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Do terrorist attacks polarize politicians? Evidence from the European parliamentary speeches on migration

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Do Terrorist Attacks Polarize Politicians? Evidence from the European Parliamentary Speeches on Migration

By HANA JOMNI AND NIKITA ZAKHAROV *

We study the effect of terrorist attacks on the migration discourse in the European Parliament (EP). First, using an LLM model, we develop an original dataset on sentiments of all parliamentary speeches concerning migration for 2009-2019, building on a novel dataset by Sylvester et al. (2023). Second, following Brodeur (2018), we employ a causal identification strategy based on quasi-natural randomization in the success or failure of terrorist attacks. We find that while a successful terrorist attack does not change the overall migration sentiment, it has heterogeneous effects conditional on the political position of the speaker: left-wing and, to a lesser extent, centrist politicians become more favorable toward migration after successful attacks, while the right-wing politicians become more negative. Politicians of different ideologies adjusting migration-related sentiment in a direction aligned with their pre-existing partisan positions indicate an increasing polarization among policymakers as a direct consequence of terrorism.

JEL codes: D74, F22, F50, K40

Keywords: Terrorist attacks, migration politics, sentiment analysis, European Parliament, polarization.

Word count: 3967

1 Introduction

The influence of terrorist attacks on public attitudes and voting has been well-documented in the literature (for a literature review, see Helbling, M., & Meierrieks, 2022), yet little do we know about their effect on the behavior of politicians despite the direct link to

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policymaking. This paper attempts to fill this gap by proposing a novel approach to studying how politicians react to terrorism,

We study plenary speeches on migration in the European Parliament (EP) since migration was found to be highly susceptible to terrorism. Previous studies established a rise in public anti-migration attitudes (e.g., Böhmelt et al., 2020; Legewie, 2013; Bove et al., 2024) and preferences for anti-migration policies (e.g., Bove et al., 2021; Finseraas et al., 2011; Tripathi, 2022), but terrorism can also have heterogeneous effects conditional on political affiliation: Jungkunz et al. (2019) finds negative attitudes toward Muslims after the 2015 Paris attack only among right-wing students, while Bauer and Schulze (2022) document an increase in pro-migrant attitudes after the 2018 Strasbourg Islamist attack only among left-wing respondents.

Based on the literature, we propose two hypotheses. On the one hand, if terrorism negatively affects public attitudes (Bove et al., 2024), we expect all politicians to frame their speeches on migration-related topics more negatively. On the other hand, politicians are often heavily invested in their beliefs and, therefore, might exhibit motivated reasoning when presented with information incongruent to their priors, resulting in attitude polarization – in other words, politicians would become more extreme in their initial positions. A burgeoning literature on motivated reasoning and attitude polarization (e.g., Little, 2019; Bénabou and Tirole, 2016) finds this biased processing especially prevalent when dealing with sensitive issues.

To test both hypotheses, we first develop an original dataset on sentiments of all parliamentary speeches concerning migration for 2009-2019 based on data from Sylvester et al. (2023) and apply a Large Language Model (LLM) Chat-GPT 4.0 for sentiment detection. Overall, we derive a panel dataset on sentiment in 2866 plenary speeches on migration-related topics by politicians affiliated with either Left, Center, or Right parties (as categorized by Döring and Manow, 2024) from 13 European Union member states for 2009-2019.¹ Further, we match the timing of speeches to the incidents of terrorist attacks from the Global Terrorism Database (GTD). Finally, we employ a causal identification strategy from Brodeur (2018) that

¹ The sample is limited to 13 member states due to omitting countries with no attacks during the period of study and countries with no debates around the attacks. Final sample includes Austria, Belgium, Czechia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Netherlands, Spain, Sweden, UK.

leverages quasi-natural randomization in the success/failure of terrorist attacks (thus comparing successful attacks with failed ones as a counterfactual).

We find that a successful terrorist attack does not affect the aggregate migration sentiment; however, disaggregating by political affiliation shows a substantial increase in polarization across the political spectrum: left-wing politicians become significantly more pro-immigration in their speeches; centrist politicians also improve their sentiment, but to a lesser extent; while right-wing speakers become negative.

