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Why October Surprises Work

By Joshua Keating

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It's the subject no one wants to bring up: What effect could a terrorist attack have in the closing days of the U.S. election? New data from Israel could help answer this uncomfortable question.

On October 29, 2004, just four days before the last U.S. presidential election, Osama bin Laden broke a three-year silence and released a videotaped message to the American people. Although he refused to endorse a candidate, saying instead "Your security is not in the hands of Kerry or Bush or al Qaeda," he didn't need to. The terrorist leader's reappearance in the public eye was not good news for Democratic candidate John Kerry, who polled lower than the incumbent George W. Bush on terrorism. Given the closeness of the 2004 election, it's not outlandish to suggest that bin Laden might have played a significant role in tipping the election to Bush—and he didn't even make good on his threats.

As this year's campaign heads into its final weeks, the prospect of an "October surprise" from the United States' terrorist enemies no doubt weighs heavily on the minds of Democratic candidate Barack Obama's increasingly confident brain trust. But publicly, the subject remains taboo, as Charlie Black found out the hard way in June. The advisor to candidate John McCain was pilloried in the media for suggesting that a terrorist attack on U.S. soil "would be a big advantage" to the Republican. Black later apologized and his comment was disavowed by the campaign.



AFP/Getty Images

Swing voter? Osama bin Laden in a message to Europeans that aired on Al Jazeera in November 2007.

Questions of tact aside, did Black have a point? It seems intuitively obvious that McCain, given his polling advantage on national security and his weakness on economic issues, would stand to gain from an attack. But can the connection between terrorism and electoral outcomes be proven? How large is the effect? To answer these questions conclusively, you have to look at the one country with enough data on terrorism and elections: Israel.

"The unfortunate fact that Israel suffers so much from terrorism is a fortunate fact in terms of econometric analysis," says economist Claude Berrebi of the Rand Corporation, a nonprofit research group. "It gives you enough variation that you can pinpoint the causal effect." Along with Esteban Klor of Jerusalem's Hebrew University, Berrebi recently examined how recent terrorist attacks have affected Israeli electoral outcomes since 1998.

The study ([pdf](#)) compiles data from more than 200 Israeli districts between 1988 and 2003. The authors found that a terrorist attack within the past three months in a given area resulted in an average 1.35 percentage point increase in the level of support for right-wing parties. This might not seem like much, but in Israel's polarized political environment, the impact can be enormous. Berrebi and Klor believe that the right-wing Likud Party's narrow victories in the 1988 and 1996 parliamentary elections are directly attributable to recent terrorist attacks. In the 1992 elections, which the left-wing parties carried by just two seats, one more terrorist attack in the preceding three months would have been enough to tip the majority to the right.

The report attributes the Israeli right's advantage on terrorism to its hawkish stance and opposition to concessions to Palestinian demands. "When terrorism reaches a certain level, voters conclude that there's no alternative but to toughen up," Berrebi says.

Surprisingly, who was in charge when terrorist attacks occurred had little effect on the outcomes—either way, the right gained. The study found that left-wing incumbents tended to lose support after attacks while hawkish right-wing incumbents saw their margins of victory increase. "Voters see attacks during a right-wing government as something inevitable," Berrebi explains, "whereas under a left-wing incumbent, it's seen as something that could have been prevented if they had only used tougher antiterrorism policies."

So why do terrorists continue to attack, when their actions only tend to bring in governments less likely to give them concessions? Berrebi doubts they are simply behaving irrationally or are ignorant of the effect they have on Israeli voters. "Our past research has shown that the behavior of terrorists is highly rational, even more so sometimes than leaders in the West," he says.

Rather than behaving irrationally, more likely they are either trying to perpetuate a cycle of tit-for-tat violence with an overly aggressive government that will end in Israel's destruction, or—the explanation Berrebi prefers—they hope terrorist attacks will cause the entire political spectrum, including the right, to move in the long run toward a more moderate stance. The more accommodating policies adopted in recent years by one-time hard-liners such as Ariel Sharon and Ehud Olmert may be evidence of this shift.

It's unclear how the trend might differ in other settings. In other terrorism-wracked countries, such as Iraq and Sri Lanka, there isn't enough quality electoral data for adequate study. And in most developed democracies, there (luckily) aren't enough terrorist incidents to examine.

The Spanish general election of 2004, coming on the heels of the Madrid train station bombing, which killed nearly 200 people, provides an interesting counterexample. Instead of bolstering the conservative government, the attack helped left-wing challenger, José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero, who was running on a platform of withdrawing Spanish troops from Iraq, upset a right-wing incumbent, José María Aznar.

Berrebi notes that although voters around the world are universally affected by terrorism, their immediate responses can vary. The Spanish troop presence in Iraq, for instance, came to be seen as a liability rather than a necessary method of fighting terrorism. "In the case of Madrid, Islamic terrorism was quite new. And they may have seen [withdrawal from Iraq] as the quick solution to the conflict."

In the U.S. political context, the sample size is similarly small. But Bush's surge of popularity after 9/11 and bin Laden's video intervention in 2004 strongly suggest that the Republicans have the most to gain from terrorist activity in the run-up to Election Day.

So, how do we keep terrorists out the democratic process? According to Berrebi and Klor, the key is to neutralize terrorism as a political issue. "When policymakers make a lot of statements about the problem, it increases the salience of the problem and makes voters more sensitive," Berrebi says. "This means that the potential impact of an attack is increased."

What does that mean for an "October surprise's" potential impact on the U.S. race? Despite the imploding economy, concerns about terrorism remain surprisingly salient in this election. Obama has been attacked in ads and speeches for being "dangerously unprepared" to defend the United States against terrorist threats and, recently, for "palling around with terrorists."

McCain's candidacy is based in large part on the argument that he's the man best qualified to keep the country safe from terrorist attacks. Following the lesson that Israel has learned the hard way, a good first step would be to tone down the rhetoric.

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