

The Domestic Rally Effect and Terrorism

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Abstract

In the past, the rally-round the flag effect has been a phenomenon applied to international conflicts wherein a short term public opinion surge to the executive accompanies an international crisis. This study will look at this phenomenon to see if such a rally effect will accompany domestic crisis such as domestic terrorism. Further, we shall determine if such an effect filters down to subnational levels as well as the central executive authority. The case study used will be the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing.

INTRODUCTION

This paper will use the Oklahoma City bombing as a case study to look at the rally effect. It will attempt to illustrate that after April 19, 1995 both the governor of Oklahoma, Frank Keating, and President Bill Clinton received a public opinion boost. This paper will use public opinion polls to demonstrate that in both the state and national cases that there is indeed a public opinion surge. This will be evident from public opinion survey results collected at the state and national level. Multiple public opinion polling sources were used to illustrate this effect.

CLASSIC RALLY EFFECT

This crisis theory expands upon much of the social science literature on crises. Classic rally round the flag effect was introduced by John Mueller (1973). The three definitional aspects that he introduced are that first, it is an international event which triggers the crisis; second, that the event must involve the president directly; and third, the event must be sharp, focused, and dramatic. Brody (1984) went on to explain the phenomenon. The rally-round-the-flag effect is a foreign relations policy crisis occurs during which the government (president) is able to mobilize national public opinion in support of his national policy. This public opinion support lasts for the duration of the foreign policy crisis.

Sigelman and Conover (1981) describe the process in terms of the government taking advantage of "threats from outside the system [that] promote cohesion inside the system." The government, if it appeals to the public for national unity, can usually recognize a measurable rise in public opinion. Sigelman and Conover (1981), describe this phenomenon as the public massing around the president (government) and supporting him in the role of national leader. This rally-round-the-flag effect seems to occur regardless of the success of the outcome of the crisis and can be enjoyed by members of either political party (Polsby 1964).

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Certainly, more cynical observers have noted that governments would be able to foment international crises in order to harness the mob mentality which seems to exemplify American public opinion (Kennon 1951; Lippman 1955). This seems to reinforce the concept of a “short, victorious, war”, by which the public is diverted from domestic concerns by international crises. Jack Levi discussed the concept of the diversionary or scapegoat theory of war in which domestic public opinion is distracted by a foreign crisis (1989).

There are many studies on the rally effect. However, the rally effect deals primarily with American public opinion and has not been treated in comparative studies. The diversionary theory of war does have deep historical roots. This seems to have been elucidated by Russian Foreign Minister V. Plehve calling for a short victorious war with which to distract the masses. Much of the other sociological literature does use comparative tools. While this offered rich grounds for speculation and research, the comparative nature of the domestic rally will not be addressed in this paper.

The rally-round-the-flag effect is derived from many sources. Presidents typically suffer from a decline in public opinion as their term progresses. Richard A. Brody in his book *Assessing the President: The Media, Elite Opinion and Public Support* (1991) shows that a foreign crisis will halt the decline in domestic support suffered by most presidents. A second source for the public support surge exemplified by the rally effect would be the diversionary or scapegoat effect discussed by Levy (1989). The negative feeling of the populace is transferred to those “responsible” for the crisis. Another source of the rally effect surge may be that opposition criticism and negative media attention is shifted away from the administration (Brody and Shapiro 1991; Russett 1990; Brody 1989). As a result, members of the public who have “fallen away” or been disenfranchised by the administration’s policies will “return to the fold for the duration of the crisis.

The rally effect is usually short-lived. Edwards and Gallup (1990) and Russett (1990) determined that the rally effect will only last for 1 to 2 months before public opinion returns to its pre-crisis level. This shows that public opinion is fickle and changes often. Brody attributes much of the change in public opinion to shifts in elite behavior and the influence of the media (1991). Brody’s arguments seem structural in nature in that the behavior of a group of people is influenced by interests groups and institutions—read organizations.

Certainly post September 11, 2001 there were a number of academic studies looking at terrorism and the rally effect (See Hetherington and Nelson 2003, also Groeling and Baum 2008). Many of the studies used the rally associated with the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks as a case for extending the rally effect to international terrorist attacks. Certainly, the September 11 attacks fit within the classic rally round the flag literature. The attacks were international in nature, they affected the president directly, and they were certainly dramatic and sharply focused.

The difficulty lies with rallies associated with domestic attacks. Would domestic terrorism trigger the same type of rally effect? Additionally, there are issues which might insulate a president such as layers of federal hierarchy. Would the rally extend to the lower levels of that hierarchy? This study sets out to introduce the possibility that a rally effect might

still occur in cases of domestic terrorism and state and local officials would benefit from such a rally.

