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Comparing the Politics of Fear: The Role of Terrorism News in Election Campaigns in Russia, the United States and Britain¹

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Abstract

How has the threat of terrorism been portrayed in recent election campaigns? Looking at detailed evidence from nightly news programmes in the Russian Federation, the United Kingdom and the United States shows various similarities, but also important divergences in the political salience of 'terrorism' in the context of the contemporary 'war on terror' in which the governments of all three countries are involved. The evidence suggests that messages about terrorism play an emotive and important role in American and Russian elections. The British media and audience, however, appear to remain more rational and less emotional in discussions about terrorism during a national election. The 'fear factor' seems to be a tempting card to play, offering political leaders means of entrenching their positions.

Keywords: campaign rhetoric, election campaigning, electioneering, fear of terrorism, terrorism in the media, war on terror

Introduction

The spectre of fear can warp, and even come to define, the political agenda of a country. One aspect of the role of fear in politics becomes apparent in the way politicians deploy fear in election campaigns. Various types of fear, ranging from the shock of terrorist attack to nagging anxiety about nuclear war, can serve as useful campaign tools. This article looks specifically at the role of the fear of terrorism in election campaigns in Russia, the United States and Britain. At issue is an attempt to pinpoint whether there is a general way in which terrorism is framed by the news and responded to by the voters – or do countries have a common dialogue between ruler and ruled about terrorism during elections? How does the nightly news talk about terrorism during elections in different countries? How do the citizens of various countries react to the framing of terrorist threat in news during national election campaigns? What lessons could newsmakers learn from the comparison of the coverage of terrorism and the reaction of citizens to this news? This article analyses election news in the 2003/4 election cycle in Russia, the 2004 United States presidential election and the 2005 British parliamentary elections. In addition, the article uses focus groups in the three countries to examine the reactions of citizens to this coverage. The central questions are how the major television channels framed the terrorist threat, how these stories were woven into election coverage, and how voters reacted to this reporting.



Evidence from the study suggests that the United States and Russia have a more common experience of the role of terrorism in campaigns. The British media and audience, however, appear to remain more rational and less emotional in discussions about terrorism during a national election.

There have been some useful studies that have compared media in different countries, particularly in times of elections, which offer important comparative analysis and influenced this study.² At issue is whether 'campaign language' about terrorism is similar across systems, suggesting dialogue about terrorism with voters has a similar resonance across country boundaries. On the other hand, the exploration of the role of terrorism in election campaigns could suggest that talking about terrorism to the voters is more bounded by national issues, political institutions and media structures than by any sort of global trend. Of particular interest in this study is whether the electoral dialogue about terrorism is more comparable in the two democracies under scrutiny – or whether the lone remaining superpower of the US and the former superpower of Russia have more in common in this regard. In other words, this project is seeking the right questions to ask of an audience when considering how they evaluate and use messages about terrorism and international security in elections. This research is designed to consider, in particular, how to break the traditional notion of the media as what Margaret Thatcher famously called the 'oxygen of publicity' for terrorists. At the same time, there is the suspicion that hard-line politicians find fanning the terrorist threat particularly helpful for gaining or retaining power, while journalists tend to sensationalise the threat in attempts to attract the attention of citizens and consumers.

Hewitt is one of the few authors to highlight the unevenness in coverage of terrorist groups by country. For example, the German media have 'exaggerated the dangers of terrorism and supported government countermeasures wholeheartedly'.³ In Italy, coverage of terrorism changed significantly in the 1970s, as a tolerance for the members of Red Brigade as like modern 'Robin Hoods' gave way to 'virtually unanimous' condemnation of terrorism in the wake of escalating violence.⁴ Hewitt cites bias and unfairness in coverage of terrorists in democratic countries, particularly by the British media in Northern Ireland. He saw the tendency in North America and Britain for the media to ignore the social causes and goals of terrorism.⁵ This is a finding echoed by others.⁶ Hewitt also discovered that 'terrorist' was not necessarily a negative term for all audiences, being positive for Palestinians in reference to the PLO. Most of the research cited by Hewitt suggests that the level of support respondents in various countries felt for terrorists was much more closely linked to their own proximity to terrorist attacks than to media coverage of terrorism. Although Hewitt wrote this chapter almost a decade before 9/11 and the spate of terrorist attacks in Russia, the point he makes is very salient to the present situation: the public respond more intensely and more emotively when terrorism ceases to be abstract and becomes concrete.

