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**A Comparison of Public Responses to Terrorist  
Attacks in Spain and the United States**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Within the short period of two and a half years the U.S. (11-September-2001) and Spain (11-March-2004) suffered two of the largest single-terrorist attacks suffered by any country since at least World War II. They shared some features in common, but they also differed substantially in many respects. However, as data collected in both countries seem to show, effects on their populations were much more similar than one would have expected.

The terrorist attack on the Twin Towers in New York took by surprise the American people. There were no signs, before the terrorist attack, that indicated to the common citizen that something like that might ever happen (though it is likely that some governmental agencies could have some information about that possibility). The magnitude of the terrorist attack was such that not only the U.S., but the whole world, was shocked, and there was an immediate and strong general reaction of empathy towards the U.S. Government and its people. From the very first moment the U.S. Government and the media blamed the Islamic terrorist group Al-Qaeda and its leader, Ouzama Ben-Laden. The reaction of the largest part of the U.S. population was to support their Government and to accept the measures it took, both internal and external, including restrictions on some civil rights and freedoms, as well as Government's decisions on foreign policy which implied retaliation measures against Afghanistan first and Irak later. From September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001 till the end of 2002 there was little internal criticism (on the part of American citizens) of the U.S. Government regarding its responsibility on the terrorist attacks or on their foreign policy decisions towards the Middle East and Islamic countries. In fact, internal criticism only began to grow during the discussion of actions against Iraq in the Security Council of the U.N., and especially after the Azores declaration when the U.S., the U.K. and Spain proclaimed their decision to invade Iraq in order to overthrow Sadam Hussein's regime. These internal criticisms became more and more apparent throughout 2003 and even more during 2004, and therefore started to have some impact on the American public during the Presidential campaign in 2004 until the elections in November of that year, though for reasons that will not be analyzed here, the incumbent President Bush finally won the elections by a larger margin than he had in the previous 2000 Presidential elections. It seems fair to conclude that, in general terms, the effect of the September 11<sup>th</sup> terrorist attack on the American public was one of support to their Government, mainly trusting

their internal and external decisions, finally manifested in the re-election of President Bush, in spite of growing criticisms.

The description of the social and political context in which the terrorist attacks in Spain took place were rather different. President Aznar and its People's Party (PP) had won the legislative elections of 1996 by a small margin over its main opponent, the Socialist Party (PSOE), but had been re-elected in 2000 by an absolute majority. According to survey data, this result may be attributed mainly to three factors: a successful economic policy, a firm policy of fighting ETA terrorism, and a clear defense of Spain's unity as opposed to secessionist movements in the Basque Country, and to a lesser extent, in Catalonia. However, the PP Government started to lose support from the electorate since the middle of its second legislature, that is, after 2002, due to several decisions that the electorate didn't support (a reform of labor legislation rejected by labor unions, the handling of the sinking of the "Prestige" petrol carrier near the Spanish North West coast, and much more important, the decision to support the U.S. and the U.K. to invade Iraq without the explicit consent of the U.N.). From January 2003 onwards monthly public opinion surveys showed a persistent rejection of the Government's decision regarding Iraq's invasion by the U.S. and its allies. More than 80% of the Spanish population 18 years and over positioned themselves against Spain's intervention in that conflict from that date till March 2004, and one out of four Spaniards with a right to vote admitted having participated in at least a public demonstration against the Government's stand on the Iraqi conflict. The vote difference between the PP and the PSOE in the elections of 2000 was 7 percent points in favor of the PP, and that difference was only reduced by 1 percent point from July 2003 to February 2004, though taking into account the intentions to participate in the 2004 elections the estimated difference prior to elections was reduced to about 4-3 percent points favorable to the PP, with a estimated turnout of around 70% of the electorate, a result that would have given it a relative (not absolute) victory. However, the terrorist attacks in Madrid on March 11<sup>th</sup>, only three days before the elections, seem to have had a significant influence on the results of that election, because final turnout raised to 77%, and the final result was 4 percent point favorable to the PSOE. Survey data seem to indicate that the climate against participation of Spain in the Iraqi conflict eroded, but not substantially, potential support for the PP in the March 14<sup>th</sup> legislative elections, but the terrorist attacks led the majority of the population to link the Islamic terrorist attacks with Spain's participation in the Iraqi conflict, a feeling that was reinforced by a