DOMESTIC TERRORISM

It may seem that terrorism, or the use or threat of violence on civilians for ideological reasons with the goal of creating and exploiting fear is, *a priori*, irrational (Lipset and Raab, 1978). Indeed, some have studied the phenomenon of terrorism from the perspective that terrorism is a psychological or sociological pathology (Oliverio, 1998). However, this article echoes Martha Crenshaw's 1998 article which treats terrorism and terrorist justification as a rational phenomenon utilizing a strategic choice model. Specifically, this work assumes that terrorists resort to terrorism as a product of "willful choice made by an organization for political and strategic reasons, rather than as the unintended outcome of psychological or social factors". The assumption of rationality is also important when investigation of the goals and objectives of terrorists as the terrorists' pursuit of strategic goals is, in essence, a rational process. Indeed, historical analysis of terrorist action "reveals similarities in calculations of ends and means." Hoffman (1998) noted in his definition of terrorism that, "it is a planned, calculated, and indeed systematic act."

Crenshaw (1983) in her seminal work on the impact of terrorism on delegitimizing governments, discusses that impact in terms of state response to terrorist acts that then act as a delegitimizing force. Wilkinson, (1977) discusses that delegitimizing effects can come about when states either underreact, showing themselves as weak, or overreact, showing themselves as repressive. One of the essays in this work also confronts economic impact, but only in terms of government response by changing public economic policy.

One of the methods that insurrectionist terrorists use to gain political power is the subversion of governmental power. One of the chief means by which governments maintain power, especially in difficult times, is through legitimacy (Lipset, 1959). This aspect of political legitimacy goes directly to the heart of terrorist goals. If the terrorist group can convince the general population that the current regime type is not able to handle the current situation, or that it is not the, "most appropriate or proper ones for the society," then it has seriously weakened the government. A terrorist group might reduce government power by reducing the legitimacy the citizenry feel the government possesses. If a terrorist group can make the citizenry feel that the government cannot maintain order or basic rights, then this can help to reduce the legitimacy of the government. Bassiouni (2004) stated part of the desired outcome by terrorist groups is the imposition of a heightened level of uncertainty and a perceived level of vulnerability. Merari (1993) emphasized that one of the main strategies of terrorism was a "strategy of chaos" which created uncertainty and helped to delegitimize governments. Stapley (2008) argues that this imposition of an uncertainty of government capability is one of the prime ways that terrorist groups attack governments to try to force political change. This concept has also been labeled the "strategy of tension" by Rentner (1985) and Jenkins (1990).

We thus see that the goal of terrorists is to de-legitimize an existing government, to create fear and instability, and to sow the seeds of chaos. Theoretically, at least, a rally effect should run counter to the goals of terrorist organizations. We will show that at least in single case

attacks, that is exactly what happens. While extensive testing has not been conducted, we will show that the rally effect extends to domestic terrorism and to state executives as well as national executives.

DOMESTIC RALLY THEORY

The domestic rally theory relates to the above-mentioned literature. The theory postulates that in the face of a domestic crisis, public opinion will surge to rally in support of the government. In this definition, Sigelman and Conover's explanation that "...threats from the outside promote cohesion" seems to be appropriate (1981). In this case, while the crisis is domestic in nature, the causes are extra-governmental. This surge shares much of the attributes and reasoning of the rally effect. As in the classic rally effect, the popular opinion decline of the government is suspended during the term of the crisis. This is due to a decline in opposition efforts and an increase in media support. Domestic rally theory also takes advantage of a diversion or scapegoat to which negative attention can be shifted.

Domestic rally theory differs from the rally effect in some key areas. Having demonstrated leadership ability in a crisis situation, it is theorized that the public will be more likely to trust the abilities of a proven leader. Therefore, a domestic rally will be more likely to be sustained. Also, as its name implies, Domestic rally theory is domestic in nature. As such, a domestic crisis is more likely to be important to the country's citizenry. As stated above, the rally-round-the-flag effect has not been applied to domestic crises or sub-national executive offices. This study will seek to integrate the field and expand to these cases.

Aside from the social science literature discussed above, domestic rally theory also references behavioral research relating to crisis. Thomas Milburn discusses the fact that crises seem to create stress in the electorate and their leaders in his individual stress model. This stress "tends to disrupt their cognitive processes" and creates a situation where the public and the leaders fall back on past situations which were successful in the past. As a result, crises tend to lead to situations where actions are institutionalized and stability or even ossification arises (Hermann 1972).

