Are Democracies Really Softer Targets?
Domestic Politics and State-Terrorist Bargaining in Hostage-taking Terrorism

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Abstract:

Terrorism scholars have argued that democracies make soft targets for terrorist groups due to their high sensitivity to civilian casualties and the influential role of democratic citizenry in shaping state policy. While recent studies show that terrorists target democratic states more frequently, it is unclear whether and how regime type affects the target country’s response to terrorism. This study fills this void by providing a quantitative analysis of how regime type and other domestic-level variables shape government responses to hostage-taking terrorism, which is a unique form of terrorism that coerces the target government into negotiating over its citizens’ lives under public scrutiny. Using data on government responses to terrorist demands in hostage-taking incidents from 1978 to 2005, I find that democracies are not softer targets when it comes to bargaining with terrorist groups over hostage release. A further comparison across democratic targets shows that, leaders nearing election time are more easily coerced into concessions by hostage-taking terrorists, whereas majoritarian governments and those that operate under institutional constraints on their executive decision-making powers are significantly less likely to offer concessions.

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