If the traditional view of the relationship between media and terrorism has been the dangerously symbiotic relationship of the two, this study looks at how the public reaction to terrorism is reflected in voting behaviour.⁷ This thrusts the study into a

large and complex literature regarding the relative balance among party identification, context, the influence of political advertising, the reach of campaign news and other factors. Terrorist threat can pervade this model at every level – for example, it can reinforce or challenge partisan identification if people feel particularly threatened or angry. In addition, the spectre of terrorism will introduce issues and topics into elections, particularly in places such as the United States and Russia where terrorism is a relatively new phenomenon for the public (as opposed to the United Kingdom). Candidates and parties may choose to use a ‘fear factor’ in their advertising or messages or they may appeal to feelings of nationalism. Candidates and parties may choose to moot particular policies, such as more policing of immigrants or laws limiting hate speech. The voters themselves may seek different messages or react in unexpected ways in the wake of a terrorist attack.

The factor of terrorism in election campaigns has become depressingly relevant in the past decade. The most obvious link between a terrorist attack and elections in recent history was in March 2004, with the deadly train attack in Madrid by Islamic terrorists just three days before Spain’s parliamentary elections.⁸ Before the tragedy, it had been assumed that the incumbent centre-right party (which initially blamed Basque separatists for the attacks) would consolidate its predominant position. However, the Socialist Party had a surprise victory. In a post-election survey reported in *El País* on 4 April 2004, only about 7 per cent of the respondents felt that the attacks had not affected the Spanish electoral outcome.⁹ The effect of terrorism can be considered at every level in the electoral process, from the messages generated by political parties, to the coverage of issues relating to terrorism on the nightly news during the campaign, to how much voters base their decision on concerns about terrorism. The notion of partisan identification generated by Campbell et al.¹⁰ and others (which suggests a relatively weak influence of the media on election results) is still the dominant paradigm in the West. Yet, as the Spanish elections show, terrorism can have a demonstrable effect on elections and this can hold true even if the terrorist act is relatively far removed from election day. Overall, public awareness of terrorism had changed markedly before the elections under study for this article. This was due to 9/11 in the United States and the horrifying series of terrorist attacks in Russia, including the siege of a theatre in Moscow in October 2002 that left more than 170 people dead, and the bombing of the Moscow metro in early 2004.¹¹ There has been less change in public perception in Britain, where terrorism related to Northern Ireland has been part of the political landscape for decades and the July 2005 London bombings came two months after the 2005 British parliamentary elections.

The study used a parallel methodology to examine the framing of terrorist threat in election campaigns in Russia, the United States and the United Kingdom from 2003 to 2005. Researchers coded the nightly news during the election campaigns on major television channels in the three countries. In Russia, news from the state-run First Channel (Channel 1) and commercial NTV (Channel 4) were collected on weekdays for the month-long campaigns before the December 2003 parliamentary elections and the March 2004 presidential election. In the United States, researchers collected the nightly news on the commercial stations of ABC, CBS, NBC, Fox and

CNN from Labor Day 2004 (6 September) to the presidential election on 2 November. In Britain, the project collected the main nightly news on the BBC (public) and ITV (commercial) stations from 7 April to the eve of the parliamentary elections on 4 May.¹² The author and collaborators used a coding frame, listing approximately 100 different categories to label stories in the nightly news. Each news segment was timed and labelled with one or more codes, relating to elections, the economy, terrorism, the military, social issues, entertainment, etc. In addition, time devoted to newsmakers and political parties was tracked. We were then able to define how much of a particular news programme was devoted to specific topics, newsmakers or political parties. This is useful not only for looking at how programmes handle the daily news, but it is particularly helpful for comparing coverage across different channels. In addition, coders recorded a qualitative description of each segment.¹³ This analysis, used in assessing Russian election coverage since 1995, generates the percentage of stories that mention specific issues. In all of the countries a team of researchers worked on the coding, and the inter-coder reliability achieved was at least 90 per cent.¹⁴

The project held focus groups to discuss the impact of terrorism and security issues on vote choice in the three countries under study. In Russia, there were ten focus groups, with eight respondents each, held in Moscow and Ulyanovsk in March and April 2004. Ten US focus groups with an average of 11 participants each were held in December 2005 in Florida, near St Louis and in the Washington DC area. In Russia and the United States, the groups were divided by age (including three groups with college students in the US). In Britain, 17 focus groups were held in the Glasgow area and London in the summer after the May 2005 parliamentary elections. The groups were divided by occupation/class and there was one group for Muslims only. The British groups had an average of seven participants. All of the focus groups were moderated by natives of that country. In the case of both the content analysis and the focus groups, it must be acknowledged that the project is looking at a relatively narrow slice of the entire election/terrorism news phenomenon. By the same token, even a modest amount of material and comments by a few hundred people do suggest some interesting dynamics at play, particularly in the United States and Russia.

