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# Security vs. civil liberties: How citizens cope with threat, restriction, and ideology

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How do citizens balance their preferences for civil liberties and security in the context of a competitive party system? Using the case of terrorism and counter-terrorism, I argue that the willingness to support restrictions of civil liberties does not only depend on external shocks and being targeted by a counter-policy. Instead, it also depends on their ideological match with policymakers and terrorist actors. Using an original survey experiment conducted in Germany in 2022, I study how the four factors feeling threatened by a terrorist attack, being targeted by a surveillance measure, the ideology behind an attack, and the partisanship of counteracting politicians influence the attitudes of citizens and whether these factors are mutually dependent. While earlier research has focused on one kind of terrorism (mostly Islamic), this paper examines various forms of terrorism (religious, right-wing, and climate-radical) and how they affect peoples' attitudes toward civil liberties and surveillance. The results show that terrorist ideology plays a minor role, but that it matters whether citizens sympathize with the party that proposes a policy. The study extends our understanding of the political consequences of polarization, threat perceptions of terrorism, and public support for surveillance policies.

## KEYWORDS

**security, civil liberties, terrorism, ideology, polarization, policy preferences, surveillance, survey experiment**

## 1. Introduction

In times of crisis, civil liberties often have to be restricted for a higher good. Since civil liberties are one of the great accomplishments of democracy, this is not an easy decision for governments to make or for citizens to support. When citizens are asked how important democratic values such as civil liberties are to them, they rate them very high ([Sullivan and Hendriks, 2009](#)). However, these rights are not set in stone and cannot be considered in a vacuum ([Peffley et al., 2001](#); [Jenkins-Smith and Herron, 2009](#); [Graham and Svolik, 2020](#)), as they entail trade-offs with other, highly valuable rights. One of the strongest conflicts is that between security and civil liberties. This applies to different external shocks, such as a pandemic, war, or terrorism ([MacKuen and Brown, 1987](#); [Rohde and Rohde, 2011](#)).

Policymakers react to these external shocks by implementing policies to protect the population from such dangers. These policies are a materialization of the norm conflict between civil liberties and security. However, these policies are often heavily debated both within parliaments and among the general public. In these discussions, not only the content of the policies matters, but also the ideology of the parties who are proposing them.

In this paper I argue that the willingness to support restrictions of civil liberties depends not only on external shocks, but also depends on whether citizens are inclined or averse to policymakers. The acceptance of opinions from other people or actors who have an opposing ideology or partisanship is limited within a competitive party system or a polarized society. Polarization along party lines is no new phenomenon, but the level of polarization has increased over the last two decades (Heltzel and Laurin, 2020; Druckman et al., 2021). In Germany, where this study is conducted, affective polarization has been slowly increasing since 2008 (Harteveld and Wagner, 2022). A major driver of polarization has been the far-right party *Alternative für Deutschland* (Alternative for Germany, short AfD) since its foundation in 2013 (Siri, 2018). Affective polarization in Germany is mainly between partisans of the AfD and other partisans. This disliking is asymmetrical, with a higher aversion of supporters from other parties toward the AfD. AfD supporters, in contrast, are less negative toward other partisans (Jungkunz, 2021).

Consequences of polarization along partisanship can be seen, for example, in studies about democratic backsliding (Somer and McCoy, 2018; Svolik, 2019). The results concerning citizens' propensity to favor partisanship over democratic norms are mixed. Carey et al. (2022) find that citizens are defending democratic norms even when this requires a punishment of a candidate from the own camp. Other studies find opposing results, according to which partisanship is valued more highly than democratic norms (Graham and Svolik, 2020; Kawecki, 2022; Saikkonen and Christensen, 2022). The polarization along partisanship embeds the norm conflict of civil liberties and security in a societal context. This constitutes the first research gap this paper is addressing. The paper is guided by the question: How do citizens balance their preferences for civil liberties and security in the context of a competitive party system?

A case in which the necessity occurs to find a balance between civil liberties and security is terrorism and counter-terrorism as a reaction to it. Looking at specific cases is necessary, as they add additional elements and variables for citizens to consider. In the case of terrorism, the major explaining factor is perceived threat. In general, the higher the perceived threat, the higher the support for security even at the expense of civil liberties (Huddy et al., 2005, 2007; Haider-Markel et al., 2006). A second element is the ideology or motivation of terrorists (Caton and Mullinix, 2022). Not every motivation generates the fear or perceived threat of becoming a target in every citizen equally. A white person might feel less

threatened by right-wing terrorism than a non-white person, so as an ordinary citizen might feel less threatened by left-wing terrorism than a person in a leading position. Turning this relationship around, the motivation of terrorists could even lead citizens to support them. However, most studies focus on a single type of terrorism, which has been mainly Islamist terrorism in the last two decades. Despite right-wing terrorism being responsible for many attacks in western democracies, especially in Germany and the U.S.<sup>1</sup>, only few articles have so far looked at different kinds of terrorism (Pronin et al., 2006; Wynter, 2017). This study addresses this second research gap by comparing how different terrorist motivations (Islamist, right-wing and climate-radical) influence citizens' preferences for security.

To answer the research question, the four stated elements (feeling threatened by a terrorist attack, being targeted by a surveillance measure, the ideology behind an attack, and the partisanship of counteracting politicians) are considered. Using a survey experiment allows me to vary these elements through specific treatments and to compare citizens' policy preferences under these conditions. Such a design complements natural experiments (Bozzoli and Müller, 2011; Giani et al., 2021), which are limited to actual attacks and cannot exclude external circumstances. The perception of actual terrorist attacks can be influenced by other simultaneous events, such as election campaigns (Muñoz et al., 2020). These limitations can be overcome by the survey experiment employed here. The design has the practical advantage that, for example, the influence of different terrorist motivations on citizens' attitudes can be examined, which would not be possible in the real world. The survey experiment was pre-registered and conducted in Germany in 2022.

The results show that, first, citizens value their privacy and prefer targeted measures. Second, partisanship matters even in a crisis. Citizens are willing to accept cuts in civil liberties when they are proposed by their preferred party. When these cuts are proposed by a disliked party, the support decreases strongly. This logic does not apply to terrorist motivation. Citizens do not change their support for civil liberties when terrorist attacks are motivated by an extreme form of an ideology the citizens adhere to. This result holds for citizens with a high level of extremism and citizens with a high propensity to violence.

