

Performing on Cue?

The Formation of Public Opinion Toward War

Christopher Gelpi

Duke University

August 7, 2009

Draft: Please do not cite without permission.

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gelpi@duke.edu

Word Count: 12,221

Abstract

The public's inability to gain direct personal experience or information about American military operations means that individuals must rely upon cues in order to form opinions about war. But in an environment filled with potential cues, which ones do Americans tend to rely upon when deciding whether to support an ongoing military operation? This experimental study uses two distinct cues within the context of a newspaper story about the Iraq War to test four theoretical models of the American public's reliance on cues. The results provide fairly consistent support for the "surprising events" model of opinion formation, which suggests that individuals will attend to news events that conflict with their expectations in an effort to update their attitudes toward the war. These results also provide support for the cost/benefit perspective on the formation of public opinion toward war that underpins much of the literature on casualty tolerance during military conflicts.

Since ordinary citizens have little direct experience with American military operations, they must inevitably construct their attitudes toward war in response to information provided by elite sources such as the news media and partisan politicians. While scholars generally agree on this perspective for understanding public opinion, much less consensus exists regarding the kinds of cues Americans tend to rely on when forming their attitudes toward war and how they use the information contained in those cues. For example, some scholars have argued that partisan elite opinions are the most important cues during wartime, while others have emphasized the importance of events from the conflict that are reported in the news media. At the same time, some scholars have argued that individuals engage in “motivated processing” that leads them to attend to cues that reinforce their existing beliefs and expectations, while others contend that individuals respond to cues that provide surprising or new information.

This article compares these different perspectives on the use of cues in the formation of public attitudes toward war. Through experimentally manipulated news stories, a representative sample of the American public was presented with a variety of cues about American progress toward the successful resolution of the Iraq war. Subjects were then asked about their willingness to support a continued American military presence in Iraq. The results indicate that the subjects responded to media reports about battlefield events more strongly than to partisan elite interpretations of those events. Moreover, the subjects attended to new and surprising information in order to update their beliefs about the war rather than selectively attending to information that reinforced existing attitudes. These results provide encouraging support for the developing “rational expectations” model of public opinion and foreign policy (Gartner, 2008). Yet at the

same time, the wide partisan gap with which subjects entered the study suggests the continuing impact and importance of partisan cue-giving.

Existing Knowledge on Opinion Formation and Military Conflict

Early research on the American public's attitudes toward the use of military force tended to view public opinion toward foreign policy as highly idiosyncratic and unstructured (Almond 1950; Lippman 1955; Campbell et. al. 1960; Converse 1964). But Mueller's (1971, 1973) seminal work on casualties and public support for the Vietnam and Korean Wars marked an important turning point in the study of public opinion and American foreign policy (see also Milstein 1968, 1973). Mueller's findings implied that the public formed coherent and systematic judgments about foreign policy events. To be sure, Mueller did not argue that public attitudes toward war are highly sophisticated. According to his view, public attitudes are driven by a single piece of information: the number of U.S. soldiers killed in the operation. Nonetheless, the core of Mueller's claim is that the public relies on news events reported from the battlefield – casualties – to form and update their attitudes toward an ongoing war.

Building on Mueller's work, much of the growing literature on casualty tolerance has adopted the view that the public engages in a cost-benefit analysis – comparing the likely benefits of continuing to fight with the expected costs (Larson 2000; Gartner 2008). Mueller (1971, 1973, 2005) and Gartner and Segura (1998, see also Gartner 2008), for example, focus on incoming information about casualties. Jentleson (1992, Jentleson & Britton 1998; see also Eichenberg 2005) focus on information about the mission objective. Kull and Destler (1999) focus on information about the participation

of allied states and international organizations in the conflict. And Gelpi, Feaver and Reifler (2005/2006, 2007, 2009) focus on information about the success of the mission on the battlefield. Gartner (2008) builds upon this perspective to formulate a “rational expectations theory” of war support. More central to this literature than normative debates about “rationality,” however, is the common assertion that individuals respond primarily to cues that are rooted in “objective” characteristics of the military conflict. This research is rooted in a broader literature suggesting that the public appears to respond in systematic ways to new information about foreign policy events. (Nincic 1988, 1992; Page and Shapiro, 1992; Peffley and Hurwitz, 1992; Aldrich et. al. 2006).

But other approaches to attitude formation emphasize the public’s strong reliance on elite partisan opinions rather than news events (Zaller and Feldman, 1992; Zaller, 1992; Bartels 2002). Studies of “priming effects,” for example, have shown substantial elite influence on individual attitudes (Iyengar and Kinder, 1987; Krosnick and Kinder, 1990; Mendelberg 2001; Druckman and Holmes, 2004). Similarly, numerous studies of “framing effects” indicate that individual attitudes toward the use of military force can be altered through the provision of narrative frames (Iyengar and Simon, 1993; Allen, O’Laughlin and Sullivan, 1994; Herrmann, Tetlock and Visser, 1999; Aday, Cluverius and Livingston, 2005; Boettcher and Cobb 2006; Berinsky and Kinder, 2006). And a number of these studies have directly critiqued the casualty tolerance literature for its lack of attention to elite partisan rhetoric as a source of public attitudes toward war. (Boettcher and Cobb, 2006; Berinsky and Druckman 2007; Berinsky 2007; see also Johnson and Tierney 2006).