The framing of terrorist threat in Russian elections, 2003–4

Russia's media have become increasingly authoritarian and dominated by the Kremlin, particularly since Vladimir Putin's first election as president in 2000.¹⁵ As such, it is not surprising that the state-run First Channel (Channel 1) provides a biased version of the news that does not question Russia's security policy, particularly the ongoing war in Chechnya. Nor does commercial television (in particular NTV on Channel 4) balance this view effectively.¹⁶ The *Vremya* news programme on Channel 1 is particularly biased during elections, devoting inordinately large coverage to those already in power and friendly to the Kremlin's interests. Those who challenge the Kremlin are either ignored or maligned with unfair reporting, rumour and innuendo.¹⁷ On the other hand, commercial NTV has tended to champion its own political interests and virtually ignored most political parties in its election coverage.¹⁸

The central themes on Channel 1's *Vremya* during the 2003 parliamentary elections could be described as the efficacy of President Putin; the prominence of top leaders of the pro-government United Russia party and their close political relationship with the president; how the central government fixes problems in the region; and Russia's role in the international sphere. NTV's *Sevodnya* presented somewhat more of the Russian political spectrum and less of Putin, yet the Russian president was still the dominant personality on the newscast. While there was relatively little news on Chechen warfare on *Vremya*, *Sevodnya* still carried some news from the front, although it was only a shadow of the more aggressive war coverage during the 1995 parliamentary campaign on NTV. The most apparent difference was in the choice of which stories to run and how close to the top of the newscast the items appeared. For the presidential election, there was little news to cover as there were no serious opponents to Putin – and the incumbent president did not use either free or paid advertising.¹⁹ Rather, *Vremya* served as a virtual infomercial for Putin.

In looking at the Russian parliamentary campaign in more depth, it is clear that there was little discussion of issues, policies or even ideology.²⁰ Campaign characteristics were mentioned in 16 per cent of *Vremya*'s stories, compared with 13 per cent for *Sevodnya*. Meanwhile, *Sevodnya* had a heavier emphasis on crime. In addition, *Vremya* had twice as much coverage of the role of the president during the parliamentary campaign. There was more coverage of Chechnya on *Sevodnya*. The commercial news show paid little attention to political parties, with just six mentions of parties over the entire course of the campaign, compared with 38 mentions on *Vremya*. As in earlier years, political parties received a negligible amount of coverage in the broadcast media and there was virtually no discussion of policy even in the relatively more expansive election coverage on state-run Channel 1.²¹

Terrorism was one of the leading topics on Russian parliamentary campaign news, not surprising given both the public interest in the problem in general and the terrorist attack on a train in southern Russia that left more than 40 people dead just two days before the 2003 elections. Major terrorist attacks in Russia also included the seizure of hostages at a Moscow theatre in late 2002 that left at least 170 dead and the deadly Moscow metro bombings in early 2004; and later, beyond the time frame of the research, the Beslan massacre. Altogether, 9 per cent of the Russian campaign news was devoted to terrorism during the parliamentary campaign. About half of the items (28) on terrorism related to Chechnya and the rest (26) were on other terrorism topics. *Sevodnya* focused more heavily on terrorism as it related to Chechnya, perhaps not surprising in that NTV offered more coverage of the war and Chechen affairs in general. On the other hand, *Vremya* had more coverage (15 items compared with 11 on *Sevodnya*) of terrorism that was not related to Chechnya.