The study expands previous findings by looking at the conflict of civil liberties and security through the lens of partisanship and ideology. In times of crisis, when difficult decisions must be made, parties should work together to gain support from the population. The good news for societies is that the political affiliation of citizens does not extend to support for ideologically close terrorist attacks.

Increasing our knowledge about citizens' preferences for security and civil liberties is crucial for western democracies.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.csis.org/analysis/escalating-terrorism-problem-united-states>

**TABLE 1** Four combinations of ordinary citizens who experience an external shock and are targeted by a counter-policy.

		External shock	
		Personal threat	No personal threat
Counter-policy	Not being targeted	A	B
	Being targeted	C	D

While security has been treated as a higher good by politicians in recent years (Hegemann and Kahl, 2018), the attitudes of citizens should not be ignored. Undermining civil liberties extensively can lead to undesirable developments. A restriction of fundamental freedom can be the beginning of democratic backsliding. While this is not a fast, overnight process, it can open paths that turn away from democracy or facilitate ongoing processes. A better understanding of the circumstances or reasons why citizens support restrictions of civil liberties opens up the possibility of counteracting such movements or seeking other solutions to strengthen democracy where it is needed.

## 2. Literature and arguments

### 2.1. Threat and surveillance—the trade-off between security and civil liberties

One aspect of citizens' decision to support a policy is the calculation of whether the policy improves their situation or not. It comes down to the personal situation of citizens. In the context of civil liberties and security, citizens have to ask themselves whether the policy is increasing security more than civil liberties are restricted. This has to be balanced against the incoming threat, which should be prevented by the policy. The relationship can be applied to any debate about civil liberties vs. security, for example health protection issues during a pandemic or the prevention of terrorism.

Table 1 shows the stated matrix between an external shock and the counter-policy. Using the specific case of terrorist threat and counter-terrorism policies, I explain in the following how these two factors are expected to influence citizens' preference for security and civil liberties.

Threat is arguably the strongest predictor and best-examined factor in studies about citizens' preferences in the context of terrorism. A large body of literature on support for security policies exists that examines the predicting effect of perceived threat exclusively or among other factors (Huddy et al., 2002, 2005; Davis and Silver, 2004; Hetherington and Suhay, 2011; Asbrock and Fritzsche, 2013; Cohen-Louck, 2019; Breznau, 2021). Unfortunately, the nomenclature is not consistent across

studies (Feldman, 2013, p. 55). Threat, perceived threat, or the perception of risk describe the same issue from a slightly different angle, but these terms are often used interchangeably. In this study, I define perceived threat as an outcome of an external shock, event, or situation the individual citizen is confronted with and which is interpreted or perceived as negative or dangerous. This definition focuses on perceived personal threat and not on societal, sociotropic, or national threat.

Perceived personal threat directly concerns individuals confronted with the external shock. In such a situation, individuals "will probably be made particularly aware of their own vulnerability" (Trüdinger, 2019, p. 37). This awareness of becoming a victim leads people to think more about their in-group than about themselves as individuals (Asbrock and Fritzsche, 2013). This awareness and the wish for protection for oneself and the own in-group translates to policy preferences for security. In the case of terrorism, it seems very likely that personally threatened citizens will favor security over civil liberties (Hetherington and Suhay, 2011).

These external shocks (or, more specific, terrorist attacks), which are a personal threat for individuals, have to be separated from a general or omnipresent fear of terrorist attacks. A general fear of external shocks is an individual predisposition, which describes citizens' general sensitivity to threat or baseline threat (Marcus et al., 1995, p. 107). An individual who has a higher baseline threat is expected to have a higher preference for security in general. For example, more fearful individuals are more in favor of restrictive migration policies (Helbling et al., 2022).

The individual shocks provide a "contemporary information" (Marcus et al., 1995, p. 107), which provokes the perception of threat. As Trüdinger (2019, p. 35) put it, "[T]he consequences of perceived threat can be considerable as it might result in a complete change in political reasoning". In danger of an external shock, "people try to restore perceptions of global control over their environment, which are at stake in times of threat" (Fritzsche et al., 2011, p. 102). This regain of control is expressed as an increased preference for security measures.

*H1a: Citizens' support for counter-terrorism measures increases when they are personally threatened by terrorist attacks.*

The rows in Table 1 show the counter-policy. The rationale behind the influence of this dimension on citizens' policy support is similar to the influence of the external shock. As in the external shock dimension, citizen can also be target of the counter-policy or not. The possibility of this differentiation depends on the individual measure because not all counter-policies to external shocks concern the ordinary citizen.

The term counter-terrorism covers a lot of different policies, ranging from military actions abroad (Gadarian, 2010) to

immigration regulations (Helbling and Meierrieks, 2020) and domestic measures such as surveillance (van Leeuwen, 2003; Ziller and Helbling, 2021). In this paper, I operationalize counter-terrorism as a surveillance policy. Surveillance can target suspicious individuals or groups, which would not concern ordinary citizens. Such a measure is rather easy for citizens to support, since it does not impose any restrictions on them. This is similar to other measures, for example a policy aiming to disrupt financial flows of terrorists. These measures do not affect ordinary citizens and thus come at no personal cost.

In contrast, dragnet surveillance affects every citizen in the state, so citizens are indirectly targeted. In this case, the measure entails the conflict between security and civil liberties (Kossowska et al., 2011). Security should be increased by preventing terrorist acts. Civil liberties are restricted, as surveillance can severely curtail privacy rights (Ziller and Helbling, 2021). Surveillance falls in the category of privacy laws and directly affects citizens in contrast to measures that concern procedural or immigration laws (Epifanio, 2011). Since citizens are expected to value their privacy, dragnet measures should receive less support than measures targeting suspect individuals.

