

PUBLIC OPINION PROS

December
2005

An Online Magazine for the Polling Professional
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FEATURES

Political Ignorance Revisited

By Stephen Earl Bennett

Most Americans are out to lunch when it comes to basic information about politics. [\(more\)](#)

Deliberation and Its Discontents

By Frank Louis Rusciano

Deliberative discussions cannot cure all of the ills of postmodern democracy, but they do appear to have potential. [\(more\)](#)

When the Trains Exploded in Madrid: Fear, Anger, Public Opinion, and Government Change

By Kenneth A. Rasinski, Tom W. Smith, and Juan Díez-Nicolás

There were similarities between the Spanish attacks and those of September 11. The political fallout, however, was much different. [\(more\)](#)



FROM THE FIELD


Online vs. In-Person: Experiments with Mode, Format, and Question Wordings

By Tom W. Smith and J. Michael Dennis

How comparable can e-surveys be to those utilizing more traditional survey modes? [\(more\)](#)



DEPARTMENTS

 *From the Editor*

Sound Bites, Unsound Governance

By Lisa Ferraro Parmelee

 *Op-Ed*


No Way to Jimmy with Federal Elections

By Martin Plissner


 *Columns*

What Do I Know?

By John Benson

 *Letters to the Editor*

Public Opinion Pros would like to hear from you.

 *In Print Presents: Public Opinion Classics*

Insights from a World War II Survey

By Samuel A. Stouffer, et al.

An excerpt from *The American Soldier: Adjustment During Army Life*.

[\(more\)](#)

 *Links*

A guide to the best of public opinion and polling on the web.



When the Trains Exploded in Madrid: Fear, Anger, Public Opinion, and Government Change

By [*Kenneth A. Rasinski*](#), [*Tom W. Smith*](#), and [*Juan Díez-Nicolás*](#)

On March 11th, 2004, the city of Madrid suffered terrorist attacks that exacted a considerable toll on human life. During rush hour that morning, ten explosive devices were detonated within three minutes of each other aboard commuter trains, resulting in nearly 200 dead and over 1,400 wounded. There were similarities between the Spanish attacks and the ones that occurred in the United States on September 11, 2001. Both were perpetrated by Islamic militants (presumably al-Qaeda members), and both involved transportation systems.

The political fallout, however, was much different in the two countries. President George W. Bush, whose popularity was waning, was able to use the 9/11 attacks as a rallying point for his administration. In Spain, the incumbent Popular Party (PP) was voted out of office after the Madrid attacks, which occurred three days before the March 14 Spanish national elections. While there was no apparent political motivation for the Spanish attacks, the effects for the PP were devastating.

According to a March 9, 2005, Associated Press report, the bombings “vaulted” the Spanish Socialist Party (Partido Socialista Obrero Español, or PSOE) to power and gave the favored PP an “unexpected” loss. How favored was the PP and how unexpected was this loss? Well before the elections, the Spanish public expressed extreme opposition to Spain’s involvement with the United States in the war in Iraq, with 85 percent opposed in November 2003. But, as reported by the *New York Times* that December, the PP [kept most of its seats](#) in regional and municipal legislatures held after the fall of Baghdad, suggesting a change in support for the party’s foreign policy and giving the administration hope for a victory in the national election.

Actual results of the municipal elections of 2003 suggest a less optimistic interpretation. When elected deputies to town councils were considered (Table 1), the PP exceeded the PSOE, but only by 423 deputies. Compared to the 1999 municipal elections, the PP lost about 1,000 deputies while the PSOE gained almost 1,300. Circumstances prevailing before the Madrid terrorist attacks, including opposition to the Iraq war, may have already placed the PP in a precarious position.

Table 1

**Number of Elected Deputies to Town Councils for PP and PSOE
1999 and 2003 Municipal Elections**

	1999	2003
PP	24,623	23,621
PSOE	21,917	23,198

A survey funded by the National Science Foundation and conducted in May 2004 as part of a monthly poll by [Analysis Sociologicos, Economicos, y Politicos \(ASEP\)](#) in Spain examined the psychological reactions and personal and political concerns associated with the attacks. Typically, the ASEP uses a national sample only. In this case, an oversample of residents of Madrid was included so that comparisons to the national sample could be made.