There appeared to be little linkage in the minds of the Russian audience between elections (dull/routine) and terrorism (upsetting/compelling). Yet, the respondents in the focus groups in 2004 did find 'strong' leadership important and their definition of strength was linked to the handling of the Chechen situation and terrorism in general. In this way, although there did not appear to be a primary connection, there was a very important electoral message being sent by Putin and pro-Putin parties

in terms of a 'hard line' on Chechnya and terrorists. This stymied any motivation for discussing the Chechen conflict and its consequences in a more meaningful or conciliatory way. Putin's hard stand on terrorism was relevant here, in that many of the participants perceived Putin as a strong, decisive leader, a man they said had promised to 'flush the Chechen terrorists down the toilet'. Many participants made a link between finding Putin 'strong' and 'effective' and feeling that he could deal with Russia's myriad problems, particularly those related to terrorism. In this way, terrorism affected the way in which these respondents analysed the political situation and voted in Russia. The focus-group respondents also felt that the lack of control under democratic regimes – as opposed to the more stringent Russian policy – was responsible for terrorism in both Chechnya and elsewhere. They were frustrated by the apparent inability of the state to control or stop terrorism (either Chechen-related or in the international sphere). They equated this to a lack of state effectiveness in other areas, such as providing employment, pensions or health care. Several times the policies of Soviet dictator Josef Stalin were praised as particularly effective. Worries over security clearly won out over concerns for tolerance. There was a general sense of despair over how to end terrorism, especially as it was so difficult to uncover the real roots of the problem in a multilateral world.

The framing of terrorist threat in the US 2004 presidential election

The despair found in the Russian focus groups was shared by many Americans. In contrast to Russia, terrorism and international security were at the heart of the US 2004 presidential election. Ironically, although the US electorate has been relatively safe from terrorist attacks since 9/11, there is evidence that the American psyche and concern about personal security in terms of terrorism have changed fundamentally. Americans continued to be concerned with a personal threat from terrorists throughout the 2004 campaign. As 2004 was the first presidential election in the wake of 9/11 and two major US-led invasions, one would expect a relatively large amount of discussion about terrorism during the campaign. Despite the many differences in the US media system from Russia (i.e. a liberal tradition of freedom of speech, a well-developed civil society and Fourth Estate that can serve as a government watchdog), what is striking about the role of terrorism in election campaigns in the United States and Russia are the similarities rather than the differences.

In an examination of a sample of the news recorded in the 2004 US election campaign (ABC's *World News Tonight with Peter Jennings*, CBS's *Evening News with Dan Rather*, and NBC's *The Nightly News with Tom Brokaw*), 43 per cent of the news stories were connected to the election. At the same time, terrorism was a frequent buzzword in 22 per cent of these election stories. Terrorism was the second most-talked-about issue (the Iraq War was first). Moreover, terrorism was often mentioned in connection with the war in Iraq. At the same time, many voters reported that the Iraq War and terrorism were key factors affecting their candidate preference.²² Despite the frequent appearance of terrorism in news stories related to the election, this

news on ABC, CBS and NBC failed to provide viewers with substantial information about the candidates' platforms for dealing with the issue. Although 67 per cent of the stories referred to the stands on the terrorist issue by President George W. Bush and Democratic contender John Kerry, such references were vague rather than about specific policy proposals. In the sample, Bush talked about terrorism *more*, but both candidates tended to talk about it *in the same way*. None of the sampled stories overtly connected terrorism with the 9/11 attacks (although this would have been a natural association for the viewers).

Both Bush and Kerry often commented on terrorism, typically attacking the other's perceived or actual ability to deal with the issue. About half of the news stories in the sample that mentioned terrorism included negative statements from both Bush and Kerry. In several cases, Bush criticised his opponent for being too 'soft' and for the lack of a coherent plan for the 'war on terror': 'John Kerry's the wrong man for the wrong job at the wrong time.'²³ The President's attack was usually followed by a promise by Kerry that he 'will not waver' and 'will hunt down the terrorists wherever they are'. Neither candidate engaged in a discussion of the concrete strategies or methods they planned to use to enhance security. Given that terrorist attacks against Americans dropped in the wake of 9/11, this is not surprising. It was not so much the international security situation and the risk of terrorism itself that had changed (despite some legitimate concerns with copycat attacks or a new allure of global terrorist networks to those disaffected with American foreign policy) as the attitude, awareness and fear on the part of the citizens. Hence, leaders had the choice of either exploiting that fear and claiming they could make the nation 'secure' or they could attempt to reassure citizens that there was no need for a radical shift in internal or external security policy. Both Kerry and Bush chose the first path. One could argue that they were following the advice of their political consultants and that Americans retained a high, if somewhat irrational, fear of terrorist attack. The rhetoric of the campaign, however, only served to underline that irrational fear, making the chance for a reasonable dialogue and debate about American's most useful role in the global sphere increasingly unlikely. Fear-mongering and posturing came to dominate over rational discussion and political debate. In this sense, the American elections came to resemble the Russian elections, even though objectively US citizens had both much less to fear from internal security threats and a much more liberal society.