But other recent research supports the view that elite influence over the public is more limited. The literature on political persuasion suggests that the public can rely on cues from more informed sources in order to express opinions and make choices that reflect their interests despite their lack of knowledge (Mondak 1993; Lupia 1994, Lupia and McCubbins 1998; Lau and Redlawsk 2001; Boudreau 2006a, 2006b). Similarly, Druckman (2001, 2004; see also Miller and Krosnick 2000 and Huckfeldt et. al. 2005) demonstrates that while framing effects are pervasive when subjects are only provided with a single frame for interpreting an issue, citizens are able to avoid these framing effects when they are provided with alternative frames or advice from trusted sources.

Events and Elites: Cues for Foreign Policy Attitude Formation

In order for a cue to be influential, an individual must believe that the cue-giver has some knowledge of the true state of the world. But expert knowledge is not sufficient for successful persuasion because listeners must be concerned about whether the speaker will deceive them. Thus Lupia and McCubbins (1998) argue that knowledgeable speakers will be persuasive in the event that one of two additional conditions are met: 1) the listener perceives him or herself to have common interests with the speaker; or 2) the speaker faces external constraints such as verification of the truthfulness of their message, penalties for lying and or paying a cost to send their message.¹

Within the realm of politics and political persuasion one of the most important indices that individuals use to judge a speaker's interests is their partisan identification (Page and Shapiro 1982; Sniderman, Brody and Tetlock 1991; Berinsky 2007). For this reason, much of the literature on opinion formation and survey response has emphasized

partisan labels as the central cues that individuals use to construct their attitudes on a variety of issues (Zaller and Feldman 1992; Zaller 1992; Bartels 2002; Berinsky 2007; Baum and Groeling 2009; Bartels and Achen 2006). At the same time, the presence of multiple cues in the political environment opens up the possibility that individuals may attend to alternative sources – such as news events – that will limit the impact of elite opinion (Popkin 1991; Huckfeldt et. al. 1999; Huckfeldt et. al. 2005).

Viewed in this context, one important dimension of the debate over the formation of American attitudes toward war concerns whether and how individuals rely on messages from the media regarding international events as opposed to statements by partisan political elites. As noted above, the casualty tolerance literature has tended to emphasize the public's response to news events – such as casualties or progress on the battlefield – the most influential cues in shaping support for an ongoing war. Scholars of American politics, on the other hand, have emphasized the primacy of partisan elite opinion.²

A second important division in this debate concerns the extent to which the content of the cues themselves – whether from elites or events – shapes the propensity of individuals to attend to them. As noted above, the cost/benefit approach of the casualty tolerance literature suggests that individuals are seeking to develop attitudes that reflect their interests in a low information environment and so will attend to cues that give surprising information that suggests the need to revise their judgments. Thus individuals should respond surprising cues that push them to alter their opinions (i.e. withdraw or restore support for a mission).

But public opinion studies of “motivated processing” have argued that individuals discount information that conflicts with their existing beliefs and disproportionately attend to cues that reinforce their current attitudes (Lord, Ross, and Lepper 1979; Taber and Lodge 2006). Not surprisingly, a substantial literature suggests that party identification can be an important source of “motivated processing” (Abramowitz 1978; Bartels 2002; Lenz 2006; Achen and Bartels 2006). Rather than updating their attitudes in response to surprising events, these arguments suggest that individuals will ignore facts and events that are inconsistent with their partisan predispositions. Such arguments imply that opinion change should be rare. When individuals do change attitudes, however, these arguments expect that they will do so in order to make their own views comport with those of the partisan elites with whom they identify.

These two debates – partisan opinion versus news events and surprising versus reinforcing information – combine to identify four differing ways in which the public may rely on elite cues. These information-processing models are summarized in Figure 1.³

Figure 1 about here

The upper-left quadrant of Figure 1 describes the “surprising events” model of American public opinion formation. According to the “surprising events” model, individuals attend to independent information about international events and use surprising new information about those events to update their beliefs. While not always explicitly articulated, this model of information processing underlies much of the literature on casualty sensitivity (Mueller 1971, 1973, 2005; Gartner and Segura 1998; Feaver and Gelpi 2004; Gelpi, Feaver and Reifler 2005/2006, 2009; Gartner 2008) as

well as much of the literature on the “rational” formation of public opinion toward foreign policy (Nincic 1988, 1992; Page and Shapiro, 1992; Peffley and Hurwitz, 1992, Jentleson 1992; Jentleson and Britton 1998; Eichenberg 2005).