*H1b: Citizens' support for counter-terrorism measures decreases when they are targeted by the counter-terrorism policy.*

The expectations stated in H1a and H1b are rather straightforward: respondents to whom case A in Table 1 applies should be most supportive of a security measure, respondents in case D the least supportive. Case C is the most interesting case, as citizens are confronted with the dilemma of threat and restriction of civil liberties. Depending on the measures implemented by the government, the individual liberties are curtailed (Davis and Silver, 2004). The theoretical argument in the literature on perceived threat highlights the strength of the influence that perceived threat has on individuals' attitudes. Following this line of research, I argue that respondents strongly support security measures even at the cost of their personal liberties.

*H1c: The feeling of being threatened by a terrorist attack outweighs the feeling of being targeted by a policy and drives the support for a counter-terrorism measure.*

## 2.2. How ideology and partisanship influence citizens' willingness to favor security over civil liberties

While the need to balance these two factors is very clear, the support for policies has to be examined in the context of a society in which citizens have different ideological stances. The necessity to do so becomes clear by going back to Table 1. Both sides of the

table can be extended by an ideological dimension. Threat when caused by some human actor has an ideological background. Equally, the counter-policy must be suggested by a party or implemented by a government, which also has an ideological background. Since ideology is a guideline for individuals to evaluate specific situations or policies, it also influences citizens preferences. Ideology can be described as an "interrelated set of attitudes, values, and beliefs with cognitive, affective, and motivational properties" (Jost et al., 2009, p. 315). Ideology groups peoples' attitudes and experiences so they can be used as guidelines for future decisions.

Ideology as a factor in policy preferences has been examined for a long time (Stimson, 1975). First, the specific content of policies can be more appealing to citizens with a certain ideology. Second, a policy is proposed by a party, which can be used as additional guidance by citizens. Research has shown that partisans are more likely to support policies when they are proposed by in-group partisan elites rather than out-group partisan elites (Bolsen et al., 2014; Pink et al., 2021). Intolerance exists on both sides of the ideological spectrum toward the other side: "conservatism would predict intolerance of left-wing targets, liberalism would predict intolerance of right-wing targets. Moreover [...] those on both the left and right would be biased against ideologically opposing targets relative to ideologically supporting targets" (Crawford and Pilanski, 2014, p. 842). While partisanship is not exactly the same as ideology, the two concepts are highly related and correlated (Wright et al., 1985; Barber and Pope, 2019; Lupton et al., 2020). In this paper, I will mainly refer to partisanship as an outcome of ideology. Partisanship is heavily used by citizens to identify with politicians and take their position on issues under discussion.

Policies concerning the nexus between security and civil liberties are no exception when it comes to the impact of citizens' partisanship on their policy preferences. As these policies are suggested by politicians, the match or mismatch between citizens' ideology and that of these politicians should be a strong indicator of whether a citizen supports the policy. On average, when the policy-proposing party is known by citizens the support for the policy decreases because there are always citizens who dislike a given party. In contrast, when the citizens are inclined to the policy-proposing party, the support for the policy should increase.

*H2a: Citizens' support for counter-terrorism measures decreases when the policy-proposing party is disliked by them.*

*H2b: Citizens' support for counter-terrorism measures increases when they are inclined to the policy-proposing party.*

Ideology is also inherent in the specific context I am investigating—terrorism. Conveying an ideologically motivated message is essential in many definitions of terrorism (Ruby, 2002; Schmid, 2011). While civil liberties have been widely studied in the context of terrorism, terrorism has mostly been considered as a general concept with no further

specification. This introduces another factor in citizens' support for counter-terrorism policies, which is the possible alignment of perpetrators' motivation or ideology and the one of citizens (Caton and Mullinix, 2022). Ideology can serve as a guiding factor, which allows citizens to allocate themselves to groups, such as parties or interest groups. In an extreme case, citizens could sympathize with potential terrorists and their motivations.

While most citizens are likely to condemn any type of terrorism, supporters of extreme ideologies might not oppose such acts as strongly as others. In a polarized society, citizens can be expected to support extreme versions of their own ideology. While most people will still not directly support terrorism, they might not support security measures that aim to prevent such incidents as strongly as other citizens.

*H2c: Citizens' support for counter-terrorism measures decreases when they share the ideology of the terrorist actors.*

The previous hypothesis concerned the influence of partisanship and ideology on citizens' attitudes toward counter-terrorism measures. As outlined, the effect is expected to be very strong and persistent. However, partisan loyalty will not be unlimited. When citizens deviate from the lines of parties they support is still debated. Related to this is the question of what factors influence the formation of citizens' policy preferences. Can the dominant factor of party cues (Cohen, 2003) be overruled by other factors?

A likely case of deviation from the party lines is when politicians behave undemocratically or propose policies that contradict democratic norms. Studies conducted in the U.S., however, have yielded contradictory findings. Graham and Svolik (2020) find that in the U.S., partisanship is more important to citizens than democratic norms: they would rather stick to their ideologically close candidate who violates democratic norms than vote for the opposition. Saikkonen and Christensen (2022) report similar findings for Finland. Carey et al. (2022) come to the opposing conclusion that citizens are willing to punish undemocratic behavior regardless of partisanship. While the violation of democratic norms is an extreme case, it can generally be expected that citizens rather take the position of their preferred party.

A most likely case of deviation from the party lines occurs when the fundamentals of human life are in danger or threatened. Security and the need for physical integrity is at the very bottom of human necessities (Maslow, 1954). Since perceived threat has been identified as a strong predictor for citizens' need for security, perceived threat should outweigh effects of partisanship. I expect citizens to support a security policy even if they dislike the policy-proposing party.

*H3a: Citizens' support for counter-terrorism measures increases when they are personally threatened by an attack, even when they dislike the policy-proposing party.*

Another trade-off or contradiction can appear between party preference and the suggested counter-terrorism policy. Citizens could sympathize with a party, but dislike their suggested policy. More specifically, citizens could disagree with the policy-target, especially if the target is their own in-group. In this case, citizens are more likely to oppose a policy because they are constrained by the policy. When polices are targeted toward an in-group, partisanship should be overruled by the attitudes toward the content of the policy (Nicholson, 2012). Therefore, I expect that support for a dragnet policy is slightly less likely than support for a targeted or not specified policy. However, the level of citizens' support should still be comparatively high when the suggested policy is proposed by their preferred party.

