.

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. Next, we use GTD’s attack- and target-type variables to filter out incidents that are not directed specifically at civilians

and infrastructure) are less clear cut. We explore a range of operational definitions to accommodate these conceptual and measurement challenges in our robustness checks.

⁷Selective targeting includes “intimidation” (Kydd and Walter 2006, p. 66-67) and/or “control” (Stanton 2009, p. 17).

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



or are not indiscriminate. 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 country-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 the dimensions of civil liberties influence the government’s ability to identify and suppress violent extremists, we do not expect the effects

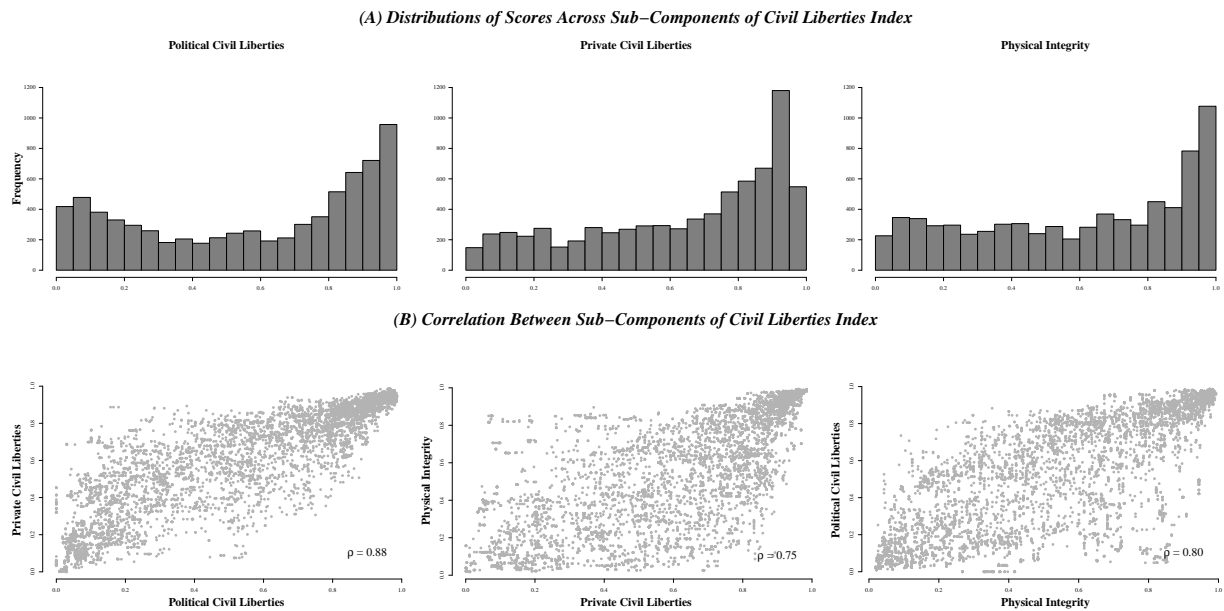
to apply differently to domestic and transnational terrorism. With rare exceptions, such as 9/11, most transnational attacks are committed by individuals or organizations based abroad, but operating and carrying out attacks through local cells. The government’s monitoring capacity is partly a function of the degree to which 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 authorities) the actions of a violent extremist group. In the appendix, we explore the robustness of our analysis to various alternative, but admittedly imperfect, incident counts that separate domestic from transnational terrorism, following [Enders, Sandler and Gaibulloev \(2011\)](#).

3.2 Explanatory Variables – Civil Liberties and Component Dimensions

We measure variation in government respect for civil liberties and its component dimensions—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)—using V-Dem version 8 ([Coppedge et al. 2017](#)). The Civil Liberties Index (CLI) is an aggregate measure composed of three component sub-indices: the political liberties index, private liberties index, and physical integrity index. The aggregate CLI and the component indices range from 0 to 1. The CLI has a mean of 0.6 and a standard deviation of 0.28. 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. Panel A in [Figure 3](#) presents the distribution of scores for each of these component indicators. We use the component indices to test Hypotheses 1-3 and the aggregate CLI to test Hypothesis 4.