manifestly wrong governmental information strategy that tried to blame the ETA terrorists for the bombings, when the evidence grew rapidly pointing to Islamic radical terrorist groups as being responsible for them. (To this date there are still many obscure points as to the planning and organization of the bombings in Madrid). Thus, in only three days, a part of the electorate (probably about 7% of it), mainly leftist potential voters that didn't plan to vote because they expected the PP to win the elections, was mobilized to participate in the elections, and most of them clearly voted for the PSOE, reversing the expected result from a minority victory of the PP to a minority victory of the PSOE, who won the elections by a margin of three percent points. Needless to say that the PP exaggerated the estimated impact of the terrorist attacks to justify their defeat, not accepting their own responsibility on the results and blaming the PSOE for unfair use of the attacks against the Government (including street demonstrations in front of the PP headquarters in many Spanish cities), while the PSOE denied any significant effect of the bombings on the electoral results and blamed the PP for their wrong decision in sending troops to Iraq and for their misleading information during the three days following the bombings. To summarize, in contrast with the U.S. experience, criticism of the Government was very prominent before the bombings on account of the Government's stand on the Iraqi conflict, and therefore a substantial part of public opinion blamed the Government for the terrorist attacks of March 11<sup>th</sup>, so that instead of public rallying around the Government, as in the U.S., there was a very emotional rallying against the Spanish Government.

### **THE SURVEYS**

The National Tragedy Study was conducted by the National Opinion Research Center, University of Chicago. The first round of data collection began on September 13<sup>th</sup>, 2001 and ended on September 27<sup>th</sup>. It was a telephone interview of adults (18+) living in households with telephones in the United States. The total sample size of 2,156 comprised a national sample of 1,013 households and additional samples in New York City (406 additional households), Washington DC (206 additional households), and Chicago-land areas (531 additional households). The second round of data collection began on December 18<sup>th</sup>, 2001 and ended on February 20<sup>th</sup>. The total sample size of 1,101 comprised a national sample of 805 households and a New York City sample of 296 households.

The Spanish National Survey was conducted by ASEP (Análisis Sociológicos, Económicos y Políticos) as part of its May 2004 monthly survey on Spaniards' Public Opinion. It was a face-to-face interview of residents in Spain 18 years and over. The total sample size of 1,602 comprised a national sample of 1,203 households and an additional sample in Madrid metropolitan area (399 additional households).

### **HYPOTHESES**

Some very preliminary hypotheses refer to the impact of the bombings on the symptoms that R's in the U.S. and Spain experienced after the terrorist attacks, on their worries, and on their national pride. There were several reasons to expect that both symptoms and worries would be lower in Spain than in the U.S. First, that the fielding dates in Spain were more than two months after the Madrid bombings, while the first survey in the U.S. started only two days after the attack on the Twin Towers and finished fifteen days later. A second reason is that, while the terrorist attack on the U.S. was absolutely new to the American citizens, Spaniards have become more used, unfortunately, to terrorist tragedies, though none of the previous ones was comparable to that of March 11<sup>th</sup>. In fact, since the decade of the 1970's ETA terrorists have produced about 1,000 victims. Third, it was further expected that symptoms and worries would be somewhat higher in New York than in the U.S., and higher in Madrid than in Spain, due to the fact that residents in New York and Madrid were more directly hit by the bombings and the human tragedy. Fourth, data from many other surveys have demonstrated that Americans show greater national pride than Spaniards (i.e., World Values Surveys and European Values Study 1981, 1990, 1995 and 1999-2000; ISSP National Identity Modules 1995), but this difference should be even greater when comparing the two post-terrorist attacks because of the massive opposition of Spaniards to their Government's participation in the Iraqi conflict throughout 2003 and the first three months of 2004, while in the U.S. the majority of the population backed their Government in that action, in spite of growing criticism to it.

Thus, the three main preliminary hypotheses regarding the comparison of the effects of the two terrorist acts can be summarized as follows:

- Symptoms and worries caused by the bombings should be similar but significantly higher in the U.S. than in Spain, and higher in New York than in Madrid.
- Symptoms and worries caused by the bombings should be similar but significantly higher in New York than in the U.S. and higher in Madrid than in Spain.