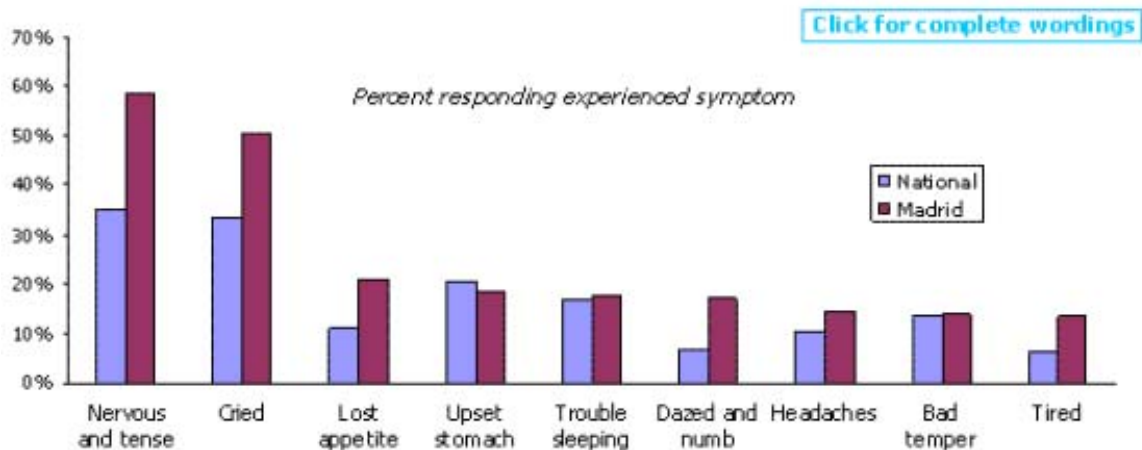
We attempted to use the data to explore as closely as possible the relationship between public reactions to the event and respondents' vote choices in the subsequent election. To put Spaniards' responses into larger context, we then compared them with results from two other surveys involving national disasters, one examining American reactions to the 9/11 terrorist attacks, and one looking at American reactions to the November 1963 assassination of U.S. president John F. Kennedy. We hoped that the comparisons could help us understand Spanish response to the Madrid attacks beyond what we could see by looking within.

To begin with, we examined fifteen different psychological reactions, or symptoms, reported by respondents after the attacks. Of these, nine were reported by at least 10 percent of respondents in the Madrid sample (see Figure 1). The predominant reactions were feeling nervous or tense, and crying, with about 35 percent of the country overall reporting one of these reactions. Residents of Madrid were noticeably more likely to report feeling nervous or crying, with reports of nervousness considerably higher than reports of crying.

Figure 1

Percent Reporting Each of Nine Common Symptoms

Question: I am going to read a list of things some people have said happened to them since they heard about the bombings. Please tell me whether or not they happened to you.



Source: Survey by Analisis Sociologicos, Economicos, y Politicos (Madrid, Spain), May 2004.

The reactions of the people in Madrid were similar to those reported in the United States after 9/11, although they were not as extreme. In 2002, [Tom W. Smith and Kenneth A. Rasinski found](#) that, after the 9/11 attacks, 60 percent of Americans reported crying and 51 percent reported feeling nervous or tense. Smith and Rasinski also compared results from 9/11 to those of the American public after the assassination of President Kennedy. The most commonly reported response after the Kennedy assassination was feeling nervous and tense (69 percent), with crying the second most reported (53 percent). In terms of the order of the two most prominent symptoms, the responses of those in Madrid more closely resembled those of Americans to the political tragedy than to the terrorist attacks.