Civil liberties component indicators are, unsurprisingly, highly correlated with each other ([Figure 3](#), Panel B). This degree of collinearity can complicate interpretations of regression

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



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 regression models on each of these sub-components, in addition to a model using all three simultaneously. We find countervailing effects remain stable across all models, which reduces concerns about the validity of inferences.⁸ As 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.

3.3 Control Variables

In our main specifications, we also include variables that may affect both terrorism and civil liberties. First, we include measures for the key political institutions that existing literature

⁸Reported in the appendix.

suggests may shape government actions on civil liberties dimensions and the country’s exposure to terrorism. 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 unethical or illegal executive actions.

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.⁹ We also include population, as country size influences institutional development and exposure to terrorism. To adjust for states’ foreign policy (Savun and Phillips 2009), we control for membership in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). 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. This ordinal variable takes integer value between 0 to 4, where 0 reflects a minority with monopoly of political power and 4 reflects equal access to power across social groups. As civil war increases exposure to terrorism and influences political institutions, we include a dummy variable for civil war exceeding 1,000 battle deaths, as reported by the Uppsala Conflict Data Project (UCDP).¹⁰ We include regional geographic controls for Sub-Saharan Africa, Middle East/North Africa, Americas, and Asia, leaving Europe as the reference category.¹¹ We lag all variables one year to help address endogeneity concerns. And, to account for changes in GTD reporting procedures, we include collection-period dummy variables.

⁹<https://unstats.un.org/unsd/snaama/dnllist.asp> Accessed: April 1, 2018

¹⁰Introduced by Gleditsch et al. (2002) and expanded by Allansson, Melander and Themnér (2017).

¹¹In the appendix, we present the results excluding these regional indicators.

4 Findings

To test our hypotheses, we estimate a series of negative binomial models using country-year observations, our preferred terrorism measure, and the battery of covariates described above. Table 1 reports the coefficient estimates and standard errors. Models 1 and 2 include each of the component civil liberties dimensions to assess Hypotheses 1-3. The difference between the two models is only the inclusion of the squared term on the clean elections index. Models 3 and 4 replace the component civil liberties dimensions with the aggregate civil liberties index to test Hypothesis 4. Again, the difference between Models 3 and 4 is inclusion of the clean elections index squared term.

Because the coefficient estimates do not inform the substantive effects, Figure 4 presents the predicted number of terrorism events across the observed range and values of each explanatory variable. That is, the reported predictions use the coefficient estimates and variance-covariance matrix from Model 1, the observed values for all covariates, and simulation methods. The resulting output is thus the average predicted number of terrorism events across the range of the specific civil liberties component variable, given how the other components co-vary with the target component.

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 model specifications the coefficient estimate for the physical integrity index remains negative, the coefficient for the political liberties index remains positive, and both are consistently statistically distinguishable 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. Similarly, the expected number of 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 devia-

Table 1: Negative Binomial Model Results

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Physical Integrity	-4.40*** (0.63)	-4.41*** (0.62)		
Political Civ. Lib.	5.22*** (0.98)	5.26*** (1.00)		
Private Civ. Lib.	-1.64 (0.93)	-1.77 (0.93)		
Civ. Lib. (Agg.)			5.12*** (1.06)	5.56* (2.49)
Civ. Lib. (Agg.) ²			-7.07*** (0.87)	-7.49*** (2.27)
Clean Elections	-0.91* (0.46)	0.21 (0.90)	-0.12 (0.26)	-0.66 (1.01)
Clean Elections ²		-1.35 (1.04)		0.69 (1.48)
Horiz. Accountability	1.54* (0.71)	1.78* (0.71)	3.65*** (0.38)	3.56*** (0.75)
Residual Deviance:	5081.52 on 7156 DF	5080.32 on 7155 DF	5015.33 on 7157 DF	5016.82 on 7156 DF
Country-Level Clustered Standard Errors in Parentheses Predictors Lagged One Year Statistically significant at: * = $p \leq 0.05$; ** = $p \leq 0.01$; *** = $p \leq 0.005$				