*H3b: Citizens' support for counter-terrorism measures decreases when they are the target of that policy, even when they are inclined to the policy-proposing party.*

### 3. Data and method

#### 3.1. Sample

I analyze data from a pre-registered<sup>2</sup> survey experiment conducted in Germany in June 2022. The sample matches the general population in terms of age, gender, and education ( $N = 2,045$ ).<sup>3</sup> No sampling weights were applied, since highly qualitative survey data is giving precise estimates while preserving high statistical power (Miratrix et al., 2018). The experiment was part of a larger survey; the median response time was 20.02 min. At the beginning of the survey, an attention check was included; participants who failed the attention check were excluded from further participation in the survey and no answers were collected from them (91.73 percent of the respondents passed the attention check).

#### 3.2. Experimental setup

The study uses a  $4 \times 3 \times 3 \times 3$  full factorial between-subjects design (Auspurg and Hinz, 2015) resulting in 108 unique vignettes in total, of which every respondent randomly

<sup>2</sup> Pre-registration plan on osf: <https://osf.io/7rs5v>. Note that the wording of hypothesis H1 and H3a has been changed from "targeted" to "personally threatened" to make the wording consistent throughout the study. In H2b, H3a, and H3b, "ideology" has been replaced with "inclined/disinclined" to match the wording in the hypothesis with the design of the experiment. The wording of H3b has been rearranged to match the wording of H3a.

<sup>3</sup> The study was conducted by the survey company Bilendi & respondi. The distribution of demographic variables in the sample can be found in the Appendix (Supplementary material).

received one. In a short text (Sauer et al., 2020), respondents were asked to imagine a terrorist attack. The following paragraph shows an example of a vignette with manipulated dimensions highlighted in *italics*:

Imagine that a terrorist attack conducted by *a right-wing group* takes place. An explosion occurs, injuring several people. *There is a serious danger for citizens like you, your family and friends.*

To ensure that attacks like this are prevented in the future, politicians from *The Greens* want to increase surveillance measures. *These measures shall target every citizen in the country.* The measure includes the monitoring of telephone calls, letter mail, e-mails, and social media accounts, as well as chats on cell phones or smartphones.

Details of this attack are described using the four treatment dimensions. Two dimensions each describe the terrorist attack and the counter-terrorism measure. The first dimension describes the motivation of the perpetrator as Islamist, right-wing radical, or climate-radical. Islamist terrorism became very prominent through the attacks of 9/11. Since it is well-known and investigated very broadly, I included this attribute to contextualize the other two motivations: right-wing and climate-radical. Right-wing terrorism is a common source of terrorism and has been present for over a decade in western democracies. Especially in Germany, where the study was fielded, right-wing motivated terrorism is the predominant form and responsible for the largest attacks.<sup>4</sup> The third attribute is climate-radical terrorism, often also called ecoterrorism. Even though this type of terrorism is less well-known as attacks with a different background, I argue that it is the most promising motivation to test my hypothesis for several reasons: First, it is not completely unknown, since ecoterrorism as a term has appeared in mainstream media in the last two decades, for example in the U.S. (Smith, 2008). Some attacks of radical environmentalist have been classified as terrorist attacks (Hirsch-Hoefler and Mudde, 2014).<sup>5</sup> Second, environmental

<sup>4</sup> Recent examples are the shooting in Hanau in 2020 (<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/20/world/europe/germany-hanau-shisha-bar-shooting.html>, accessed July 15, 2022) and the antisemitic attack in Halle in 2019 (<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/oct/09/two-people-killed-in-shooting-in-german-city-of-halle>, accessed July 15, 2022). In the early 2000s, a series of attacks was conducted by the Nationalist Social Underground (NSU). Reports in the media lasted for several years due to a long trial (<https://www.nytimes.com/2013/05/07/world/europe/trial-of-neo-nazi-beate-zschape-in-germany.html>, accessed July 15, 2022).

<sup>5</sup> For a historical overview, see, Loadenthal, 2017. An exemplary group is the Earth Liberation Front (ELF), who for example attacked private property in the U.S. in 2008 ([https://web.archive.org/web/20080306184703/http://ap.google.com/article/ALeqM5hQlKz\\_UjBgvhm8rfGiTaQYS82a5gD8V66KUG0](https://web.archive.org/web/20080306184703/http://ap.google.com/article/ALeqM5hQlKz_UjBgvhm8rfGiTaQYS82a5gD8V66KUG0), accessed

protection and its implication to slow down climate change are very salient in the public discourse. In Germany, it was one of the major issues during the last national election campaign in 2021. Many people have a strong opinion on the issue. It is not too hard to imagine that somebody with extreme attitudes toward climate protection will turn to terrorism at some point to underline their message with violence. There are already books with activist intent that discuss the use of violence to highlight the importance of mitigating climate change, e.g., Malm, 2021. Third, this setup of right-wing and climate-radical motivation mirrors the setup of the third treatment dimension, the party that proposes the counter-terrorism policy. For this dimension, I use the *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD) and the *Bündnis 90/Die Grünen* (The Greens). While the AfD is classified as the furthest to the right of the major parties in Germany, The Greens take strongly opposing positions to the AfD on many policy issues. Therefore, the parties are very distinguishable and appeal to different people<sup>6</sup>.

The second treatment dimension describes whether someone is personally threatened by a terrorist attack (or not). The fourth dimension describes whether someone is targeted by a counter-terrorism policy (or not). Every dimension also contains a control group, in which the attribute was not specified or mentioned<sup>7</sup>.

### 3.3. Measures

The treatment text concludes with a description of a security policy involving the surveillance of telephone calls, letters, e-mails, social media accounts, and chats on cell phones or smartphones. Afterwards, the respondents were asked to state to which degree they would support the surveillance policy on a ten-point scale. This serves as main dependent variable for the study. As stated earlier, surveillance entails the conflict between security and privacy rights and can restrict ordinary citizens. The case of surveillance is also well-suited to examine the hypothesis about partisanship, since the “cuts into privacy rights beyond what voters accept should reduce political support for the incumbent” (Epifanio, 2011, p. 403). Therefore, differently than in the case of other counter-terrorism measures, the preferences

September 28, 2022) and a cableway in Germany in 2013 (<https://web.archive.org/web/20130905085530/http://www.ndr.de/regional/niedersachsen/harz/seilbahn167.html>, accessed September 28, 2022).