The upper-right quadrant of Figure 1 includes “surprising opinions” models of opinion formation suggest that individuals attend to partisan cues when forming their foreign policy attitudes, but they tend to focus on surprising partisan cues to help them update and revise their beliefs. Parts of the literature on the importance of domestic partisan consensus in shaping support for American military conflicts fits within this category (Larson 1996, 2000; Berinsky 2007; Berinsky and Druckman 2007), as does literature focusing on “costly” partisan rhetoric as critical to opinion change (Baum and Groeling 2009).

Arguments in the bottom half of Figure 1 draw on the “motivated processing” perspective to argue that individuals attend to cues that reinforce their predispositions. The “reinforcing events” model in the lower left quadrant focus on “motivated processing” based on individuals’ current attitudes on the issue in questions.⁴ Works in psychology such as Lord, Ross and Lepper (1979), as well as extensions of this perspective into political science (Taber and Lodge 2006) fit into this category. These works acknowledge that individuals may attend to media reporting on “real-world” events, but contends that they will selectively ignore cues about events that conflict with their pre-existing beliefs. Thus respondents who support a military conflict will attend to reports that it is going well, while those who oppose the operation will attend to media reports suggesting that things are going poorly.

The “reinforcing opinions” model in the lower right quadrant shares this same emphasis motivated processing, but focuses on the central role of party identification as the key source “motivation.” These arguments suggest that individuals will attend to cues that reinforce their partisan identification rather than their prior attitude on the issue per se.⁵ More specifically, these arguments suggest that cues from elite co-partisans that reinforce the party position will cause individuals to shift their attitudes toward those of their party (Bartels 2002, Lenz 2006; Achen and Bartels 2006).

The Formation of Attitudes Toward the Iraq War

I evaluate these four differing models of opinion formation through an examination of attitudes toward the Iraq War. While the arguments summarized in Figure 1 could be tested in a variety of issues areas, the Iraq War presents an excellent opportunity to examine this debate for a number of reasons. Most importantly, the salience of Iraq in the public mind over a period of several years means that individuals are likely to have well-developed (and potentially entrenched) attitudes toward Iraq (Jacobson 2007). Thus the Iraq War represents a very “hard case” (Eckstein 1975) for testing the claim that individuals will update their views in response to “surprising” cues (either from events or partisan elites).

Moreover, partisan differences on the Iraq War have been stark for some time. While much of the leadership of the Democratic Party initially supported President Bush’s decision to attack Iraq, their support of this decision had evaporated by the fall of 2004, and by the fall of 2006 Democratic leaders were nearly unanimous in pressing for a timetable for the withdrawal of troops. Republican leaders, on the other hand, largely

remained steadfast in supporting both Bush's initial decision to attack as well as his desire to avoid any specific timeline for withdrawal. The polarized partisan battle over the war should increase the salience of partisan cues and should make it clear to respondents which partisan cues are "surprising" and which reinforce party views. At the same time, the salience of partisan cues should make it more difficult for the news events cues to influence individual attitudes. Thus while the Iraq War provides a challenging environment for testing any theories about response to surprising cues, it provides an especially hard case for the "surprising events" model that underpins the casualty tolerance literature.

Measuring Public Attitudes Toward Iraq

Throughout 2008 the central debate regarding the Iraq War focused on the question of a timetable for withdrawal. Those who sought to end the war as quickly as possible supported an explicit timetable for withdrawing troops, while those who were willing to continue fighting tended to argue that troop withdrawals should be based on conditions on the ground in Iraq. Thus the central dependent variable in this study is the public's support or opposition to a timetable for withdrawing troops.⁶ Specifically, subjects in the study were asked whether they approved or disapproved of "the policy of setting a timetable with a specific date for withdrawing all American troops from Iraq."⁷

In addition, I examine two attitudes that may contribute to public to support a timetable for withdrawal. Gelpi, Feaver and Reifler (2005/2006, 2009) and Eichenberg (2005) emphasize expectations of success as the most critical factor in determining public

support for a conflict. Thus I also asked respondents how likely they thought it was that the US would succeed in Iraq.

Finally, at the time of this study the public debate over success in Iraq focused centrally on the results the so-called “surge” strategy implemented by the Bush administration beginning in February 2007. The surge involved a change in the mission of US forces – to include population protection – but the most salient aspect of the surge to the public was an increase in the number of US forces in Baghdad and Anbar province. Those who opposed an explicit timetable for withdrawal did so largely on the basis of the claim that the surge had been successful. Thus subjects in the study were asked, “As you may know, last year President Bush sent approximately 30 thousand additional U.S. military forces to try to restore civil order in parts of Iraq. Do you think this increase in U.S. forces has made the situation in Iraq better, worse, or hasn't made much difference?”

Gathering Data on Attitudes Toward Iraq

Data on public attitudes toward Iraq were gathered by Polimetrix/YouGov in a survey fielded from March 19-17 2008.⁸ Polimetrix gathers data from a volunteer opt-in panel of respondents via the internet and produces samples that are representative of the national public through a statistical procedure that selects opt-in respondents that are most similar to a random draw from the 2004 American Communities Study (ACS) conducted by the Census Bureau (Rivers 2007).