This polarization effect of terrorism pushes positions of left and center parties away from median voters who themselves experience the rise in anti-immigration perceptions due to terrorism (Bove et al., 2024; Giavazzi et al., 2024), thus benefiting the right-wing parties. Indeed, a recent study by Sabet et al. (2024) showed that terrorist attacks in Germany substantially increased the vote share for the right-wing, populist party AfD (Alternative für Deutschland). The growing mismatch between the positions of voters and politicians might also explain why terrorism fuels a persistent dissatisfaction with the government, as documented in Amarasinghe (2023).

Our study makes several contributions. First, it advances the literature on the political consequences of terrorism by looking beyond public opinion or voting results – typical outcomes studied in the literature (e.g., Berrebi and Klor, 2008; Bove et al., 2022; Robbins et al., 2013) – into the political attitudes of politicians.² Second, our findings contribute to the literature on the interaction between international terrorism and migration attitudes (e.g., Nussio et al., 2019; Helbling, M., & Meierrieks, 2020) by showing that terrorism reduces cohesion not only among the public (Bauer and Schulze, 2022) but also among the politicians. Finally, by introducing a novel dataset on sentiments of migration-related plenary speeches in the EU parliament, we add to the line of the emerging literature on text-to-data approaches in general (see Grimmer and Stewart, 2013, and Gentzkow et al., 2019, for an overview) and using the algorithmic methods (LLMs) in particular (see Ash and Hansen, 2023, and Korinek, 2023, for an overview).

² To our knowledge, only Indridason (2008) studied politicians' behavior in response to terrorism (he found that political coalitions tend to be more surplus coalitions and less ideologically polarized).

The paper is structured as follows. Section 2 describes the main variables. Section 3 presents the results. Section 4 discusses the potential mechanisms. Section 5 concludes.

2 Data

Sentiments. The European Parliament is the directly elected legislative body of the EU, holding regular plenary sessions. The agenda of the debates is prepared several weeks in advance by the Conference of Presidents (composed of the Parliament's President and political group leaders).

Our dataset is constructed from the collection of the universe of plenary speeches over 2009-2019 composed by Sylvester et al. (2023), which we then processed using a large language model (LLM) of Chat GPT 4.0 for filtering out topics not related to migrations and for evaluating the sentiment of each speech. A growing literature has validated Chat GPT as an accurate and cost-efficient approach to annotating political texts of different lengths and languages: for example, Törnberg (2023) finds that Chat GPT-4 outperforms crowd workers and experts in annotating political Twitter messages.

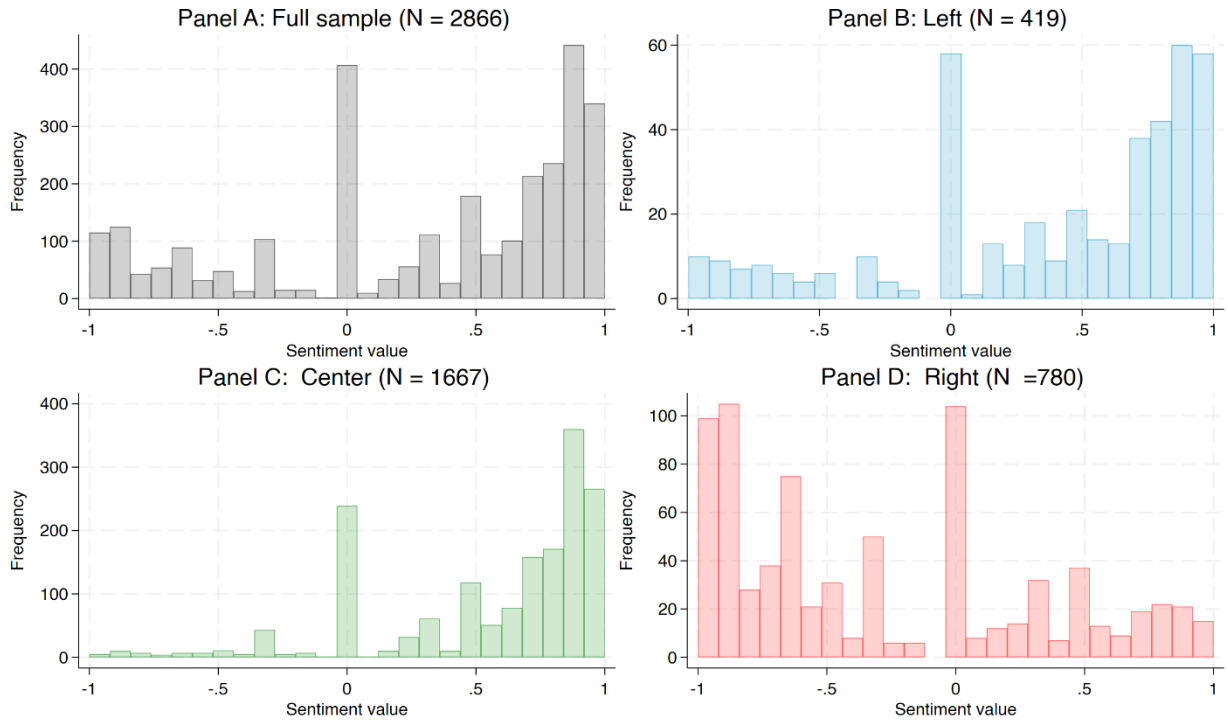
The sentiment is a continuous variable ranging from -1 (highly negative about migration) to 1 (highly positive), and 0 indicates neutral sentiment. We provide the protocol and the prompt for sentiment evaluation in Appendix Section A.³