<sup>6</sup> The alternative would have been to use left-wing terrorism as opposed to right-wing terrorism. However, left-wing terrorism has not been present in the past two decades. Also, the political party in Germany furthest to the left is quite unpopular, with a voter turnout of 5%.

<sup>7</sup> See Appendix (Supplementary material) for an overview of the dimensions and attributes and detailed vignette wording.

for surveillance really become a balancing act between security and civil liberties.

To identify respondents' partisanship, I use a pre-treatment measure that asks respondents to rate their level of liking or support for each party on a scale from one ("strong aversion") to 10 ("strong inclination"). The three lowest categories are coded as aversion, the three highest as inclination and the remaining four as neutral<sup>8</sup>.

### 3.4. Analysis

To test the impact of the single dimensions, I compare average marginal component effects (AMCEs; Hainmueller et al., 2014).<sup>9</sup> To study the interdependence of the dimensions, e.g., terrorist threat and being target of a policy, I use the framework by Egami and Imai (2019).

## 4. Results

### 4.1. Main results

Figure 1 shows the AMCEs for the four treatment dimensions. The first two dimensions concern the side of the terrorists. For the first dimension, terrorist threat, the effect does not differ between the control group and the treatment group. The additional information in the hypothetical scenario that respondents are in danger or not does not influence their support for the surveillance policy. The second dimension, the specification of the motivation of terrorists, also has no influence on respondents' support for the counter-terrorism measure.

The third and fourth dimension describe the counter-terrorism side. A specification of the policy-proposing party leads to a significant and substantial decrease in policy support ( $-0.49$  [CI:  $-0.81, -0.17$ ] when proposed by The Greens and  $-0.91$  [CI:  $-1.23, -0.59$ ] when proposed by the AfD). When the policy-proposing party is not specified, respondents might think of their preferred party (or at least not about a party they dislike), which leads to a stronger support of the policy. The majority of the respondents feel aversion toward the two parties specified in the treatment (40.52 percent toward The Greens, 72.36 percent toward the AfD) or are neutral toward them (37.32 percent toward The Greens, 15.86 percent toward the AfD). Only a small share is inclined to each of the two parties (22.16

<sup>8</sup> In robustness analyses, I vary the thresholds for categorizing respondents as inclined or disinclined to a party. For further validation, a secondary item is used, which asks respondents for their vote choice if a general election were held next Sunday (*Sonntagsfrage*).

<sup>9</sup> I also present marginal means in the Appendix (Supplementary material) to avoid the problem of having a fixed reference category (Leeper et al., 2020).

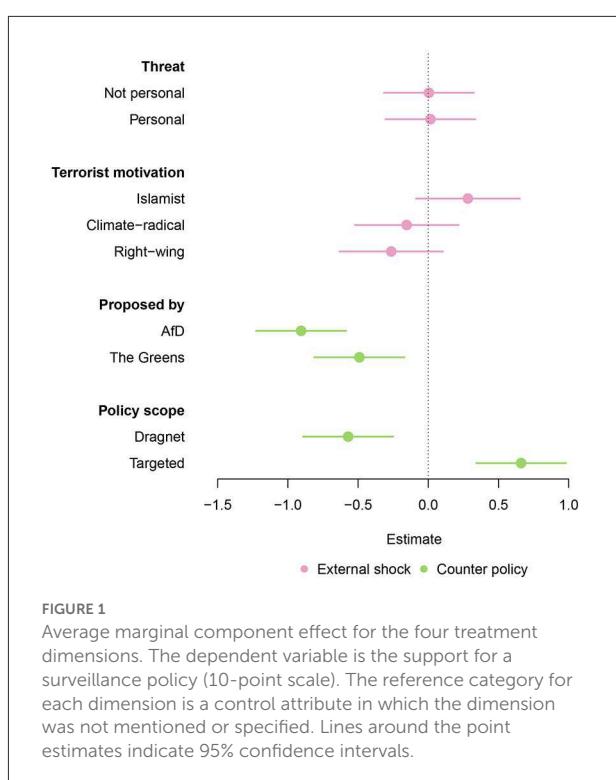


FIGURE 1

Average marginal component effect for the four treatment dimensions. The dependent variable is the support for a surveillance policy (10-point scale). The reference category for each dimension is a control attribute in which the dimension was not mentioned or specified. Lines around the point estimates indicate 95% confidence intervals.

percent to The Greens, 11.77 percent to the AfD).<sup>10</sup> Accordingly, on average respondents do not have a positive attitude toward the two parties, which leads to a lower support for the policy.

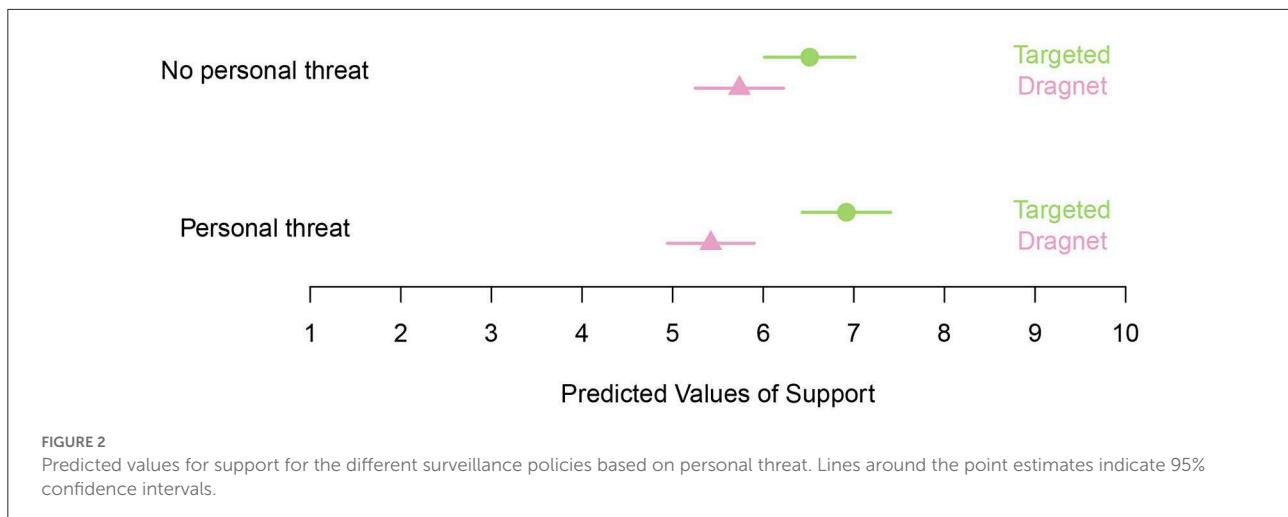
The fourth and last dimension specifies whether the proposed surveillance policy should be dragnet or targeted at suspect individuals or groups. Respondents' support for the dragnet policy is substantially and significantly lower ( $-0.57$  [CI:  $-0.89, -0.25$ ]) than for the not specified policy (control). Respondents' support for the targeted policy is substantially and significantly higher ( $0.66$  [CI:  $0.34, 0.98$ ]) than for the control.