- National pride and support of country’s government should be higher in the U.S. than in Spain, and higher in New York than in Madrid, but differences between U.S. and New York, or between Spain and Madrid, should not be significant.

### **SOME PRELIMINARY RESULTS**

In spite of the above mentioned differences between the two terrorist acts, both with respect to the “social context” in which they took place as well as with respect to the time gap between the terrorist act and the fielding of the survey, there seems to be a very similar pattern regarding symptoms and worries that people in the two countries manifested.

Table 1. Proportions (per person) that have felt indicated symptoms after the bombings

	US	Spain	New York	Madrid
Didn’t feel like eating	0,29	0,11	0,46	0,21
Smoked more than usual	0,21	0,05	0,20	0,08
Had headaches	0,22	0,10	0,24	0,15
Had upset stomach	0,37	0,21	0,35	0,19
Cried	0,60	0,33	0,74	0,50
Had trouble sleeping	0,51	0,17	0,59	0,18
Felt nervous or tense	0,50	0,35	0,62	0,59
Felt like getting drunk	0,07	0,02	0,12	0,04
Felt more tired	0,38	0,06	0,48	0,14
Felt dizzy	0,09	0,02	0,13	0,06
Lost temper	0,20	0,13	0,27	0,14
Hands sweaty	0,09	0,05	0,11	0,06
Had rapid heart beats	0,16	0,01	0,22	0,03
Felt dazed and numb	0,46	0,07	0,46	0,17
Kept forgetting things	0,20	0,04	0,28	0,06
	US	New York	Spain	Madrid
Didn’t feel like eating	0,29	0,46	0,11	0,21
Smoked more than usual	0,21	0,20	0,05	0,08
Had headaches	0,22	0,24	0,10	0,15
Had upset stomach	0,37	0,35	0,21	0,19
Cried	0,60	0,74	0,33	0,50
Had trouble sleeping	0,51	0,59	0,17	0,18
Felt nervous or tense	0,50	0,62	0,35	0,59
Felt like getting drunk	0,07	0,12	0,02	0,04
Felt more tired	0,38	0,48	0,06	0,14
Felt dizzy	0,09	0,13	0,02	0,06
Lost temper	0,20	0,27	0,13	0,14
Hands sweaty	0,09	0,11	0,05	0,06
Had rapid heart beats	0,16	0,22	0,01	0,03
Felt dazed and numb	0,46	0,46	0,07	0,17
Kept forgetting things	0,20	0,28	0,04	0,06

Thus, taking the average (arithmetic mean) proportion of persons (per person) that mentioned having felt different symptoms after the bombings, it may be noticed (Table 1) that Americans and Spaniards, New Yorkers and Madrilians coincide in mentioning much more frequently the same symptoms: crying, trouble sleeping and feeling nervous and tense, though Spaniards mention an upset stomach and Madrilians mention that they

didn't feel like eating, in greater proportions than they mention having trouble sleeping. A second finding is that Americans mention each symptom in slightly larger proportions than Spaniards, probably due to the two reasons mentioned above (proximity in time to the terrorist act and less experience of terrorism impacting in their own country); the same is also true when comparing New Yorkers with Madrilians, the former mentioning every symptom in larger proportions than the latter. With few exceptions, it is also found that New Yorkers and Madrilians mention having felt every symptom in slightly higher proportions than Americans and Spaniards respectively, a finding that suggest that space proximity also seems to have an influence on the impact of the terrorist acts on individuals. Time and space proximity seem to have similar and complementary effects.

Table 2. Proportions (per person) that mention different worries after the bombings

	US	Spain	New York	Madrid
Worried political situation	0.29	0.62	0.37	0.64
Worried foreign relationships	0.39	0.48	0.40	0.39
Felt angry about terrible deed	0.86	0.76	0.89	0.90
Brought it on self	0.11	0.38	0.16	0.35
Ashamed it happened	0.39	0.43	0.39	0.38
Worried affect own life	0.45	0.39	0.60	0.44
Wondered about safety	0.47	0.53	0.58	0.59

  

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Brought it on self	0.11	0.16	0.38	0.35
Ashamed it happened	0.39	0.39	0.43	0.38
Worried affect own life	0.45	0.60	0.39	0.44
Wondered about safety	0.47	0.58	0.53	0.59