We classify the speeches by the speakers' position on the political spectrum based on their party affiliation as Left, Center, or Right, using the classification from Döring and Manow (2024).⁴ Figure 1 shows the distribution of the sentiment in speeches for the full sample and each part of the political spectrum separately. Panel A shows a significant variation in the overall sentiment – with a relatively large proportion of speeches being close to extremes, i.e., indicating polarization on the issue. Left-wing (Panel B) and centrist (Panel C) parties are typically more positive about migration, while right-wing party members are generally more negative (Panel D).

³ For an overview of LLMs' capabilities and efficiency see review articles by Ash and Hansen (2023) and Korinek (2023).

⁴ A small number of speeches (n=23 or <1%) of Non-Attached (NA) MEPs who do not belong to any political group are omitted from the analysis.

Figure 1: Distribution of speeches' sentiment (total and by political affiliation)



Terrorism. We employ the Global Terrorism Database (GTD), which includes a list of all terrorist attacks over our period of interest (2009–2019) with details for the attack's date, location, and characteristics. Importantly, for our identification, all attacks are classified into successful and failed attacks (planned and initiated but failed, e.g., a bomb fails to detonate). In line with the literature on the attitudes toward migration and terrorism, we look exclusively at transnational terrorist attacks, i.e. those in which the nationality of the perpetrator group differs from the location of the attack or the nationality of the target(s)/victim(s).

Summary statistics are reported in Appendix, Table A1.

Estimation strategy. Our identification strategy tests the effect of successful terrorist attacks (treatment) relative to failed ones (control) to eliminate endogeneity due to the strategic timing of the attack by the terrorists. We estimate the following difference-in-differences model in a linear regression:

$$Sentiment_{c,t} = \beta_1 Post_{c,t} + \beta_2 Success_{c,t} + \delta_{c,y} + \theta_t + X_{c,t} + \varepsilon_{c,t} \quad (1)$$

, where $Sentiment_{c,t}$ is the continuous variable [-1:1] for the sentiment of a migration-related speech by a politician from country c at calendar date t . The variable $Post_{c,t}$ takes the value 0 in the pre-attack period and 1 after an attack in the targeted country. $Success_{c,t}$ assumes 0 in the pre-attack period for all attacks, 1 if the attack was successful or 0 if the attack failed in the post-attack period. $X_{c,t}$ is a vector of controls that includes attack-type and weapon-type fixed effects, and the number of attacks per month in each member state to account for possible terrorism “fatigue” (Turkoglu and Chadeaux, 2023). $\delta_{c,y}$ and θ_t are country-year and time fixed effects, respectively. We perform a separate estimation with a variation of the time windows around each attack – either 30/60/90/120/150/or 180 days before and after the attack, to explore the effect’s persistence.⁵

The estimation of a heterogeneous effect of terrorism by political position follows the model:

$$Sentiment_{c,t} = \beta_1 Post_{c,t} + \beta_2 Success_{c,t} + \beta_3 Post_{c,t} \times Right + \beta_4 Post_{c,t} \times Left + \beta_5 Success_{c,t} \times Right + \beta_6 Success_{c,t} \times Left + \beta_7 Right + \beta_8 Left + \delta_{c,y} + \theta_t + X_{c,t} + \varepsilon_{c,t} \quad (2)$$