These results do not corroborate Hypothesis 1a, because the direct threat of a terrorist attack does not change respondents' policy support.<sup>11</sup> In contrast, there is strong evidence for Hypothesis 1b: respondents do not want to be personally restricted by the given surveillance policy and are less likely to support dragnet measures.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Regularly conducted surveys about Germans' party preferences (*Sonntagsfrage*) show similar numbers for the survey period.

<sup>11</sup> For a discussion see Section 5.

<sup>12</sup> This finding is further supported by a manipulation check, which shows that respondents feel significantly and substantially more restricted when the described surveillance measure is dragnet and not targeted (see Supplementary Section 5).



## 4.2. Interactions

Figure 2 shows the predicted policy support dependent on personal threat and policy scope. In the absence of personal threat, there is no significant difference between support for a targeted measure and support for a dragnet surveillance measure. In contrast, when citizens are personally threatened, the support for a targeted measure is significantly and substantially larger than support for a dragnet measure. While personal threat increases the preference for a targeted over a dragnet measure, the effect differs from the expectations in Hypothesis 1c that support for surveillance would be higher under personal threat, independent of the policy scope. Therefore, there is no supporting evidence for Hypothesis 1c.

Figure 3 shows the predicted values for respondents' policy support based on the policy-proposing party and respondents' inclination or aversion to the AfD or The Greens.<sup>13</sup> When the policy is proposed by the AfD, support for the policy differs very strongly between respondents who are averse toward the AfD and respondents who are neutral or pro toward the AfD, by an average of roughly two points on a ten-point scale. However, respondents who sympathize with the AfD are not more likely to support the policy than neutral respondents. The panel for The Greens shows a similar picture. Policy support is identical on average among neutral and inclined respondents. Respondents who are averse to The Greens are on average 1.3 points less likely to support the policy than respondents who are sympathetic with or neutral to The Greens.

This evidence supports Hypothesis 2a that respondents will be less likely to support a counter-terrorism measure when it is proposed by a party they dislike. There is no support for Hypothesis 2b that respondents will be more likely to support

such a measure when they are inclined to the policy-proposing party than when the policy-proposing is not specified.

To test Hypothesis 2c, it is necessary to compare whether the respondents have the same motivation as the terrorists. Using the previous setup, I investigate whether partisans of the AfD change their policy preference when the terrorists' motivation is right-wing extremist. I repeat this procedure for policy preferences of partisans of The Greens when terrorists' motivation is climate-radical. The results in Figure 4 show that the motivation of terrorists does not influence the policy support of partisans who have a similar ideology in a less extreme form. Since partisans of a single party are still a very heterogeneous group, I investigated additional subgroups based on their left-right self-assessment, their environmental attitudes, and their level of extremism. None of these yield any reduction in support for the counter-terrorism measure. Furthermore, I investigated combinations of these attributes: a high propensity to violence/high degree of extremism and a right self-assessment or a strong personal commitment to environmental protection (right extremists, far-right violent extremists, climate extremists, climate-violent extremists). Since the subgroups in this analysis are very small, the results should be taken carefully, but again there is no difference in support of these subgroups. Respondents' preferences for supporting a counter-terrorism measure is not driven by the motivation of the terrorists; consequently Hypothesis 2c is not confirmed.

For the remaining two hypotheses, 3a and 3b, we have to look at three-way interactions. For Hypothesis 3a, I compare how support for a policy proposed by a party to which respondents are averse changes depending on whether the terrorist attack poses a personal threat to the respondents (Figure 5). When the policy is proposed by The Greens, a small (+0.48) but not significant increase in support can be seen. When the policy is proposed by the AfD, the support decreases in comparison to the control group. This effect is even smaller

<sup>13</sup> See Appendix (Supplementary material) for marginal means and results using the respondents' hypothetical party vote.

( $-0.25$ ) and not significant. For Hypothesis 3b, I compare how support for a policy proposed by a party to which respondents are inclined changes depending on the policy being dragnet (Figure 6). For both parties, I find a very small (Greens  $-0.35$ ; AfD  $0.48$ ) and not significant effect. In sum, the evidence does not support Hypothesis 3a and 3b.

## 5. Discussion

In this paper, I investigated how citizens cope with threat, restriction, and ideology (in the form of partisanship) and what influence this has on their preferences for civil liberties or security. The central findings of the study are that (a) citizens who are averse to the party that proposes a security policy are clearly less likely to support this policy and (b) citizens are less likely to support a security policy if it is dragnet and therefore restricts the citizens themselves. These two attributes dominated the preference formation in comparison to other factors. The study extends our understanding of (1) the influence of political polarization in a context in which citizens prefer a policy but have an aversion to the political actor that proposes the policy, (2) citizens' support for surveillance when they are personally affected, and (3) the rejection of any kind of terrorism, independent of the underlying ideology.