The focus-group participants did not appear to make particularly rational assessments of the terrorism policy of either Bush or Kerry. This is not surprising, since as noted above neither candidate was putting forth a particularly specific, long-term plan. Bush, of course, was being judged on his actions in the wake of 9/11, including the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq. It was clear that emotions rather than policy were playing a role in the choice of president – particularly for those who were not committed Republicans or Democrats. That emotion was primarily fear and, given the choice between Bush and Kerry, most found Bush more reassuring on that emotional level. While most focus-group participants were quick to identify Kerry as the candidate who appeared more intelligent (particularly in the debates), there was an overwhelming consensus that Bush was 'stronger'. It is not surprising that

Republicans and Bush supporters would feel this way, particularly about an incumbent president during a major terrorist attack and two wars. What was surprising, however, was that those who called themselves Kerry supporters often voiced this opinion, even when they clearly disagreed about the decision of the Bush administration to invade Iraq in 2003. When voters were undecided, they often cited the problems of Kerry's 'weakness' and the appeal of Bush's 'strength' as determinants in their choice. It is particularly interesting in that the general climate of fear, which the focus-group participants discussed and worried over to a large extent, was a new part of the political landscape for younger Americans who could barely remember the Cold War.²⁴

Much like their Russian counterparts, the Americans in the focus groups were not too impressed with the campaign coverage in general. They could barely recall any of the paid political advertising, despite the hundreds of millions of dollars spent on publicising the candidates. There was some frustration that the media tended to focus on events relating to terrorism rather than the causes of terrorism, both during the campaign and at other times. They heard frequent references to terrorism, but little that was in-depth or analytical. As a result, many respondents felt that there was little meaningful discussion about terrorism and there was criticism that the media only seemed to 'do a very good job of explaining all the ways that we're not safe'.²⁵ Overall, there was a feeling of helplessness, dread and sometimes fear that the world was simply a more dangerous place for Americans and that there was little that could be done about it. Like the Russians, they felt disempowered to make meaningful change. Unsurprisingly, however, the American respondents were less resigned to the trade-off between security and political choice than the Russian respondents. It is important to note, however, that this trade-off could be considered as the same in type, if not in magnitude, in both the US and Russian electoral arenas. Although most respondents denied a direct link between anger over 9/11 and their vote three years later, they would admit to the more diffuse feelings of the importance of 'strength' and hence a preference for Bush. This is a far cry from the 'strong hands' in preference to democracy that is more frequently cited by Russian voters and in opinion polls in the former Communist state, yet there are echoes of this within the 2004 US focus groups as well.

The framing of terrorist threat in the 2005 British parliamentary elections

Evidence from the 2005 British parliamentary elections suggests that there can be a more rational discussion and debate about terrorism during a campaign. Granted, much of this evidence is somewhat negative in that there was little discussion of terrorism during the British elections. The most prominent issue relating to international security was Prime Minister Tony Blair's decision to cooperate closely with the Americans in the second invasion of Iraq despite a dearth of British public support for the war. Unsurprisingly, the Labour Party did not highlight this issue in

the campaign, focusing instead on the key Labour strength of a strong economy. The other primary factor in the campaign was a lack of realistic competition (a parallel to the Russian case, although not for the lack of a strong political party system). The Conservatives had been unable to find a strong leader or a coherent message since Labour's victory in 1997. While the Liberal Democrats had a promising start with a popular anti-war message, they were hampered by their status as the minority party in Britain, leaving tactical voters uninterested in wasting a vote on a party that could not realistically form a government.