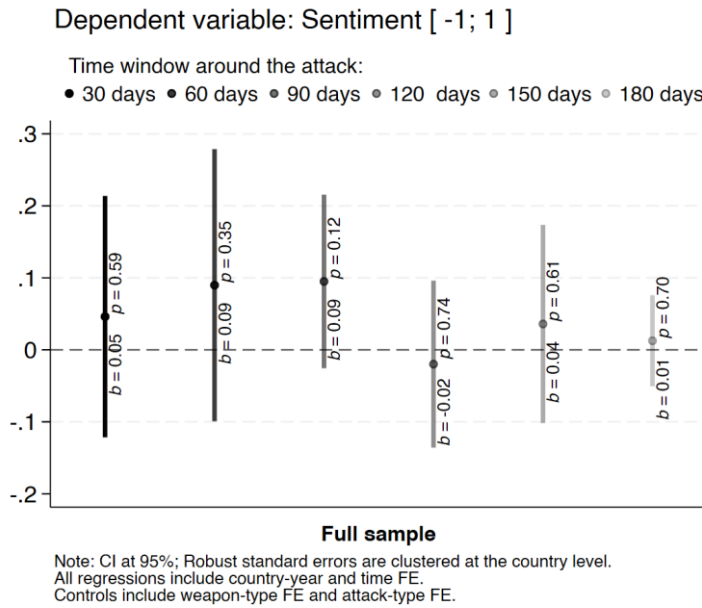
, where $Right$ and $Left$ are binary variables identifying political positions for right-wing or left-wing parties (note: Center-position is a reference category).

3 Results

We present the marginal effects of successful attacks on sentiment for simplicity of interpretation (full regression results are in Appendix). Figure 1 plots the marginal coefficients (β_2 from Equation 1) for estimations with the average sentiment of migration-related speeches. The coefficients for shorter time windows are relatively positive, but statistical significance remains below conventional levels.

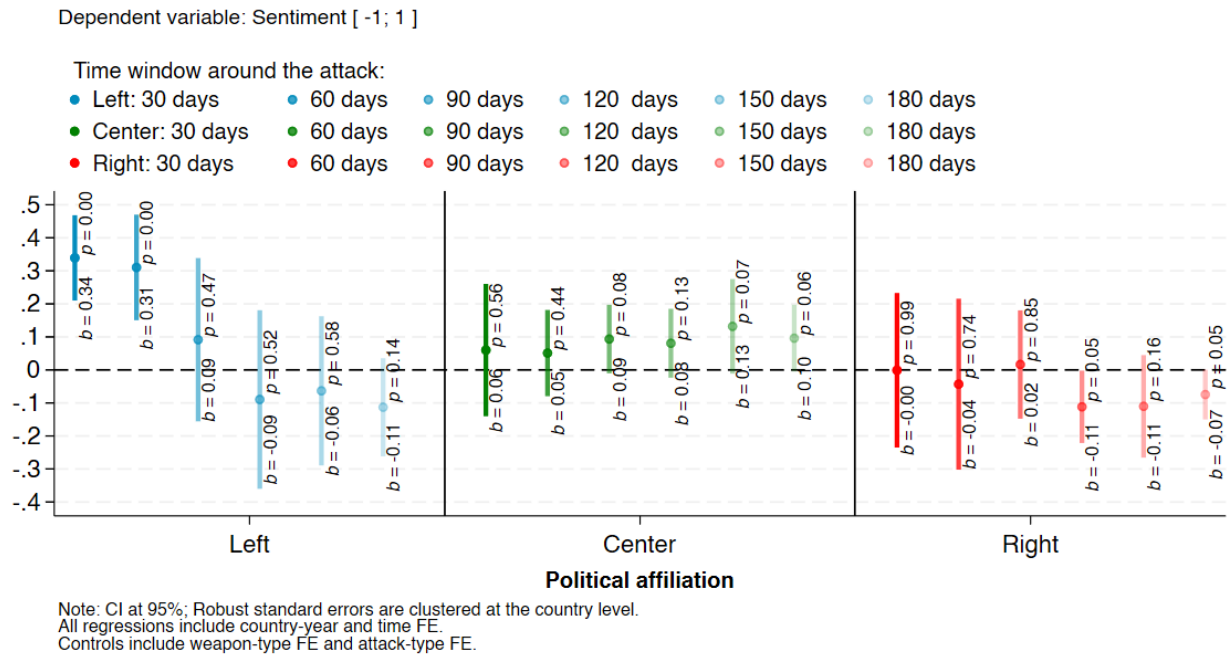
Figure 2: Marginal effects of successful terrorist attack on the average sentiment of migration-related speeches in the EU parliament (see Table A2)