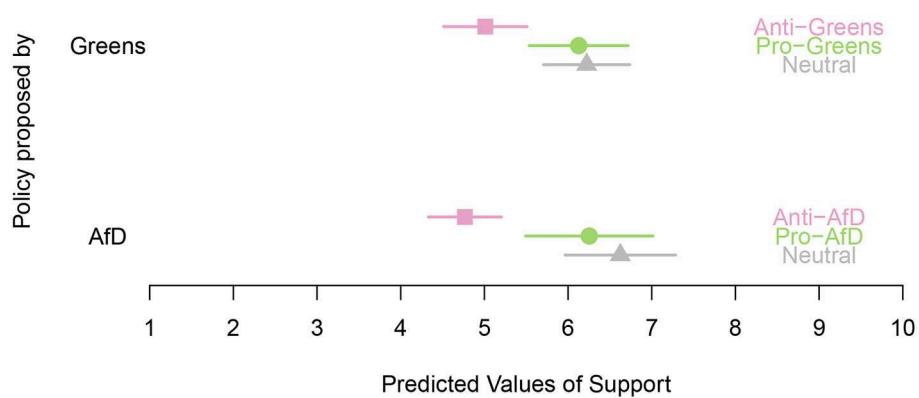
A direct translation to the real world depends on parties' behavior after an attack. If parties stand united, a rally-round-the-flag effect can occur, in which partisanship plays a minor role and citizens support the government's action (Kam and Ramos, 2008). However, parties do not necessarily stand united. For example, in the aftermath of the aforementioned right-wing terrorist attack on people believed to have a migrant background in 2020 in Hanau, Germany, parties have not taken a unified position. Medeiros and Makhashvili (2022) examined the discourse on Twitter, where parties and individual politicians expressed their condolence, but also stated their opinions. The evolving discourse consisted of mainly two clusters. The first cluster contained messages from journalists, legacy media accounts, anti-racist activists, and politicians from the SPD and *Die Linke* (center-left and left-wing party). The second cluster was centered around the AfD, far-right political actors, and far-right spam accounts. The authors interpret the discourse as polarized (Medeiros and Makhashvili, 2022, p. 45). This example is not an exception of the AfD being isolated in their position (Urman, 2020). In such a case, i.e., when parties appear not uniform, the results of the study are likely to hold. The acceptance of policy proposals will depend to a certain degree on the policy-proposing party.

While this study investigated the specific context of terrorism, its implications are likely to apply to other external shocks. Terrorism is comparable to the threat of violence from other sources such as war or crime. Similarities appear in two regards, in the physical dimension and in the symbolic

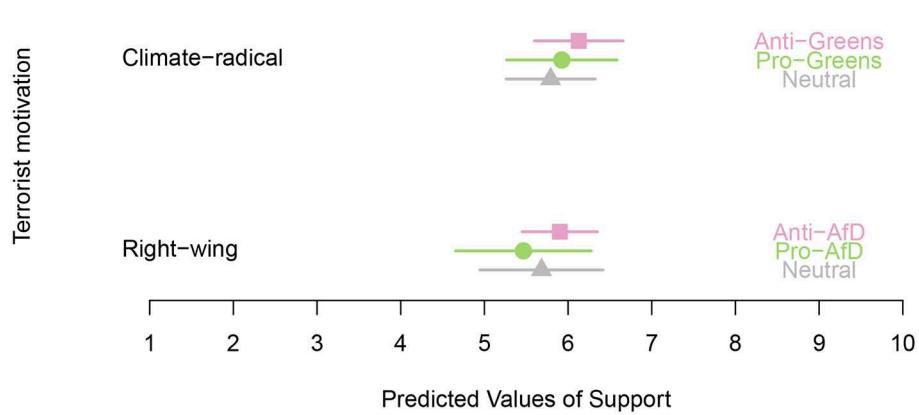
dimension (Vergani, 2018, p. 23). This has also been shown in empirical studies that compared citizens' willingness to accept cuts in civil liberties when they are faced with crime instead of terrorism (Mondak and Hurwitz, 2012).

The manipulation of threat as a single factor had no influence on citizens' support for surveillance (contrary to the expectations stated in Hypothesis 1a). This is in line with other experimental studies (such as Helbling et al., 2022), in which a treatment that included terrorist threat did not influence citizens' policy attitudes. However, it contradicts other experimental studies that have successfully shown an impact of terrorist threat on policy support by mentioning the number of victims in the past 3 years in their treatment (Ziller and Helbling, 2021). In the present study, citizens were asked to imagine a terrorist attack. This attack was described as (a) threatening for the individual citizen, their friends, and family, (b) not threatening for the individual citizen, their friends, and family, or (c) not further specified. Accordingly, respondents always had to imagine a terrorist attack. Even though respondents in group (c) did not get any information whether the threat was personal or not, they still were asked to think about a terrorist attack. Since terrorism is generally threatening, this could explain why no differences were found between the threat conditions. An alternative explanation would be a disconnection of perceived threat and actual situations: "Subjectively perceived threats do not necessarily have to correspond to an objectively threatening situation—if the latter can be determined at all" (Trüdinger, 2019, p. 33). If citizens did not perceive the shown description as personally threatening, but feel threatened by terrorism in general, then we would expect no impact of the treatment dimension. This argument is supported by an additional analysis in which the perceived personal threat is investigated based on the treatment dimensions. The manipulation of threat did not change how respondents perceived personal threat (see Supplementary Section 5). A third explanation might be that social threat instead of personal threat explains citizens' preferences to increase security at the cost of civil liberties (Huddy et al., 2002, p. 488). Counter-terrorism policies are rather an answer to threat that affects the whole of society than to one that affects the individual. As previous research on policy preferences has shown, people try to evaluate what is not only the best for themselves but also for their surroundings (Sears et al., 1980). Therefore, they do not necessarily form policy preferences only according to their own situation and feelings. However, this explanation is less convincing since empirical studies have already shown the impact of personal threat on security preferences (Hetherington and Suhay, 2011; Asbrock and Fritzsche, 2013).

