

# National Center for Disaster Preparedness

EARTH INSTITUTE | COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY

TERRORISM  
ATTITUDES  
AND OPINIONS



## ANGER VERSUS FEAR:

Perceptions of Terrorism **Among the American Public**

# introduction & METHODOLOGY

## Introduction

With recent terrorist attacks in Brussels, Belgium; Paris, France; San Bernardino, California and elsewhere, the rhetoric for addressing the issue of terrorism has grown more polarized. In particular we have seen increasingly aggressive statements demanding limits to immigration, increasing vigilance against Muslim communities, and calling for more direct military action against terrorist organizations. The tone of these statements has prompted an important question as to the underlying reason for the desire for more aggressive policing and military tactics. It has also raised critical questions regarding surveillance and data privacy rights via encryption backdoors on every day technologies. Is this desire for action driven more by a sense of fear and anxiety? Or is this driven by anger and humiliation? The answer to these questions may help understand which groups of individuals are likely to support or reject various approaches to combatting terrorism, as well as their perceptions of the kind of leadership needed.

## Methodology

A nationally representative, quota-based on-line survey was conducted between February 5th and February 11th, 2016 to total of 1069 people across the US. The sample was weighted to the US census data for sex, gender, race and region for representativeness. The survey was administered through an online survey panel by Survata.

Along with basic demographics, survey respondents were asked to identify their political party affiliation. If they selected the Independent party, they were asked a follow-up question to identify their party leaning, and were given the options "Republican" or "Democratic." For the purposes of this report, the terms Republican and Democrat refer to those who identified with the respective party in either of these questions, which accounted for 77% of the total sample. For the remaining party affiliations, approximately 14% still "did not know" their party affiliation and 8% selected "other" – these two classifications were excluded from the political affiliation analysis for simplicity. Additionally, all refused responses were excluded from the analysis as the total number of refusals did not exceed 3% of the sample. The total sample for political affiliation analysis was 935.

## Recommended Citation

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# findings

## Overall

Initial findings from this nationally representative on-line poll have revealed that 80% of Americans exhibit some anxiety or fear of further terror attacks in the United States, with over 16% saying they are extremely anxious or fearful. 69% of Americans have anxiety or fear that someone close to them will be directly impacted by a terrorist event. This fear and anxiety is translating to an ever-present concern where 62% of the population finds themselves thinking about terrorism at least once a week which has left 37% of Americans with the stark conclusion that a constant fear of terrorism is the “new normal.” Additionally, when comparing fear of terrorism versus other disasters, 78% are more concerned about terrorism than they are about natural or technological disasters.

Overall, 88% of Americans are angry about recent terror attacks in the United States, with 47% extremely angry. Additionally, 42% of Americans think that recent events in the US have made the country seem weak and vulnerable. Further exploration shows that Americans who are angry about terrorism *and* those who believe recent events in the United States have made the country seem weak and vulnerable represent 52% of the population who is both angry and feel America’s power and stature is being diminished. In order to reduce terrorism in the US, 45% Americans believe that the US government should take more aggressive military actions overseas and 47% believe those actions should be of a retaliatory nature. When asked about controlling or banning assault weapons and high capacity magazines to prevent acts of terrorism, approximately 45% of Americans agreed while 34% disagreed.

## Political Affiliation

Cross-tabulations by political affiliation revealed the following:

- When asked about their concern for terrorism in the US compared to natural or technological disasters, 54% of Democrats and 72% of Republicans reported being somewhat more or much more concerned about terrorism.
- While Republicans generally expressed more anxiety/concern regarding more terrorist attacks in the US (67%) compared to Democrats (53%), there was less anxiety/concern noted when the question was specific to their communities for both Republicans (45%) and Democrats (34%). When this question was made specific to attacks involving loved ones, the anxiety/concern of among Republicans was slightly higher than the community specific questions for both Republicans (49%) and Democrats (42%), but still lower than levels of concern/anxiety about more terrorist attacks against the US in general.
- Republicans are more likely to agree with the statement that deaths at the hands of Islamic extremists in the US exceeds those caused by non-Islamic domestic terrorists or vigilantes with 49% agreeing compared to 25% of Democrats.

# findings

- 85% of respondents who identified as Republican reported being somewhat, moderately or extremely angry about recent acts of terrorism in the United States compared to 67% of Democrats. Republicans were also more likely to agree that recent terrorist attacks made the United States seem weak and vulnerable (63%) compared to Democrats (26%).
- 72% of Republicans tend to think about terrorism once a week or more, compared with only 59% of Democrats. Republicans are also more likely to think of terrorism as a “new normal” for life in the United States (52%) compared to Democrats (33%).
- Republicans were more likely to agree with taking more aggressive military action both to prevent acts of terrorism (69%) and to retaliate for acts of terrorism (65%). Democrats were less likely to agree with taking more aggressive military action to reduce the risk of terrorism (34%) or for retaliation for acts of terrorism (34%).
- While Republicans are more concerned about terrorism, they do not generally agree with banning assault weapons to prevent terrorism with only 30% agreeing with this notion. Democrats, although less concerned with terrorism, prefer this measure with 63% agreeing to this measure.

While Americans continue to have concern over terrorism, the public is very conflicted between concern, anger, and acceptance of terrorism as a new normal. Republican sentiment on terrorism tends to be more focused on national embarrassment and a perception that it makes the US seem weak. This appears to be driven more by anger than fear. For Democrats, both concern and anger over terrorism is less prominent. There is also a reduced appetite for increasing military action to solve problems related to terrorism.

Policies to combat terrorism must be well-informed by science and include a plurality of perspectives, political affiliation can be a good indicator of the kinds of communication that certain cohorts of Americans will be the most receptive to. With this, it is important that the concerns of these cohorts are understood and acknowledged to ensure their support for new and existing programs to protect the lives of Americans.