⁵ The maximum length of the window is based on Bove et al. (2024) and Tripathi (2022).



Disaggregated analyses by political affiliation are presented in Figure 3. Again we present the marginal effects for Equation 2 (β_2 for centrist politicians; $[\beta_2+\beta_5]$ for right-wing; $[\beta_2+\beta_6]$ for left-wing). For the left-wing speeches, we observe a substantial increase in positive sentiments in the first 60 days after the successful attack, and it fades away when taking longer time windows. The speeches by centrist politicians exhibit a much smaller positive increase after the attack, yet the statistical significance does not reach conventional levels. Right-wing politicians change the sentiment in their migration-related speeches only when we analyze longer time windows (over 120 days). Overall, we observe politicians reinforcing their initial stance (as seen in Figure 1) on the sensitive issue after a successful terrorist attack, indicating attitude polarization.

Figure 3: Marginal effects by political affiliation (see Table A3)



We address the possibility of a spurious correlation with a placebo robustness check using the next-year terrorist attacks (1-year lead) as the placebo-treatment. The absence of statistically significant effects confirms our results (Appendix, Figure A1).

4 Discussion

Mechanisms. How does terrorism polarize politicians? Based on the existing literature, we can identify two potential mechanisms. First, political psychology literature often views polarization as „an emotional phenomenon“ (Prinz, 2021). Under this framework, attitude polarization should be caused by a terrorist attack because it triggers anger – a primordial emotion that has been closely connected to the biased processing of information that results in attitude polarization, as shown in recent experimental studies by Fridkin and Gershon (2021) and Renström et al. (2023). Second, an explanation alternative to the emotional reaction would imply a change in the rational calculus due to a terrorist attack. We know that politicians must constantly choose between electoral and partisan goals, either by pursuing policies that win the most voters or policies that please the core supporters; however, a recent study by Lindvall et al. (2023) empirically shows that this trade-off is often determined by the information environment of politicians: the more uncertain environment makes politicians adopt more partisan policies. This mechanism may also explain why a terrorist attack, which

increases uncertainty by being a disturbance to the societal and political life of the country, causes politicians to reinforce their initial position on migration in their speeches, resulting in polarization in the European Parliament. Due to the limitation in our data, we are unable to distinguish between the two mechanisms and leave this task for future (potentially experimental) research.

5 Conclusion

We empirically assessed the influence of terrorism on the sentiments in all migration-related plenary speeches in the EU parliament for 2009-2019. We found a polarizing effect after a successful terrorist attack when the sentiment moved in the direction aligned with the prior political position of the speaker. Since the public is well-known to become more anti-immigrant in the aftermath of a terrorist attack (Giavazzi et al., 2024), our result implies that right-wing parties become closer to the median voter, thus explaining better electoral results of the right and far-right parties (Sabet et al., 2024).

The main contribution of this paper is to extend the current research on the political consequences of terrorism, which almost exclusively looked at opinions or voting among the public, by shifting focus to politicians and the changes in their behavior due to the attacks.

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Appendix

Section A: Chat GPT Prompt

```
messages = [  
    {"role": "system", "content": "You are a helpful assistant that  
conducts a sentiment analysis of EU Parliament speeches on  
immigration in the EU."}, {"role": "user", "content": "Rate the  
sentiment of the speech from -1.000 to  
1.000,"}  
    {"-1.000 being highly anti-immigration, 0.000 being neutral  
about immigration and 1.000 being highly pro-immigration."}  
    {"Refugees and Asylum seekers topics are also immigration  
topics."}  
    {"Provide a three decimals rating and do not round up."}  
    {"Instead of replying with a text, please only state a  
number."}  
    {"Return `no` if the speech is not about immigration."}  
    {"Here is the speech: '{}'.format(speech)},
```

(The prompt used to communicate with the ChatGPT API in Python.)