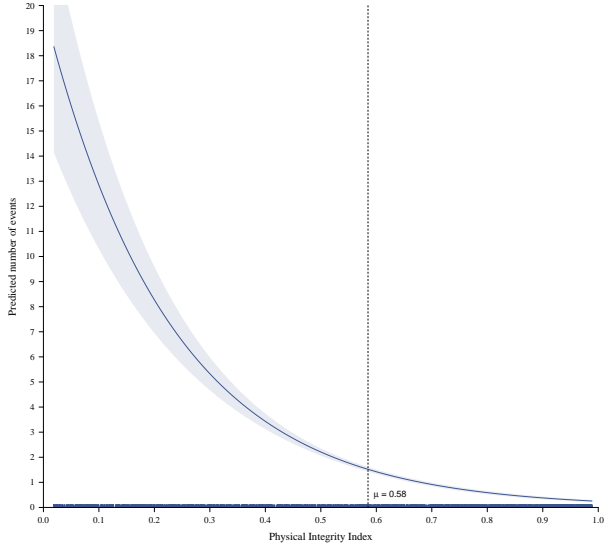
All Models include the following controls: log GDP per capita, log Population, NATO membership, Discriminated population, civil war incidence, regional controls, GTD data collection period, and an Intercept (results reported in Appendix).

tion above its mean. In general, these findings hold across the range of different model and variable specifications (Results reported in the appendix).

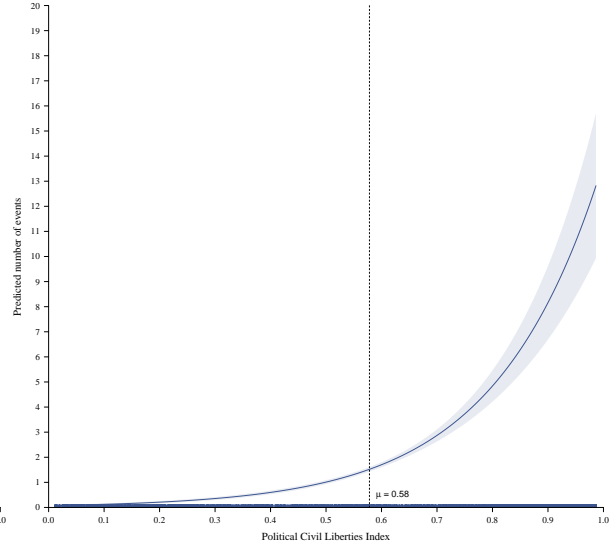
The coefficient estimates on private liberties are consistently negative, consistent with Hypothesis 3B, but are not statistically distinguishable from 0 in our main model specifications. Nevertheless, these coefficient estimates remain stable across models included in the appendix as robustness checks, and are statistically distinguishable from 0 when we use the replication data and model specification in Gaibulloev, Piazza and Sandler (2017), substituting the civil liberties component measures for their aggregate regime type measures. 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 dimensions of civil liberties: from

Figure 4: Civil Liberties Components & Predicted Terrorism

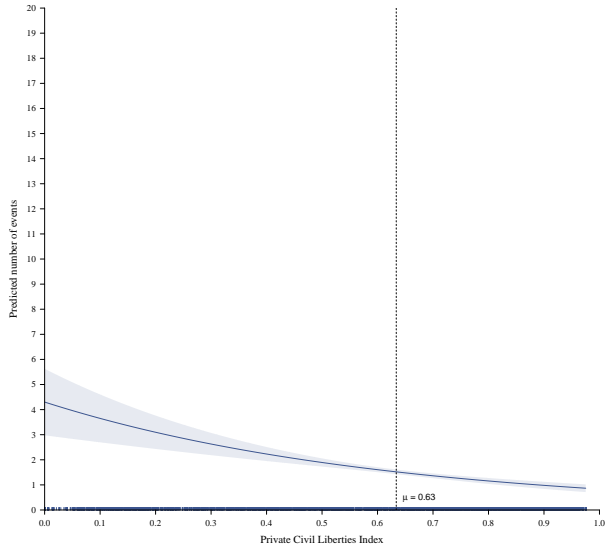
(a) Physical Integrity (H1)