As a relatively new method of selecting respondents, Polimetrix's matched opt-in panel methodology has attracted a good deal of attention. Malhotra and Krosnick (2007) argue that levels of partisanship, political interest, and even the structure of multivariate

relationships within the data differ between a matched opt-in panel and the random sample generated for the American National Election Study (ANES). Hill et. al. (2007), on the other hand, conclude that the sample matching techniques produces modest biases which are analogous to the kinds of biases created by random digit dialing (RDD) telephone surveys.

Since these analyses focus on experiments with random assignment, the question of the representativeness of the sample is less critical when estimating treatment effects. Nonetheless, since experimental research must always address questions of external validity, it is worth comparing this sample obtained via Polimetrix's methodology to true random samples such as the ANES or Knowledge Networks' internet panel, which is created with RDD sampling techniques.

Since the most critical issues of sample bias focused on levels of political interest and activity, Table 1 compares levels of interest in politics and rates of voter registration between the 2008 ANES and the matched opt-in sample for this study. ANES and Polimetrix offer somewhat different response categories to the question "How interested are you in information about what's going on in government and politics," making it difficult to compare the samples too precisely. Nonetheless, respondents in the matched opt-in sample appear to express levels of political interest that are roughly similar to those in the ANES sample. Just over 48% of the matched opt-in sample stated that they were "very much" interested in politics as compared to 44% of the ANES sample who are "extremely" or "very" interested. The two samples appear to be even more similar in terms taking action to become involved in politics. Nearly 90% of the matched opt-in

sample stated that they were registered to vote in March of 2008, and in the fall of 2008 92% of ANES respondents stated that they were registered to vote.⁹

However, Malhotra and Krosnick (2007) argue that sample selection method also may alter the observed relationships between attitudes. The current study focuses centrally on beliefs about progress and success in Iraq, so in order to test for this possibility, I replicate the Gelpi, Feaver and Reifler (2005/2006) argument about casualty tolerance in Iraq and compare their results – which were based on an internet panel recruited by RDD techniques - to the current matched opt-in sample.¹⁰ The measure of support for keeping US forces in Iraq differs slightly across these two studies. Gelpi, Feaver and Reifler measure support for staying in Iraq with a 5-category ordinal measure of casualty tolerance. Those who responded in the third, fourth, or fifth categories of this measure indicated that they would approve of keeping US troops in Iraq even if the US suffered additional casualties. The current study, on the other hand, simply asks respondents if they approve of a timetable for withdrawing US troops from Iraq. Figure 2 plots expectations of success against both the predicted probability that a respondent will tolerate additional casualties in the 2004 RDD data and the predicted probability that they will disapprove of a timetable in the 2008 matched opt-in data. For each sample the impact of expectations of success is plotted by the respondent's approval or disapproval of the initial decision to invade Iraq.

Figure 2 About Here

Despite the differences in measurement, sample selection method, and the nearly four years that elapsed between the studies, we can see that the structure of attitudes toward Iraq is fundamentally very similar across these two samples. The predicted

probabilities of support for staying in Iraq are within approximately 2% across the entire range of expectations of success and attitudes toward the initial decision to attack.¹¹ Of course, no analysis can demonstrate that the generalizability of other relationships – including the treatment effects in this study – have not been affected by the matching process in some unforeseen way. But the strong similarities between the Polimetrix data and probability samples from ANES and Knowledge Networks suggest that these data represent a reasonable basis for assessing the experimental treatment effects.

Experimental Evidence on the Formation of Attitudes Toward Iraq

Prior to their responses to questions about the success of the surge, the likely success of the Iraq war, and their approval of a timetable for withdrawal, subjects were presented with a randomly assigned newspaper story about the Iraq War. The stories were comprised of two experimental treatments in a 3x3 fully crossed design with respondents assigned a positive cue, a negative cue, or no cue from two different sources: 1) a Reuters news wire story about events in Iraq and 2) a statement from President Bush about the war. The experimental design is described in Figure 3.

Figure 3 about here

The positive and negative news events stories were similar in both format and length. Each story focused on a raid by US military forces on an Iraqi target and each story identified the raid as part of a broader crackdown on insurgents that coincides with the increase in US force levels. The positive story then mentions a reduction in the overall level of violence against US forces and Iraqi civilians and mentions the reform of the de-Baathification law as evidence of progress toward political reconciliation. The

negative story, on the other hand, mentions continued bombings and violence in Iraq. The negative story then notes the Iraqi Parliament's lack of progress toward passing an oil law as evidence of a lack of political reconciliation. All events in both the positive and negative news stories were reported in mainstream US newspapers between September 2007 and February 2008. The text was kept as close as possible to the original wording so as to give it the feel of a real newspaper story.