Figure A1: Placebo test using future attacks as a treatment (1 year-lead) (see Table A4)

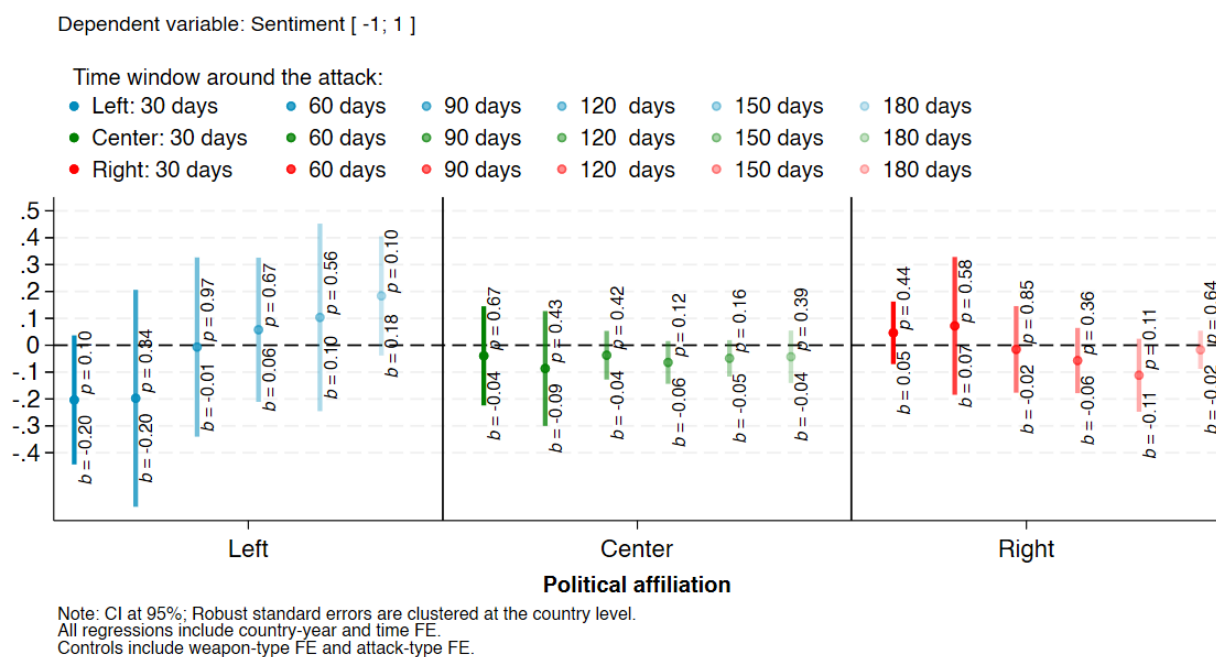


Table A1: Summary statistics

Variable:	Mean	Min	Max	St. Dev.
Sentiment of a migration-related speech	0.245	-1	1	0.643
Success: Dummy for the period after the successful attack	0.511	0	1	0.500
Post: Dummy for the period after any attack	0.752	0	1	0.432
Left-wing dummy	0.132	0	1	0.339
Center dummy	0.559	0	1	0.497
Right-wing dummy	0.309	0	1	0.462
Number of attacks per month in each member state	2.200	0	28	4.972
Type of attack: Bombing	0.007	0	1	0.083
Type of attack: Facility/Infrastructure	0.016	0	1	0.125
Weapon type: Explosives	0.028	0	1	0.166
Weapon type: Incendiary	0.023	0	1	0.149
Weapon type: Other/Unknown	0.002	0	1	0.044
Observations	2023			

Table A2: Full regression results for Figure 2

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Dependent variable:	Sentiment					
Time window:	30 days	60 days	90 days	120 days	150 days	180 days

Success	0.046 (0.086)	0.090 (0.096)	0.095 (0.062)	-0.020 (0.059)	0.036 (0.070)	0.013 (0.032)
Post	-0.166* (0.064)	-0.117 (0.076)	-0.160** (0.050)	-0.049 (0.065)	-0.077 (0.064)	-0.066 (0.053)
Country-year FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Time FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Controls	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
N	955	1302	1510	1765	1905	2023
R2	0.24	0.24	0.23	0.22	0.22	0.22

Note: OLS regression coefficients. Robust SE are clustered at the country level. All regressions include country-year and time-fixed effects and controls (fixed effects for the type of attack and weapon used and the number of attacks per month in each member state).