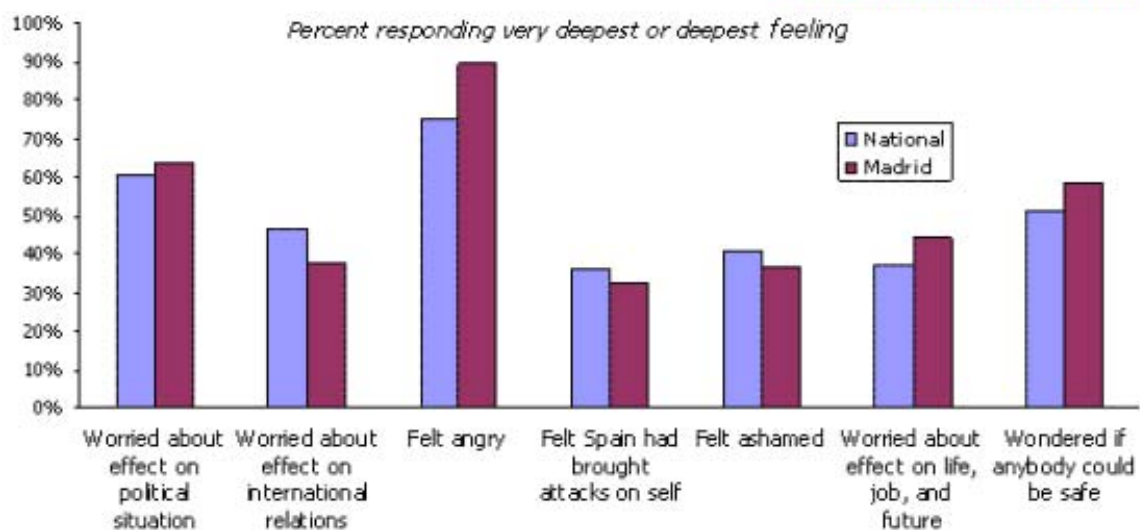
Among political and personal concerns, in Spain, and particularly in Madrid, anger was a dominating response to the train bombings (Figure 2); 75 percent and 89 percent, respectively, reported feeling “angry that anyone would do such a terrible deed.”

Figure 2

Concern About Political and Personal Circumstances

Question: I'm going to read some ways that some people felt when they first heard about the terrorist attacks and I'd like you to tell me whether the statement represents your very deepest feeling, a feeling that was quite deep, whether the statement crossed your mind, or whether it never occurred to you.

[Click for complete wordings](#)



Source: Survey by Analisis Sociologicos, Economicos, y Politicos (Madrid, Spain), May 2004.

This outstripped the 65 percent of Americans reporting anger after 9/11 and the 44 percent reporting it after the Kennedy assassination. Interestingly, the sense of shame among Spaniards was closer to that reported by the Americans after the Kennedy assassination than after the 9/11 attacks. Nearly 41 percent in Spain and 37 percent in Madrid reported that they were ashamed that this event could happen in their country. Twenty-two percent of the U.S. population reported feeling ashamed after 9/11, compared with 50 percent who reported feeling ashamed after the Kennedy assassination.

The majority of Spanish citizens (60 percent) thought that the attacks might affect internal politics. These concerns were slightly higher in Madrid (63 percent) than in

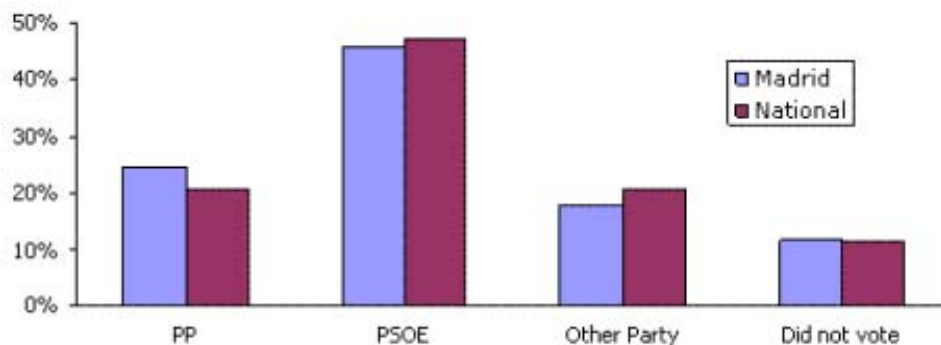
the nation as a whole. Compared to the nation as a whole, a smaller percentage of citizens of Madrid was concerned with the foreign policy implications. Forty-six percent of the nation thought that the terrorist attacks would affect Spain's relationship with other countries, compared to 38 percent of the population of Madrid. Nationally, 36 percent thought that Spain might have done something to bring on the attacks, compared to 32 percent in Madrid.

As might be expected, those in Madrid were more concerned about personal impact and general safety. Forty-four percent wondered how the attacks might affect them personally, and 58 percent were concerned about whether anyone could be safe in Spain. These sentiments were held by 37 percent and 51 percent, respectively, of the national sample.