Much like the Russians, findings from the focus groups suggest British voters approached the campaign with a degree of reserve and disinterest. While there was anger at Blair's decision to go to war on shaky evidence for weapons of mass destruction, Labour still proved the most popular party with the voters. The Conservatives pursued a far more negative campaign. They were unable to highlight protest against the war – since the party had supported it at least to the same degree as Labour – but their campaign focused at times on concerns about immigration and the economy. While their complaints about immigration policy were caged in terms of jobs for the British, there was an underlying message of 'British vs. foreigners'. This was embodied in the party slogan 'Are You Thinking What We're Thinking?', ostensibly calling for support for such things as an enhanced police force and more controlled immigration. The British campaign certainly proves that banal slogans are not limited to any particular country. Although many found the campaign slogan of United Russia ('Together with the President!') worryingly free of ideological content, Labour chose the ambiguous, yet upbeat, 'Forward, Not Back'.²⁶

It is in the news coverage of the campaign that Britain remains distinct. A preliminary review of the main nightly news on the BBC and commercial ITV in the month-long campaign showed that public television, in particular, was very careful to give time to political parties in segments roughly equal to their success in the last electoral round. In a particularly distinctive feature of British news, both public and commercial television used extensive graphics and studio discussions to discuss policies suggested by political parties. Political leaders and supporters were given opportunities to speak directly for themselves and to respond to allegations during the campaign. Some aspects of campaign 'Americanisation'²⁷ with a greater focus on media messages over policy statements were evident as viewers were treated to the usual scenes of rallies, walkabouts, school visits, campaign bus tours and a discussion of billboard ads. Britain does not allow paid political advertising on television; hence, the campaign tends to have a quieter and more dignified air than US or Russian campaigns. Parties are given free time instead.²⁸

There was ample coverage given to the 2005 campaign on two flagship British news programmes (making it perhaps unsurprising that some British focus-group participants complained of weariness with the campaign). Out of 446 news segments, the campaign was mentioned in 216 of them (48 per cent of the news items) for a total of 10 hours and 23 minutes of items with election coverage aired from 7 April to 4 May.²⁹ This is comparable to the percentage of news coverage found in the US. Unlike the presence of terrorism items in almost a quarter of the US election news

segments, terrorism was only mentioned in about 10 per cent of all British news segments in the sample (43 out of 445, with 28 on the BBC and 15 on ITV). On the BBC, nine of these segments were considered election news, while on ITV only six segments that mentioned terrorism were also about the elections. Thus, the presence of terrorism issues in the election news in Britain was minimal.

The respondents in 17 focus groups held after the 2005 British elections found little of interest in the election campaign. Much like the Americans, they had a hard time remembering *any* political marketing. Unlike in the US, there was little choice in the election, as it was unlikely that the Conservatives or the Liberal Democrats could unseat Labour. In this sense, British voters were in a similar position to the Russians, with no realistic political alternatives to the current administration. The British focus-group participants saw no particular connection between their vote and terrorism. Terrorism, after all, has been part of the domestic political sphere in Britain for decades. There was anger on the part of many Labour voters about the involvement in the war and some people reported switching their votes because of disaffection with Blair. Given their experience with terrorism (although different from international Islamic terrorism), the British focus-group participants were dubious about the efficacy of a show of 'strength' in eliminating terrorism. They showed sympathy for the American victims of 9/11, but not for the subsequent US invasions. Interestingly, this attitude among the respondents did not noticeably harden after the 7 July 2005 bombings in London (half the focus groups were held after the attacks). This could be related to the restraint in a 'nationalistic' response on the part of the BBC and other British broadcast media (when compared with US coverage of terrorism, for example).³⁰ On the other hand, it could be related to the fact that most British citizens have been aware of the problems and relative risk of domestic terrorist attacks for decades longer than their US or Russian counterparts. In other words, it no longer had the same resonance for the voters.

Conclusions

The evidence above suggests that terrorism played a varying role in campaigns in recent elections in three countries. Politicians chose to frame things differently – a show of 'strength' was important in the US and Russia, while this was not part of the central campaign rhetoric in Britain. Television news covered the issues differently in the three countries. Terrorism was visible in the campaign news in Russia and the United States, but there was very little in-depth discussion of the issues. In Russia, there was not very much to discuss, as Putin and the main pro-Kremlin party dominated the political sphere and realistic alternatives were essentially absent. In the United States, the economy and the continuing crisis in health care should have been meaningful campaign issues. These problems were covered to a degree, but international security and terrorism were not discussed on the same rational level of comparing and contrasting policy. Terrorism simply did not play a role in the British 2005 elections. Hence, one finds three countries that are involved in the 'war on terror' to varying degrees, but it is relevant in only two of the three countries'

national elections. In addition, terrorism plays a role in an emotional, primal way in the United States and Russia rather than as part of a policy discussion.