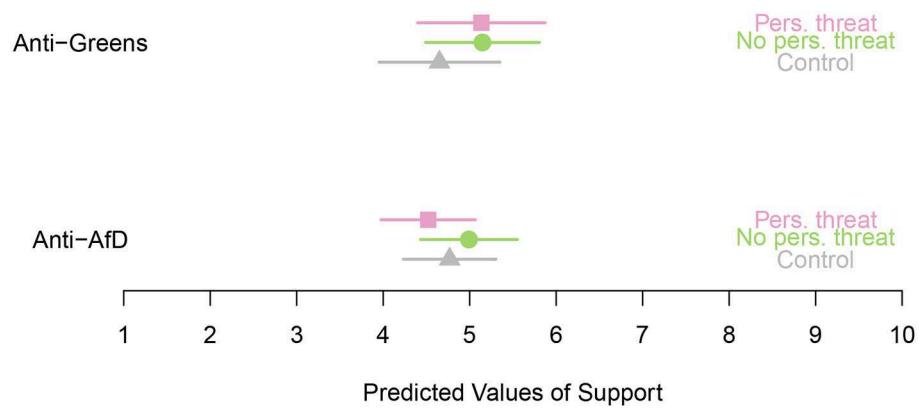
For the impact of personal threat on support for targeted and dragnet policies, the result was rather surprising (see Figure 2). Personal threat does not increase the overall support for counter-terrorism policies (as expected prior to the study, stated in Hypothesis 1c), but instead changes



**FIGURE 3**  
Predicted values for support for the surveillance policy based on the policy-proposing party and the inclination/disinclination to the respective party. Lines around the point estimates indicate 95% confidence intervals.



**FIGURE 4**  
Predicted values for the support of the surveillance policy based on the motivation of terrorists and the inclination/disinclination to the AfD or The Greens. Lines around the point estimates indicate 95% confidence intervals.



**FIGURE 5**  
Predicted values for support of the surveillance policy. The policy is proposed by a party citizens are averse to. Results are shown for different degrees of exposure to threat. Lines around the point estimates indicate 95% confidence intervals.

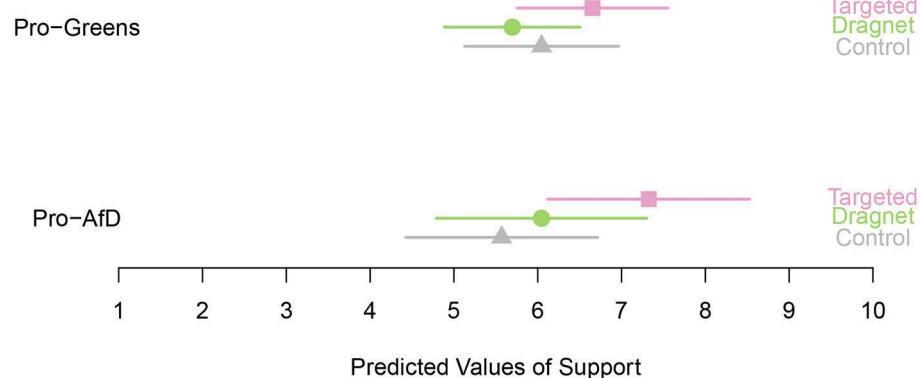


FIGURE 6

Predicted values for support of the surveillance policy. The policy is proposed by a party citizens are inclined to. Results are shown for different policy types. Lines around the point estimates indicate 95% confidence intervals.

the preference for the type of policy. When citizens are under threat, the support for targeted measures increases and the support for dragnet measures decreases compared to measures when citizens are under no personal threat. One possible explanation could be that people who are personally threatened do not want to be additionally targeted by a policy. They do not want to carry a double burden. Testing this hypothesis or alternative ones is left to future research.

In contrast to perceived threat, partisanship has a strong influence on citizens' support for a security policy. However, real-world threat is expected to reduce the strength of partisan cues. Instead of relying on party cues only, citizens make use of the best evidence they can find (Druckman et al., 2021). In the case of the here discussed security policy, citizens would be expected to evaluate how effective the policy is to prevent them from threat. When considered effective, the impact of partisanship is expected to decrease. This relationship remains to be investigated in future studies.

The second dimension in which no differences in policy support was found concerns the motivation of the terrorists in the treatment. Hypothesis 2c stated that the support for counter-terrorism measures would decrease when citizens share the ideology of terrorist actors. While it was quite unlikely to find support for terrorist actions in the general population, it is reassuring that terrorist motivation does not influence citizens' support for counter-measures. Normatively speaking, this is positive news for democracy. A natural experiment has shown that right-wing extremist attacks shifted citizens who hold a right ideology away from this ideology (Pickard et al., 2022). The present study

contributes to this finding by showing that other ideologies also do not lead respondents to change their preference for civil liberties.

Lastly, there was no significance for the small effect sizes for Hypothesis 3a and 3b. Personal threat did not overrule the disliking of a party and becoming target of surveillance did not lower citizens' policy support when the policy was proposed by the citizens' preferred party. Since three-way interactions were needed in this study to test these hypotheses, the experimental power was rather low, which makes it difficult to detect small effect sizes. As a result, these hypotheses cannot be rejected with high certainty. Instead, this provides ground for future research with more tailored experimental designs to examine the relationship between action by preferred parties and restrictions for individual citizens.

Subject to the limitations noted above, the findings indicate that citizens' attitudes toward security are rather shaped by counter-terrorism than by terrorism. First, citizens' agreement with security policies rather depends on the scope of the policy and whether they are affected by it. Second, their support of these policies depends on their liking or disliking of the policy-proposing party. Since counter-terrorism, and the discussed issue of surveillance in particular, is preventive in nature, these factors outweigh the terrorist motivation and personal threat. The study contributes to the understanding of citizens' preferences for security policies in a context in which the need for such policies is emphasized. In a broader sense, this has implications for political polarization because citizens are less likely to support otherwise preferred policies if they are proposed by a party the citizens disliked.

## Data availability statement

The data set and replication file are available online (<https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/2ZOPHQ>). Further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

## Ethics statement

The studies involving human participants were reviewed and approved by Ethics Committee of the University of Mannheim. The patients/participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study.

## Author contributions

The author confirms being the sole contributor of this work and has approved it for publication.

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## Conflict of interest

The author declares that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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## Supplementary material

The Supplementary Material for this article can be found online at: <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fpos.2022.1006711/full#supplementary-material>

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