Similarly, an organizational response model predicts that in times of crisis, that crisis will cause decision-making to be moved up the hierarchical ladder, reducing fragmentation and effecting coalescence in policy and opinion. This serves as a unifying factor increasing stability in the face of change or crisis (Herman 1972).

The domestic rally theory also approaches crisis from a rational choice model by which the public is thrust into a "bargaining" role of determining whether to support the government in a time of instability. This theory postulates that the public will tend to weigh in favor of a known government than for an unknown effect of a crisis. Therefore crisis will tend to increase the support for the government domestically because the government is perceived as the best tool for handling the crisis. It is in the public's best interest to have a stable government in times of instability and crisis.

This paper will use what would in effect be a pre-test/post test model with the Oklahoma City bombing acting as the stimulus. The public opinion ratings for the governor of Oklahoma and the President of the United States for the time period before the bombing and the time following the bombing will be taken and compared. Given the circumstances of the case, there is no control. While the public opinion rating of the governor could be compared to governors of states where no tragedy occurred, problems of case selection make this difficult at best. Comparison of President Clinton’s public opinion ratings cannot be compared given the lack of other comparable cases.

DOMESTIC RALLY EFFECT AND THE STATE EXECUTIVE

In early 1995, Republican governor Frank Keating was feeling his way into the job. He was brought into office in an election in which Republican voters had turned out in unprecedented numbers. He was serving in a state with a hostile legislature and a tradition of Democratic rule. Further, his public approval rating was consistently in the low 50’s for January, February and March according to the Oklahoma Poll (Martindale, 1995). If anything, Frank Keating was non-spectacular. In an instant all of this was to change.

Immediately following the terrorist bombing, Frank Keating stepped into the leadership spotlight. He appeared on national television daily and appeared to steer the wounded ship into the harbor. As discussed above, Governor Keating assumed a strong leadership role which would allow him to tap into the domestic rally effect. Immediately following the bombing, Governor Keating’s approval rating surged to 73 percent in April, May and June, and increase of 20 percentage points (Martindale). This is graphically represented by Table 1 below.

Table 1. Keating approval ratings—1995, quarters 1 and 2

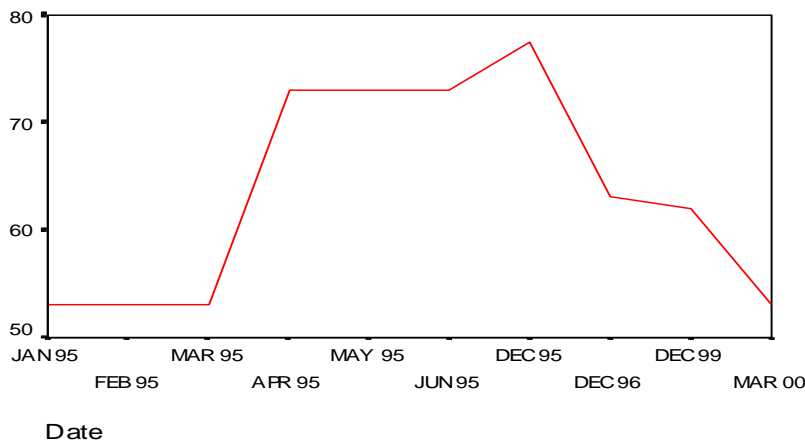
January	February	March	April	May	June
53%	53%	53%	73%	73%	73%

This dramatic rise in popularity can be related to the bombing. When asked about the governor’s handling of the crisis, 91 percent of those polled statewide indicated satisfaction. In Oklahoma City, Keating did even better with 93 percent.

Demonstrating long term public approval trends for the state are difficult in Oklahoma, where public opinion sampling is not carried out consistently. However, a statewide Oklahoma Poll for the last quarter of 1995 showed Keating’s approval rating at 77.5%. The Classic rally

Figure 2

Keating Public Approval



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effect predicts that the rally will be relatively short lived—typically 10 months. Again, while no monthly survey figures are available, at the end of eight months, Keating's figures were actually up by 4.5 percent. A statewide Oklahoma Poll at the end of 1996 showed Keating had lost ground and was enjoying 63.1 percent public approval ratings. While this illustrates a 15-percentage point drop from the last quarter 1995 highs, it still indicates a 10-point increase over the pre-bombing levels. This public approval level seemed to hold steady through 1999 where Keating held an approval level of 62 percent. Keating approval rating has dropped off dramatically since that time, returning to pre-bombing levels, but the surge does seem evident from directly after the bombing through 1999. See Figure 2 above.

DOMESTIC RALLY EFFECT AND THE PRESIDENT

The previous work done on the rally effect has focused on the president. This section will show that the domestic rally effect also affects the national executive. In 1995, President Bill Clinton was having a difficult time as far as public opinion is concerned. His administration was wracked with scandal and it was perceived that his presidency was weak and vulnerable. Like with Governor Keating, this was to change with the Oklahoma City Bombing.