The positive and negative partisan opinion cues about Iraq were also similar in format and length. Both the positive and negative cues were statements by President Bush about the level of progress in Iraq. Future research should investigate the impact of both Democratic and Republican cue-givers. However, varying the partisanship of the elite cue-giver would have doubled the number of treatment cells and required doubling the recruitment of subjects. Resources were not available for such a large study, and so I focus on positive and negative opinions from a single source so as to parallel the structure of the news events treatments. This design still allows me to test theories about partisan response to elite opinions by comparing the responses of Democrats, Republicans, and Independents to statements by President Bush.

Bush is a useful foil for investigating the interaction of cues with subjects' predispositions since most Americans had formed relatively stable opinions – either positive or negative – about the President by March of 2008. Of course, the fact that subjects have opinions about the President raises the possibility that the impact of the partisan cues in this study is combined to some extent with their opinions of Bush. As with any experimental study of this kind, we face a tradeoff between realistic accuracy of the treatments and contamination of the treatments with prior experiences. This study

seeks – both in the news events treatments and the elite opinion treatments – to mimic the realistic circumstances of news reporting in which proper names are used instead of hypothetical events and generic “Democratic” or “Republican” politicians. Future research in this area should, of course, explore the impact of different cue givers – both real and hypothetical – as well as the impact of events in hypothetical military operations.

In both the positive and negative cues, the President begins with a statement that he has been evaluating the level of progress in Iraq and he commends US forces for their outstanding dedication and service. In the positive cue the President mentions the reduced level of violence, states that he is encouraged by the political progress made by the al-Maliki government and concludes by stating that he plans to maintain the current level of US forces in Iraq in order to sustain this progress. In the negative cue, the President expresses his frustration at the continued violence in Iraq as well as the low-level of political progress made by the al-Maliki government. He concludes by stating that he plans to reduce the number of US forces in Iraq and redeploy some units home.

The text of the positive cue remained very close to a number of Presidential assessments of the Iraq War. Constructing a negative cue for President Bush was somewhat more difficult, since the President has been fairly consistently optimistic about US prospects for success in Iraq. I constructed the cue simply by reversing the tone of each of the positive statements in the positive cue. The resulting statement was quite similar to the kind of frustration that the President expressed in some of the more candid moments of the series of speeches he made in November and December of 2005 leading up to the first Iraqi Parliamentary elections. Full text of both the positive and negative news stories and Presidential cues are included in the online appendix.

The impact of news cues and partisan cues will be captured through a series of dummy variables denoting the treatments received. For each cue source the dummy variables for positive and negative cues compare those treatments to subjects who received no cue from that source. Respondents' predispositions to respond to cues will be measured through partisan identification. Party ID is obviously the appropriate measure for predisposition to attend to partisan cues, since party labels act as shortcut measures of "common interests" between politicians and voters. But party ID is also an appropriate measure of predispositions to respond to news events because of the very wide partisan gaps regarding perceptions of events on the ground in Iraq. For example, a survey in February 2008 – immediately prior to the implementation of this study – found that 80% of Republicans believed the US was making progress toward defeating the insurgents in Iraq, but only 36% of Democrats shared this view. Independents were only slightly optimistic than Democrats, with 44% of them stating that the US was making progress. Thus entering this study Democrats and Independents tended to hold negative views about the extent of progress in Iraq, while Republicans tended to hold positive views.

Hypotheses on Public Responses to News Events and Presidential Cues

What do the models of opinion formation in Figure 1 tell us about how individuals are likely to respond to the treatments in Figure 3? The "surprising events" model expect that the news events cues will have a greater impact on beliefs than the cue from President Bush. More specifically, however, the these arguments expect that Democrats and Independents should respond most strongly to positive news from Iraq –

which would be surprising given their predisposition to see the mission as failing – while Republicans should be more likely to respond to negative events from Iraq.

The “surprising opinions” model expects individuals to attend to partisan labels, but expect individuals to update their views based on surprising information. Since President Bush is a Republican and is strongly identified with an optimistic view of the likely success of the war, this perspective would suggest that President Bush’s cues are likely to have the greatest impact, but they are only likely to be influential for Republicans who receive a pessimistic cue. According to this view, Democrats and Independents will ignore a cue from the President because of his partisan identification, and Republicans who receive a positive cue from the President will not change their views because this information is expected.¹² Only the surprising cue of pessimism from the President should move Republicans.¹³

The “reinforcing events” model suggests that news events from Iraq will matter, but only those that reinforce existing beliefs. Thus according to this view, negative events will make Democrats and Independents even more pessimistic because they are predisposed to receive this kind of information that reinforces their beliefs. Republicans, on the other hand, will ignore negative events but will become more optimistic in response to good news stories that are consistent with their underlying optimism.

Finally, the “reinforcing opinions” model expects that individuals will respond only to partisan cues from politicians with whom they share interests. But these arguments expect that individuals will tend to discount changes in cues - even from trusted politicians – in order to preserve their beliefs. As a result, this argument suggests that Republicans will respond to positive cues from President Bush by increasing their

optimism. Democrats and Independents, on the other hand, should not respond to cues from the President.