Finally, when asked about their vote choices in the most recent national election, overall, about 22 percent of respondents in the national sample said that they had voted for the PP. The percentage was slightly higher among those living in Madrid (24.8 percent versus 20.9 percent nationally, as Figure 3 shows).

Figure 3

Vote Choice: Madrid and National



Source: Survey by Analysis Sociologicos, Economicos, y Politicos (Madrid, Spain), May 2004.

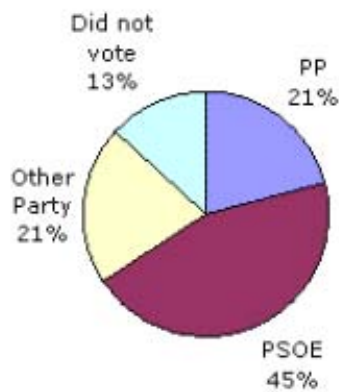
Having gauged separately the psychological responses of our sample to the Madrid attacks, we created a summary measure for each respondent by adding across the fifteen symptoms in our inventory. Nationally, 41 percent reported experiencing at least one of these symptoms, compared to 57 percent in Madrid.

We divided the samples into two parts: those who stated that they had experienced none of the fifteen symptoms and those who said that they had experienced at least one. When vote choice was examined by reported symptoms comparing these two groups, no difference in support for the PP was found for the national sample (Figures 4A and 4B).

Figure 4A

Vote Choice: National

Among those reporting no symptoms

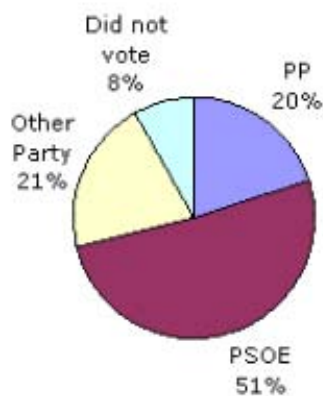


Source: Survey by Analisis Sociologicos, Economicos, y Politicos (Madrid, Spain), May 2004.

Figure 4B

Vote Choice: National

Among those reporting at least one symptom

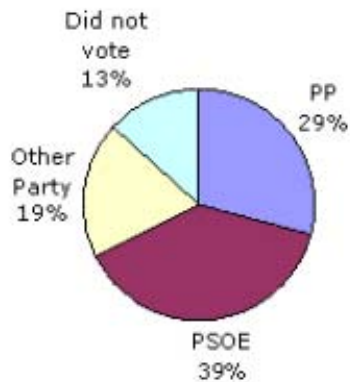


In Madrid, however, a substantially smaller percentage of those who said that they had experienced at least one symptom reported having voted for the PP (Figures 5A and 5B).

Figure 5A

Vote Choice: Madrid

Among those reporting no symptoms

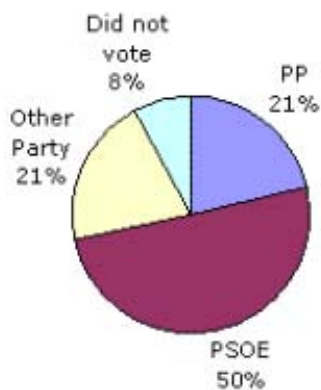


Source: Survey by Analysis Sociologicos, Economicos, y Politicos (Madrid, Spain), May 2004.

Figure 5B

Vote Choice: Madrid

Among those reporting at least one symptom



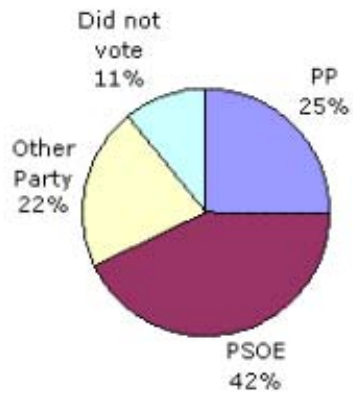
We mentioned earlier that about a third of the country thought that Spain might have done something to bring on the attacks. Although we did not ask what they thought Spain might have done, it is highly likely that citizens were thinking about

their country's involvement in the war in Iraq. To explore this further, we again divided the sample into two, separating out those who put virtually no stock in the idea that Spain had brought the attacks on through its own actions (responding "never crossed my mind" or "not very deep concern") from those who were convinced of this idea (deep concern/one of my deepest concerns), and examined reported vote choice for the national sample and for citizens of Madrid. At both the national and local levels, a lower percentage of citizens who held Spain responsible for the attacks reported voting for the PP compared to those who did not hold Spain responsible (Figures 6A, 6B, 7A, and 7B). The difference in support was nearly three percentage points less among those in Madrid compared to those in the Spanish national sample.