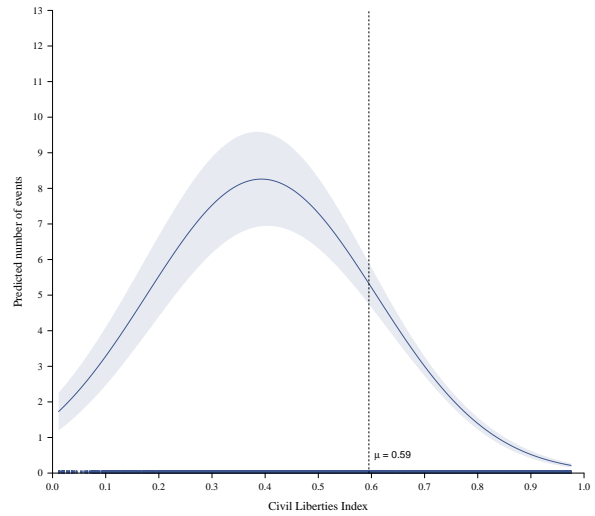
(b) Political Liberties (H2)



(c) Private Liberties (H3)



(d) Civil Liberties Index (H4)



Note: Predicted terrorism events are calculated using coefficient estimates from Model 1. We calculate the best-fit line and 95% confidence intervals (shaded regions) using observed values of all covariates, the variance-covariance matrix, and simulation methods. The resulting output is thus the average predicted number of terrorism events across the range of the specific civil liberties component variable.

approximately 2.43 incidents at one 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 may 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. But, the empirical support for this claim is weak given the lack of statistical significance.

Testing Hypothesis 4, we recover the “inverted-U” relationship between civil liberties and terrorism using V-Dem’s Civil Liberties Index (CLI). 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. These results, together, suggest that the “inverted-U” relationship may be driven by the components of V-Dem’s Liberal Democracy Index that capture various elements of civil liberties protections, consistent with the argument.

4.1 Robustness Checks

We conduct a variety of robustness checks to ensure the results are not sensitive to model choice or covariate adjustment. Though gaining widespread use, V-Dem is still a new dataset in the discipline. To validate the V-Dem measures, we replicate established findings in the literature regarding the relationship between aggregate regime type and terrorism using more established data sources (Polity IV), substituting V-Dem’s liberal democracy index (LDI). To ensure our findings are not sensitive to our model specification, we replicate [Gaibullov, Piazza and Sandler \(2017\)](#), using their sample and control variables, substituting our explanatory variables. Next, we allow each component civil liberties dimension 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.

5 Conclusion

This article contributes to debates regarding the relationship between government respect for, or infringement upon, civil liberties and the country's exposure to terrorism. It builds on existing research that has begun to examine the component dimensions of civil liberties by disaggregating the aggregate concept and advancing an argument to unify previous insights into a coherent framework. It therefore helps account for countervailing claims in the literature.

Our descriptive evidence for the diversity in government records across the set of civil liberties dimensions, and the empirical findings for their distinct effects on terrorism exposure, motivate future work to examine the different security consequences of these and other government actions. The article suggests that researchers investigating the use of terrorism, as well as other dimensions of international security, may do well to theorize about the effects of distinct political institutions and government behaviors 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. Further, our empirical findings are consistent with research supporting a non-monotonic relationship between a country's civil liberties protections and its exposure to terrorism, but they also provide a new argument for the empirical pattern grounded in these theoretical mechanisms. Additional research is required to verify theoretical mechanisms. Untested in our country-level analysis, the theory carries implications for the non-state actors' emergence and tactical decisionmaking 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 2018, Polo and Gleditsch 2016).

Our theory and empirical findings carry important policy implications and also help provide clarity with regards to policy prescription perspective. Our findings suggest that policy-makers and aid agencies should first focus on improving a country's record on physical integrity rights ahead of, or at least in conjunction with, strengthening the country's protections of political civil liberties. While protecting political organization, speech, and action may be necessary to achieve robust democratization and security in the long-term, they may increase incidents of terrorism at least in the short term. Protections against state repression reduce terrorism, and may create the conditions necessary for secure liberalization. Though we are not suggesting governments curtail political freedoms, which are essential to a functioning democracy and which, if denied, may result in a host of other undesirable political and security consequences not addressed here. We simply note that policymakers must consider the vulnerabilities created by an open political system in order to effectively allocate resources and effort to mitigate the risks.

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