Empirical Results

The impact of news events and presidential cues on subject's beliefs about the war in Iraq are displayed in Table 3. The table presents the analyses for the three dependent variables. Each dependent variable is analyzed with two statistical models. The first model for each dependent variable reports the treatment effects for the positive and negative news events as well as the positive and negative statements from President Bush pooled across the entire sample of respondents. Party identification is also included in the model as a control. The second model of each dependent variable allows each of the treatments to interact with the subjects' partisan predispositions.

Table 3 About Here

Turning first to an examination of the pooled treatment effects, we can see two strong patterns emerge repeatedly across all three dependent variables. First, we observe a consistent partisan gap in support for the Iraq War. The positive coefficients for Republicans indicate that they tend to be significantly more supportive of the view that the "surge" has made things better in Iraq, that the US will succeed in Iraq, and they tend to be more strongly opposed to a timetable for withdrawal relative to Independents. The negative coefficients for Democrats, on the other hand, indicate that they are significantly less supportive of these views than Independents.

Second, with regard to the treatment effects we see that one treatment consistently moved aggregate opinion on the war, while the others had no aggregate effect. The

coefficient on the positive events cue indicates that respondents exposed to good news about events in Iraq became significantly more optimistic about the results of the surge and the likelihood of American success. Exposure to the positive news story also significantly increased opposition to a timetable for withdrawal from Iraq.

Not only was the impact of positive news statistically significant, it was substantively large. For example, the model of perceptions of the “surge” predicts that a respondent who did not receive the positive events treatment had a 40% probability of stating that the surge had “made things better” in Iraq. But subjects who were exposed to the good news story had a 57% probability of making this statement. Similarly, the model of expectations of success predicts that a respondent who did not receive the positive events treatment has a 42% probability of stating that the US is “very likely” or “somewhat likely” to succeed in Iraq, but subjects who were exposed to the good news story have a 57% probability of holding this view. Finally, the last model predicts that a respondent who did not receive the positive events treatment had a 50% probability of opposing a timetable for withdrawing US troops, but a subject who was exposed to the good news story had a 59% probability of holding this view. Thus with regard to perceptions of the surge, expectations of success and opposition to a timetable, exposure to the positive news events treatment shifted the median position on the Iraq War from opposition to support.

These results are broadly consistent with the “surprising events” model, since they suggest that in the aggregate a public that was skeptical about the progress of the war responded to positive news events from Iraq. Nonetheless, the aggregate impact of positive news events could be consistent with a variety of causal processes among

different segments of the public. According to the surprising events model, for example, the impact of both positive and negative news events should vary significantly depending on the predispositions of the subject receiving the cue. Moreover, both of the “partisan opinion” models would suggest that pooling the impact of cues from President Bush across all of the subjects may be masking significant effects these cues have for groups of subjects who are attentive to the President.

Thus for each dependent variable I estimate a “partisan effects” model that allows each treatment to interact with the subject’s party identification. For these models the coefficients for each treatment reflects the impact of that cue on the attitudes of subjects who identify themselves as Independent. Treatment effects for Republicans and Democrats can be calculated by adding together the coefficient for the treatment together with its interaction with the Democratic or Republican dummy variables. Thus the coefficient for the impact of positive news events among Independents on the perception that the “surge” has made things better in Iraq is 1.034 ($p < .01$). The impact of this treatment on Democrats is calculated by adding this coefficient to the interaction between positive events and Democrat. The resulting coefficient is 0.56 ($p < .05$). The coefficient for Republicans, on the other hand, is 0.11 (n.s.)

Perhaps the clearest way to illustrate the treatment effects in the partisan models is to calculate the predicted values for the dependent variables across the news events and partisan cue conditions. I calculate these predicted values separately for Democrats, Independents, and Republicans across each of the three dependent variables. The predicted effects of the news events treatments are displayed in Figure 4, and the predicted effects of partisan cue treatments are displayed in Figure 5. The vertical axes in

these figures display the predicted probability that a subject will express the view that the “surge” has made things better in Iraq, that the US will succeed in Iraq, and that the US should not set a timetable for withdrawal. In each figure, the three clusters of columns to the left-hand side of the horizontal axis display the predicted probabilities for Democrats. The predicted probabilities for Republicans are displayed on the right-hand side of the horizontal axis, while Independents are in middle. Within each cluster of columns, the left-hand column reflects the predicted value for subjects who did not receive any treatment, the center column reflects the predicted value for those who received the positive event or partisan treatment, and the right-hand column reflects the predicted value for those who received the negative event or partisan treatment. Predicted values for treatment conditions that are statistically significantly different from the “no treatment” condition at the 0.05 level are displayed in enlarged bold-faced type.¹⁴

Figures 4 and 5 About Here

The predicted values in Figure 4 demonstrate that the aggregate effect of surprising news events actually reflects a more complex underlying process that varies dependent on the subject’s partisan predispositions. First, with regard to Democrats, we can see that exposure to positive news events significantly increased their optimism regarding the success of the surge and overall success in Iraq. As expected, Democrats tended to be very skeptical of the success of the surge and the war. Specifically, the model estimates that Democrats who were not exposed to any news events treatment had a 0.2 probability of stating that the surge had made things better and a 0.17 probability of expecting that the US will ultimately succeed in Iraq. Democrats who were exposed to the positive news events treatment, on the other hand, had a 0.31 probability of agreeing

that the surge has worked and a 0.28 probability of expecting success in Iraq. These results reflect more than a 50% increase in the optimism of Democratic respondents in response to the positive news treatment. Negative news events, on the other hand, do not have any significant impact on Democratic views of the surge or the success of the war. Democrats exposed to the bad news story had a 0.16 and 0.18 probability of agreeing that the surge had made things better and that the US will succeed. Neither of these values differs significantly from the “no treatment” condition.