Could this suggest a sort of 'fear factor' model, in which the political and media systems of some countries lend themselves to an exploitation of concerns about international and domestic security? This would certainly fit into the history of both the United States and Russia, as during the Cold War leaders of both countries used fear of the other to bolster domestic power. Perhaps the answer lies more within this history: that countries that wish to project themselves as major players in the international sphere need to maintain a strong 'back story' of friends and enemies. There is no doubt that both the United States and the Russian Federation have groups that wish to do them violence (although only Russia is engaged in an actual civil war). However, it would appear that this exaggeration of international fear and threat is a very useful tool for leaders to seek or maintain power. It also makes it possible for leaders to limit civil rights, even within democratic societies, through vehicles such as the US Patriot Act. Yet Britain does not currently appear to conform to this model. Do superpowers or ex-superpowers have a particular media dynamic involving patriotism, xenophobia and nationalism? The cases of Russia and the United States would suggest this dynamic is relevant – and would also imply that these media systems and electorates have far more in common than one would expect.

Like Russian voters, it would appear that US voters often acted more as comrades than citizens, motivated by fear and helplessness rather than by a sense of political participation and efficacy. British voters and viewers did not appear to do this. This should motivate us to ask why the British dynamic is so different. One cannot say that terrorism in general is not salient to the British political sphere. Terrorist groups related to Northern Ireland have been a very visible part of the culture and there has been a lively debate about British security measures, such as mandatory identity cards. What is different, however, is the television coverage of global terrorism and Britain's perceived role in the 'war on terror'. It is clear from the focus groups that the British public do not perceive Britain as having a central role in this 'war'. On the other hand, American and Russian citizens seem to link their nation's 'strength' with their own personal security. It does not make much rational sense – which Americans will occasionally comment upon – but the feeling appears to be strong enough to make a significant difference in elections. At issue is the role of television news, especially during campaigns, in this dynamic. It must be said that neither Russian nor US television networks offered a rational review of realistic options for improving international or domestic security. Leaders were not providing particularly useful or realistic statements. However, it should be the role of the media to initiate discussion rather than parrot the press statements of leaders. While this might be difficult in Russia in the current climate, there is no excuse for US journalists to abandon an analytical or watchdog role. It begs the question of the impact of the lack of a real public television sphere in either society. How much can television lead a rational debate – or how much does it merely follow the emotional needs of an audience or the demands of the leaders? In this case, it can transform an election from a democratising institution into an exercise that translates fear into power.