It is important to note that a presidency is a dynamic and complex entity. Taking one event and attributing to it sweeping effects is a hazardous endeavor and care should be taken to establish theory from this type of exercise. However, for the purpose of this paper, it is illustrative to compare the approval ratings before and after the Oklahoma City Bombing.

Ascertaining the public approval numbers for the president is a different proposition than that of governors. If anything, there is too much information making integration and comparison difficult. This study uses five major polls to determine presidential approval. These polls include the Gallup poll, the Harris Poll, the ABC News/Washington Post Polls, the NBC/Wall Street Journal Polls, and the CBS/New York Times Polls for the entire Clinton Presidency. The Gallup Poll seemed most comprehensive with 63 separate polls during that time period and the Harris Poll the least comprehensive with 16 polls during that period. The news polls fell somewhere in the center.

In order to combine the data sources, President Clinton's public opinion rating before April 19, 1995 for each polling organization was averaged and then those averages were averaged to determine the pre-bombing approval rating. The same was done for President Clinton's public approval rating after April 19. These findings are listed below in figures 7 and 8 along with the number of cases, the high and low level and the standard deviation in each poll.

Figure 3—Pre-April 19 Approval Rating

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Approval CBS/NY Times	32	37	64	45.97	6.82
Approval Gallup	63	37	59	47.56	5.17
Approval Harris	16	35	54	44.69	5.33
Approval ABC/Wash Post	27	44	63	51.63	5.92
Approval NBC/Wall St Journal	24	41	60	49.33	5.24

Figure 4—Post-April 19 Approval Rating

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
App CBS/NY Times	128	43	73	58.85	7.24
Approval Gallup	175	42	73	58.91	5.99
Approval Harris	33	43	65	53.52	5.77
Approval ABC/Wash Post	88	47	69	60.50	4.60
Approval NBC Wall St Journal	49	46	70	58.18	6.27

In order to facilitate pre-and post-test comparison, the above means for each opinion poll were averaged together creating pre- and post test presidential opinion indices. Prior to April 19, 1995, President Clinton had a public opinion index of 47.84 percent. Following the bombing, President Clinton’s average public opinion index was 57.99 percent—more than a 10 percent increase. These findings are listed in figure 5 below.

Figure 5.



Again, there were most definitely many events which shaped public opinion during these time periods. However, this increase may also be partly attributable to the domestic rally surge. This 10 plus percent increase after the bombing tests significant at the 95 percent confidence level. This seems especially cogent given the fact that the scandals which plagued the Clinton presidency did not diminish in the time following the Oklahoma City bombing.

An Oklahoma Poll immediately following the bombing seems to bolster this theory. Clinton did not do well in the state of Oklahoma during his run for the presidency. Further, prior to the bombing, his highest public opinion rating in Oklahoma was 49 percent in the last quarter

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of 1993. By the last quarter of 1994, Clinton's Oklahoma public opinion rating had dropped to 37 percent. Immediately following the bombing, "83 percent of those polled said the president satisfactorily exercised the duties of his office. Conservatives moderates and liberals gave him passing grades" (Martindale, 1997). Further, residents of Oklahoma felt that "the president 'did everything he could possibly do to involve himself' by visiting Oklahoma City and working to obtain \$39 million for relief efforts." (Martindale).

CONCLUSION

This paper has postulated the existence of a domestic rally effect. This domestic rally effect is closely related to the classic rally-round-the-flag effect. During times of crises, public opinion surges in support of the leaders of the country. This paper had extended this phenomenon to domestic rather than international crises. Further, this effect is also evident in sub-national units of government.

This paper has shown that Governor Frank Keating enjoyed an immediate public opinion surge following the Oklahoma City bombing. This dramatic surge of over 20 points thrust Governor Keating into the position of one of the highest-ranking governors at the time. This domestic rally effect was quite long-lived, lasting over four years time. This effect on state governors was illustrated by public opinion polls and local media reporting.

The domestic rally effect was also demonstrated in the traditional presidential case. Again, public opinion polls were used to demonstrate a public opinion rally directly following the Oklahoma City bombing. In this case, five independent polls confirmed the domestic rally theory with statistical significance.

We are left with the major question of "so what?" The answer to this question questions the significance of studying disasters and terror. Certainly more research needs to be conducted on this topic. However, if the goal of terrorists is to de-stabilize societies and governments, does not this theory demonstrate that if anything, terrorist acts stabilize governments and society by creating a rally around the leaders of the government?

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