Interestingly, Democrats did not alter their support for a timetable in response to positive events despite the fact that they updated their perceptions of the surge and their expectations of success for the war in response to these events. The unwillingness of Democrats to alter their position on a timetable for withdrawal may represent the influence of “real world” partisan cues at the time, since the leadership of the Democratic Party – including House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid, and rising presidential candidate Barack Obama – had all taken strong positions in support of a timetable.¹⁵

Independents were not as negative as Democrats in their initial views about Iraq, but their predispositions remained negative. Specifically, the model predicts that Independents who were not exposed to any event treatments had a 0.36 probability of agreeing that the surge has made things better, a 0.45 probability of expecting success in Iraq and a 0.46 probability of opposing a timetable for withdrawal. Exposure to positive news events, however, had a very substantial positive impact on Independent support for the Iraq War across all three dependent variables. The predicted probability that an independent respondent would agree that the surge has made things better in Iraq

increased from 0.36 to 0.61 after exposure to the “good news” story. Expectations of success increased from 0.45 to 0.61 and opposition to a timetable increased from 0.46 to 0.64. All of these effects are substantively quite striking, especially in light of the fact that the subjects in the study have already been exposed to so much information about Iraq. One slightly surprising result from the experiment is that Independents became slightly more supportive of the war when exposed to negative news events. However, this change was substantively very small with regard to expectations of success and support for a timetable for withdrawal, and in all cases the rise in optimism was statistically insignificant.

As expected, Republicans were highly predisposed to be supportive of the Iraq War. The predicted probability that a Republican who did not receive any events treatment will believe that the surge has made things better in Iraq is 0.79, and the probability that he or she will expect success in Iraq overall is 0.81. The probability that Republican will oppose a timetable is 0.83 in the absence of exposure to any news events. In contrast to Democrats and Independents, however, it is the negative news events stories that have an impact on Republican war support. Specifically, exposure to the negative news events story reduces the probability that a Republican will express optimism about the surge from 0.79 to 0.68. Similarly, the “bad news” story reduced Republican opposition to a timetable for withdrawal from 0.83 to 0.70. As with Democrats and Independents, these effects are substantively large and potentially politically important.

Interestingly, the negative events story did not have a significant impact on Republican expectations of success for the war overall. The treatment effects were in the

expected direction, but they did not approach statistical significance. This suggests that while Republicans may respond to bad news that surprises them by altering their perceptions of the surge and a timetable for withdrawal, they are more resistant to altering their overall judgment about the success of the Iraq mission.

Turning next to the impact of the partisan cue treatments, Figure 5 indicates a failure of the presidential cues to move public opinion across most of the partisan subgroups. For example, the probability that a Democrat will agree with the view that the surge has made things better in Iraq or that he or she will expect success in Iraq remains virtually constant at 0.17 to 0.20 regardless of whether they receive a positive message from President Bush, a cautious message, or no message at all. The probability that a Democrat will oppose a timetable also remains essentially unchanged at 0.27 to 0.32 regardless of the cue they receive from President Bush.

Independents actually appear to become less optimistic if they hear either a positive or a negative message from President Bush. The model predicts that an Independent has a 0.36 probability of perceiving the surge as a success if they do not receive any cue from President Bush. The probability that those who received a confident message and a cautious message share this view is somewhat lower at 0.30 and 0.28 respectively. Neither of these treatment effects is statistically significant, but the impact of the cautious cue from the President does approach statistical significance ($p < .09$).

The effects of presidential rhetoric on expectations of success is similar, but of a greater magnitude. In this case the probability that an Independent will expect success in Iraq is 0.45 if they do not receive a presidential cue, but this probability drops to 0.36 and

0.33 for confident and cautious presidential cues respectively. Once again the impact of the confident cue from Bush is not statistically significant, but the cautious message from the President does have a statistically significant chastening effect ($p < .05$). In some ways this result is consistent with the “surprising opinions” model, especially those that focus on “costly” partisan rhetoric as persuasive (Baum and Groeling 2009). The results regarding opposition to a timetable, on the other hand, were more muted. Independents who received the cautious cue showed less opposition to a timetable than those who received no cue, but this drop was not statistically significant.