Figure 6A

Vote Choice: National

Among those saying Spain did not bring attacks on itself



Source: Survey by Analisis Sociologicos, Economicos, y Politicos (Madrid, Spain), May 2004.

Figure 6B

Vote Choice: National

Among those saying Spain brought attacks on itself

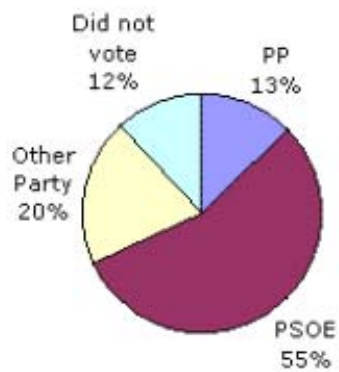


Figure 7A

Vote Choice: Madrid

Among those saying Spain did not bring attacks on itself

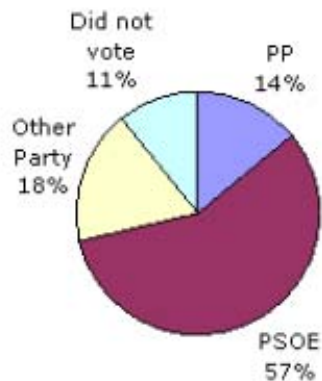


Source: Survey by Analysis Sociologicos, Economicos, y Politicos (Madrid, Spain), May 2004.

Figure 7B

Vote Choice: Madrid

Among those saying Spain brought attacks on itself



The Spanish citizenry responded to the awful 3/11 bombings in ways that are understandable and natural. When confronted with such an assault, people react with anger, outrage, fear, anguish, and a feeling that they want to hold someone or something accountable. The results of our survey indicate that the psychological reactions of Spaniards were similar to those of Americans after 9/11. In both countries, citizens cried upon hearing the news and showed a variety of physiological responses, such as anxiety, loss of appetite, and sleeplessness. As would be expected, proximity to the event elicited the greatest response. In Spain,

a higher percentage of those in Madrid, compared to the nation as a whole, reported experiencing the symptoms.

There is, however, an intriguing difference between the ordering of the two predominant responses to 3/11 and 9/11. As noted, Smith and Rasinski showed that crying was the predominant response and anxiety a secondary one to 9/11. Their comparison with the Kennedy Assassination Study showed that the order of the two responses was reversed in the aftermath of Kennedy's assassination, with anxiety coming out on top of crying.

Though it is difficult to be definitive, it is conceivable that a public event that is disruptive of the current political order is more likely to engender anxiety than tears. Perhaps this predominance of anxiety, especially in Madrid, is an indicator that the attacks did tip the balance in favor of the PSOE over the PP.

The effect of attacks such as those of March 11, 2004, in Madrid is likely to be complex. Citizens were anxious, sorrowful, fearful, and angry, and they apparently focused some of their reactions on the incumbent government. While psychological reactions seemed to moderate vote choice in Madrid, the data do not indicate that this was the case for the rest of Spain. However, at both the national and local levels, it is clear that those who held Spain accountable for the act were most ready to turn against the incumbent, pro-Iraq war, party. The pattern of national and local results indicates that the attacks clearly galvanized support for the antiwar PSOE and further eroded the already unpopular foreign policy of the PP.

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Additional reading

Smith, Tom W., and Kenneth A. Rasinski. 2002. Assassination and terror: Two American tragedies compared. *Public Perspective* 13 (no. 5): 34-38.

Smith, Tom W., Kenneth A. Rasinski, and Marianna Toce. 2001. American rebounds: A national study of public response to the September 11th terrorist attacks. Chicago, IL: NORC, at The University of Chicago.

Kenneth A. Rasinski, Jennifer Berktold, Tom W. Smith, and Bethany Albertson. 2002. America recovers: A follow up to a national study of public response to the September 11th terrorist attacks. Chicago, IL: NORC, at The University of Chicago.