Notes

- 1 I acknowledge research support from the ESRC under projects RES 223-25-0028 and RES 228-25-0048.
- 2 Including S. Bowler, D. Broughton, T. Donovan and J. Snipp, 'The Informed Electorate? Voter Responsiveness to Campaigns in Britain and Germany', in S. Bowler and D. M. Farrell (eds), *Electoral Strategies and Political Marketing* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1992); Lynda Lee Kaid and Christina Holtz-Bacha (eds), *Political Advertising in Western Democracies: Parties and Candidates on Television* (London: Sage, 1995); P. Norris, *A Virtuous Circle: Political Communication in Postindustrial Societies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); H. A. Semetko, J. G. Blumer, M. Gurevitch and D. Weaver, *The Formation of Campaign Agendas: A Comparative Analysis of Party and Media Roles in Recent American and British Elections* (Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1991).
- 3 Christopher Hewitt, 'Public's Perspective', in David L. Paletz and Alex P. Schmid (eds), *Terrorism and the Media* (London: Sage, 1992), p. 174.
- 4 Hewitt, 'Public's Perspective', pp. 174–5.
- 5 Hewitt, 'Public's Perspective', p. 177.
- 6 Greg Philo and Mike Berry, *Bad News From Israel* (London: Pluto Press, 2005).
- 7 Paul Wilkinson, 'The Media and Terrorism: A Reassessment', *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 9(2), 1997, pp. 51–64.
- 8 Ingrid Van Biezen, 'Terrorism and Democratic Legitimacy: Conflicting Interpretations of the Spanish Elections', *Mediterranean Politics*, 10(1), 2005, pp. 99–108.
- 9 Cited in Van Biezen, 'Terrorism and Democratic Legitimacy', pp. 104–5.
- 10 A. Campbell, P. E. Converse, W. E. Miller and D. E. Stokes, *The American Voter* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960; reprinted 1980).
- 11 Research for this article took place before the Beslan school attack in September 2004.
- 12 In both Russia and Britain there is a set election period of approximately one month before each election with a ban on election news starting at midnight on election day. In the United States, there is no formal rule, but the presidential campaign traditionally swings into high gear from right after the Labor Day holiday on the first Monday in September until the eve of the election on the first Tuesday in November. While dates are not fixed for individual elections in Russia and the United Kingdom (although they do follow constitutional patterns), the US presidential election is fixed as the first Tuesday in November every fourth year.
- 13 For a detailed discussion of the coding as developed for the Russian case, see Sarah Oates, *Television, Elections and Democracy in Russia* (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2006). For a more detailed discussion of the US coding, see Sarah Oates and Monica Postelnicu, 'Citizen or Comrade?: Terrorist Threat in Election Campaigns in Russia and the US', paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, Washington DC, 2005. Information about the New Security Challenges ESRC grant project is available at: <http://www.media-politics.com/newsecuritychallenges.htm> (author's own website).
- 14 For the US 2004 presidential election, coding was performed by the U-Vote research team at the University of Florida in Gainesville under the direction of Professor Lynda Kaid. In Britain, coding was completed under the direction of the author and Dr Mike Berry. For Russia, the coding was directed by the author, but performed by native Russian speakers (Katya Rogatchevskaia, Andrei Rogatchevski and Boris Rogatchevski).
- 15 Oates, *Television, Elections and Democracy in Russia*.
- 16 Oates, *Television, Elections and Democracy in Russia*.
- 17 See also European Institute for the Media, *Monitoring of the Media Coverage of the 1995 Russian Parliamentary Elections* (Düsseldorf: European Institute for the Media, 1996); European Institute for the Media, *Monitoring of the Media Coverage of the 1996 Russian Presidential Elections* (Düsseldorf: European Institute for the Media, 1996); European Institute for the Media, *Monitoring of the Media Coverage of the 1999 Russian Parliamentary Elections* (Düsseldorf: European Institute for the Media, 2000); European Institute for the Media, *Monitoring of the Media Coverage of the 2000 Russian Presidential Elections* (Düsseldorf: European Institute for the Media, 2000).
- 18 Sarah Oates, 'Through A Lens Darkly?: Russian Television and Terrorism Coverage in Comparative Perspective', paper prepared for the 'Mass Media in Post-Soviet Russia' international conference, April 2006, University of Surrey, UK. Available at: <http://www.media-politics.com/publications.htm> (author's own website).

- 19 Russian law allows for both.
- 20 The Russian parliamentary elections typically are held every four years, but only the 450 seats of the lower house are still elected by popular vote.
- 21 For more details, see Oates, 'Through A Lens Darkly?'; Oates, *Television, Elections and Democracy in Russia*; Oates and Postelnicu, 'Citizen or Comrade?'
- 22 Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, 'Voters Liked Campaign 2004, but too much "Mud-Slinging"', available at: <http://people-press.org/reports/display.php3?ReportID=233> (accessed 20 August 2005).
- 23 President George W. Bush on NBC, 29 October 2004.
- 24 It should be noted that there was some debate in the groups as to what was meant by 'terrorism'. Generally, people took it to mean 9/11 and Islamic extremism and the conversation focused on that type of terrorism. However, many respondents correctly pointed out that it was important to define the nature – and scope – of terrorism under discussion because global issues of terrorism, anti-American terrorism and Islamic extremism are not identical.
- 25 A Washington DC respondent.
- 26 Pundits were quick to note that this campaign slogan was used by aliens who parodied Bill Clinton and Robert Dole running for president in an episode of the American cartoon comedy show *The Simpsons*.
- 27 Dennis Kavanagh, 'New Campaign Communications: Consequences for British Political Parties', *Harvard International Journal of Press/Politics*, 1(3), 1996, pp. 60–76.
- 28 This article does not include an analysis of the 2005 free-time party broadcasts.
- 29 The election was held on 5 May 2005. The author would like to thank Gordon Ramsay, Hazel King and Murray Leith for their work in coding the British election news.
- 30 Based on a qualitative analysis by the author of the television coverage of both.