# data tables

**TABLE 1. RESPONSES BY QUESTION**

QUESTION/RESPONSE	NUMBER	PERCENTAGE
<b>How much more concerned are you about terrorism in the U.S. compared to natural disasters, which may include floods or earthquakes, as well as technological disasters such as large-scale communications and power failures? (n=1,055)</b>		
Much more concerned	369	35%
Somewhat more concerned	274	26%
Slightly more concerned	178	17%
Not more concerned at all	188	18%
Don't Know	46	4%
<b>How anxious or fearful are you about more terror attacks in the United States? (n=1,054)</b>		
Extremely anxious or fearful	175	17%
Moderately anxious or fearful	232	22%
Somewhat anxious or fearful	204	19%
Slightly anxious or fearful	234	22%
Not anxious or fearful at all	173	16%
Don't Know	36	3%
<b>How anxious or fearful are you about more terror attacks in your community? (n=1,056)</b>		
Extremely anxious or fearful	104	10%
Moderately anxious or fearful	147	14%
Somewhat anxious or fearful	157	15%
Slightly anxious or fearful	249	24%
Not anxious or fearful at all	341	32%
Don't Know	57	5%
<b>How anxious or fearful are you about terror attacks harming you personally or people close to you? (n=1,050)</b>		
Extremely anxious or fearful	175	17%
Moderately anxious or fearful	117	11%
Somewhat anxious or fearful	181	17%
Slightly anxious or fearful	254	24%
Not anxious or fearful at all	288	27%
Don't Know	35	3%
<b>How many times in a week do you think about, or find yourself concerned with, terrorism in the US? (n=1,069)</b>		
Several times per day	28	3%
Every day	140	13%
2-5 times per week	174	16%
Once a week	318	30%
Rarely or never	409	38%

# data tables

**TABLE 1. RESPONSES BY QUESTION (CONTD.)**

QUESTION/RESPONSE	NUMBER	PERCENTAGE
Thinking about the recent acts of terrorism in the United States, would you say this makes you feel... (n=1,044)		
Extremely angry	491	47%
Somewhat angry	277	27%
Slightly angry	154	15%
Not angry at all	56	5%
Don't Know	66	6%
Please indicate your level of agreement with the following statement: Recent terrorist attacks have made the United States seem weak and vulnerable. (n=1,046)		
Strongly Agree	194	19%
Agree	242	23%
Neither Agree or Disagree	258	25%
Disagree	217	21%
Strongly Disagree	100	10%
Don't Know	35	3%
Please indicate your level of agreement with the following statement: I believe we should take more aggressive military action overseas in order to reduce the risk of terrorism in the US. (n=1,038)		
Strongly Agree	245	24%
Agree	245	24%
Neither Agree or Disagree	231	22%
Disagree	154	15%
Strongly Disagree	100	10%
Don't Know	63	6%
Please indicate your level of agreement with the following statement: I believe we should take more aggressive military action overseas in order to retaliate for terror attacks in the United States. (n=1,038)		
Strongly Agree	219	21%
Agree	246	24%
Neither Agree or Disagree	226	22%
Disagree	179	17%
Strongly Disagree	106	10%
Don't Know	63	6%
Please indicate your level of agreement with the following statement: Deaths caused by terrorism at the hands of Islamic extremists in the U.S. exceeds those caused by non-Islamic domestic terrorists or vigilantes. (n=1,036)		
Strongly Agree	127	12%
Agree	204	20%
Neither Agree or Disagree	286	28%
Disagree	161	16%
Strongly Disagree	81	8%
Don't Know	177	17%

# data tables

**TABLE 1. RESPONSES BY QUESTION (CONTD.)**

QUESTION/RESPONSE	NUMBER	PERCENTAGE
Please indicate your level of agreement with the following statement: I believe that expecting acts of terrorism is the new normal for life in the United States. (n=1,047)		
Strongly Agree	65	6%
Agree	327	31%
Neither Agree or Disagree	230	22%
Disagree	252	24%
Strongly Disagree	109	10%
Don't Know	64	6%
Please indicate your level of agreement with the following statement: I believe that assault weapons and high capacity magazines should be banned or controlled to help prevent acts of terrorism. (n=1,043)		
Strongly Agree	195	19%
Agree	270	26%
Neither Agree or Disagree	162	16%
Disagree	172	16%
Strongly Disagree	186	18%
Don't Know	58	6%

# data tables

**TABLE 2. RESPONDENT TABLE**

CHARACTERISTIC	NUMBER	PERCENTAGE
<b>Age Category (n=1,069)</b>		
18 to 24	149	14%
25 to 34	181	17%
35 to 44	164	15%
45 to 54	213	20%
55 to 64	175	16%
65 and over	187	17%
<b>Race (n=1,069)</b>		
Asian	41	4%
Black or African American	131	12%
Hispanic or Latino	140	13%
Native American	34	3%
Other	8	1%
Pacific Islander	9	1%
White or Caucasian	706	66%
<b>Gender (n=1,069)</b>		
Female	566	53%
Male	503	47%
<b>Thinking of your current political party leanings, would you consider yourself: (n=935)</b>		
Republican	210	22%
Democrat	298	32%
Independent	216	23%
Other	76	8%
Don't Know	135	14%
<b>Do you consider yourself closer to the Republican Party or the Democratic Party? (Follow-up asked of Independents) (n=216)</b>		
Republican	114	53%
Democrat	102	47%
<b>Political Affiliation (after re-coding leaning of Independents) (n=935)</b>		
Republican	324	35%
Democrat	400	43%
Other	76	8%
Don't Know	135	14%