Table A3: Full regression results for Figure 3

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Dependent variable:	Sentiment					
Time window:	30 days	60 days	90 days	120 days	150 days	180 days
Success x Left	0.279* (0.125)	0.259** (0.077)	-0.002 (0.149)	-0.170 (0.155)	-0.195 (0.151)	-0.209* (0.089)

Success	0.060 (0.102)	0.051 (0.067)	0.093 (0.053)	0.081 (0.053)	0.132 (0.073)	0.096 (0.052)
Success x Right	-0.061 (0.140)	-0.094 (0.137)	-0.077 (0.106)	-0.193 (0.091)	-0.242* (0.096)	-0.171* (0.077)
Post x Left	-0.089 (0.109)	-0.262* (0.086)	0.010 (0.133)	0.149 (0.157)	0.119 (0.154)	0.053 (0.073)
Post	-0.248 (0.114)	-0.062 (0.075)	-0.159** (0.052)	-0.086 (0.046)	-0.101 (0.051)	-0.050 (0.032)
Post x Right	0.191 (0.150)	0.038 (0.099)	0.128 (0.098)	0.154 (0.091)	0.144 (0.071)	-0.020 (0.051)
Left	-0.249** (0.072)	-0.11 (0.097)	-0.148* (0.063)	-0.14 (0.068)	-0.1 (0.076)	-0.08 (0.074)
Right	-0.994*** (0.073)	-0.806*** (0.046)	-0.900*** (0.086)	-0.851*** (0.078)	-0.808*** (0.055)	-0.747*** (0.049)
Country-year FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Time FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Controls	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
N	955	1302	1509	1764	1904	2022
R2	0.56	0.52	0.51	0.51	0.51	0.50

Note: OLS regression coefficients. Robust SE are clustered at the country level. All regressions include country-year and time-fixed effects and controls (fixed effects for the type of attack and weapon used and the number of attacks per month in each member state).

Table A4: Full regression results for Figure A1 (placebo)

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Dependent variable:	Sentiment					
Time window:	30 days	60 days	90 days	120 days	150 days	180 days
Success (1-year lead) x Left	-0.164 (0.094)	-0.111 (0.150)	0.030 (0.156)	0.122 (0.148)	0.152 (0.175)	0.227 (0.123)

Success (1-year lead)	-0.039 (0.094)	-0.087 (0.109)	-0.037 (0.046)	-0.064 (0.041)	-0.049 (0.035)	-0.043 (0.050)
Success (1-year lead) x Right	0.086 (0.069)	0.159 (0.168)	0.022 (0.123)	0.007 (0.086)	-0.063 (0.087)	0.026 (0.063)
Post (1-year lead) x Left	0.208 (0.105)	0.155 (0.170)	0.127 (0.163)	-0.006 (0.161)	-0.041 (0.172)	-0.108 (0.136)
Post (1-year lead) x Left	0.050 (0.083)	0.095 (0.084)	0.053 (0.044)	0.049 (0.055)	0.019 (0.045)	0.027 (0.049)
Post (1-year lead) x Right	-0.044 (0.049)	-0.136 (0.118)	0.050 (0.096)	0.062 (0.107)	0.109 (0.109)	0.027 (0.068)
Left	-0.173* (0.077)	-0.199** (0.049)	-0.296*** (0.048)	-0.273*** (0.049)	-0.277*** (0.046)	-0.288*** (0.055)
Right	-0.835*** (0.063)	-0.833*** (0.111)	-0.907*** (0.131)	-0.904*** (0.131)	-0.879*** (0.129)	-0.890*** (0.129)
Country-year FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Time FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Controls	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
N	904	1160	1393	1615	1763	1845
R2	0.54	0.53	0.52	0.52	0.50	0.50

Note: OLS regression coefficients. Robust SE are clustered at the country level. All regressions include country-year and time-fixed effects and controls (fixed effects for the type of attack and weapon used and the number of attacks per month in each member state).