Results do not present a common or regular pattern concerning worries that individuals felt after the bombings. It is true that the most common thought of Americans and Spaniards, New Yorkers and Madrilians, was their “feeling angry about terrible deed”. (a feeling that was slightly higher among Americans than among Spaniards, higher among New Yorkers than among Madrilians, and higher among New Yorkers than among Americans, though almost equal between Madrilians and Spaniards). Nevertheless, Spaniards have mentioned every feeling or worry in greater proportion than Americans (except for two, “feeling angry about terrible deed” and “worried about own life”). This finding suggests that the interpretation of the causes and consequences that Spaniards attributed to the terrorist attack were more politically or ideologically influenced than those felt by Americans. It must be underlined, in this line of reasoning, the great difference between Spaniards and Americans regarding the proportion that

said they were worried about the political situation (something that was probably related to the potential effect of the bombings on the general elections that were to be held only three days after the bombings), as well as regarding the higher proportion of Spaniards who answered that [the country] “brought it on self”. Besides, a larger proportion of Spaniards worried about “foreign relationships”, were “ashamed that it happened” and wondered about safety, while a larger proportion of Americans “felt angry about terrible deed” and “worried that it might affect their own life”. Similar differences are found when comparing New Yorkers with Madrilians. And New Yorkers and Madrilians mention every feeling or worry in greater proportion than Americans and Spaniards respectively (with only three exceptions in the Spanish-Madrid comparison).

Table 3. Proportions (per person) that agree with different statements

	US	Spain	New York	Madrid
Rather be american/spanish citizen	0.97	0.73	0.94	0.77
Ashamed of America/Spain	0.46	0.37	0.42	0.47
Others shd be more like Americans/Spaniards	0.50	0.37	0.48	0.35
America/Spain better than other countries	0.85	0.44	0.83	0.41
Support country if wrong	0.34	0.29	0.35	0.33
	Spain	Madrid	US	New York
Rather be american/spanish citizen	0.73	0.77	0.97	0.94
Ashamed of America/Spain	0.37	0.47	0.46	0.42
Others shd be more like Americans/Spaniards	0.37	0.35	0.50	0.48
America/Spain better than other countries	0.44	0.41	0.85	0.83
Support country if wrong	0.29	0.33	0.34	0.35

Finally, the different political context in which the two terrorist attacks took place, and the responsibility that was attributed to the two Governments, seem to have had a greater impact on Spaniards than on Americans. The data in Table 3 show a significant lower proportions of Spaniards who answer they would rather be Spaniards than of any other nationality, that others should be more like Spaniards, that Spain is better than other countries or that they would support Spain even if wrong. All these indicators are measures of different dimensions of national pride, and they all indicate a lower national pride among Spaniards than among Americans. Americans, however, feel more ashamed about the U.S. than Spaniards about Spain, though it is the opposite when comparing New Yorkers with Madrilians. In general, therefore, Spaniards and Madrilians blamed their national Government more for the terrorist attacks than Americans or New Yorkers blamed their federal Government, and that seems to reflect on the national pride in each case.

## **SOME CONCLUSIONS**

Though the analysis of the data is very preliminary, it seems that the social and political context in which the two terrorist acts took place has a great importance to evaluate the consequences on attitudes of Americans and Spaniards after the bombings. The first hypothesis, that the consequences on physical symptoms should be very similar, seems to hold, as there are only small differences that could be attributed to proximity in time and space (that is, Americans and New Yorkers mentioned each symptom in slightly larger proportion than Spaniards and Madrilians, due to the fact that the survey in the U.S. was conducted immediately after the bombings, while the survey in Spain was conducted three months later; and New Yorkers and Madrilians showed more symptoms than Americans and Spaniards in general because they lived the bombings more closely).

With respect to worries and after-thoughts, however, and even more regarding different indicator of national pride, the different political context seems to have been of greater importance. In general it may be noticed that Spaniards blamed their Government much more for the bombings, reflecting that blaming in a lower national pride. It is well known that Spanish public opinion was clearly and very unanimously against Spain participating in the Iraqi conflict, and the bombings in March 11<sup>th</sup> only aggravated that feeling, by means of considering the bombings a consequence of that participation. The electoral results of March 14<sup>th</sup> only reinforce this interpretation.

However, more research will be needed to test these preliminary interpretation, through a more complete analysis controlling for party closeness and other relevant variables.