As noted above, however, the most critical subgroup for both the “surprising opinions” and “reinforcing opinions” models are Republicans. Given their common partisan identity with the President, these models would expect Republicans to attend to his cues. Instead, like Democrats, Republicans were generally quite unresponsive to messages from President Bush about Iraq. The probability that a Republican would perceive the surge as a success remained essentially constant at 0.79 to 0.81 regardless of the presidential cue they received. The same result held for expectations of success in Iraq overall and support for a timetable for withdrawal. The probability that a Republican would expect success in Iraq remained at 0.81 to 0.85, while the probability that they would oppose a timetable remained even more consistent at 0.83 to 0.84.

Discussion

Overall, the pattern of responses to news events and presidential cues in this study are predominantly consistent with the “surprising events” view of the formation of American public opinion toward war. With a couple of notable exceptions, we observed

Democrats and Independents moving toward greater optimism about the war when presented with positive events that conflicted with their beliefs prior to the study. At the same time, Republicans tended to move toward greater pessimism when presented with negative events that conflicted with their prior beliefs. All of these effects held even when subjects were presented with partisan cues that conflicted with the news events presented to them. Republicans presented with bad news, for example, did not discount those events when given an opposing view from President Bush. Conversely, Democrats were not so repelled by positive messages from the President that they refused to attend to good news from Iraq.¹⁶

There were, of course, some exceptions to this overall pattern. Republicans, for example, were unwilling to alter their belief that the Iraq War would ultimately succeed regardless of the news events they were exposed to from Iraq. Similarly, Democrats were unwilling to abandon their support for a timetable for withdrawing from Iraq even when presented with positive events indicating progress. In both of these cases, it seems likely that the failure of surprising events to move subjects' opinions was a result of real world partisan cues. President Bush and the Republican leadership, for example, have insisted that the US effort in Iraq will succeed – no matter how long it takes or how much it costs – for a number of years. Thus it is not entirely surprising that Republicans would not abandon this view in response to one “bad news” story. Similarly, the leadership of the Democratic Party had been strongly committed to a timetable for withdrawal for more than a year prior to the fielding of this study. The salience of this party position may have made Democrats reluctant to change their view on this issue. Thus advocates of the

“partisan opinions” models would not be surprised that independents (i.e. those without strong party predispositions) were the more responsive to surprising news events.

One final result that is not well explained by the “surprising events” model is the wide partisan gap with which subjects entered the study. Thus the support found here for the “surprising events” model does not imply the irrelevance of partisanship for opinion formation. What the results do imply, however, is that reporting on news events continues to have an impact on the support for military conflict regardless of the rhetoric of political elites and even in an environment of strong partisan polarization. Moreover, the results show that even those with strong partisan predispositions remain willing to revise their attitudes in response to news events that conflict with their expectations.

While subjects did enter the study with strong partisan predispositions, cues from President Bush had relatively little impact on their attitudes toward Iraq. In fact, the only group that appeared attentive to Presidential rhetoric was Independents. As was the case with responses to events, however, it continued to be the surprising cues that influenced opinion. In this case, exposure to cautious rhetoric from President Bush on Iraq – a cue that would be unexpected by most respondents – caused Independents to reduce their support. The failure of Democrats to respond to cues from the President is expected by the partisan opinion models, since these respondents are not likely to view themselves as having common interests with Bush. The failure of Republicans to respond to Presidential cues, however, is more puzzling from the perspective of those who emphasize the importance of partisan cues. While high initial Republican support for the war might explain the inability of the President’s message to increase this optimism

further, it does not explain the inability of the cautious message to reduce Republican support.

Investigating Internal Validity

While these treatment effects remained quite consistent across a range of attitudes toward Iraq, it is important to explore the robustness of these results across alternative specifications. First, I assess the possibility that the treatments interacted with one another. While some literature suggests that individuals may use combinations of cues to update their beliefs (Boudreau 2006a), I found no evidence of an interaction in this instance. Moreover, in order to determine whether some interaction between treatments might depend upon a subject's partisanship, I estimated a model with all possible interactions between treatments within each category of party identification. None of the interaction effects were statistically significant.¹⁷ Finally, in order to ensure that the impact of the Presidential cues was not being swamped by the event treatment stories, I also removed all of the subjects who received events treatments and separately estimated the impact of presidential cues (i.e. comparing treatments A, B and C). The results remained unchanged.

Next I investigated the possibility that the event treatment effects worked only within certain categories of respondents. After completing their randomly assigned treatment, subjects were asked whether they had read the story "carefully," had "skimmed" the story, or had not read the story. Of those assigned to read a newspaper article (i.e. those not in treatment group A), 64% stated that they had read the article carefully, 33% stated that they skimmed the article, and 3% stated that they had not read

it at all. Not surprisingly, the results become stronger when the analysis is restricted to respondents who stated that they read the article carefully (plus those who did not receive any treatment). The same pattern of results continues to hold when the analysis is restricted to those who say they skimmed the article, but the results do weaken significantly. In particular, the impact of positive events on the attitudes of Democrats was contingent on reading the news article carefully. There were not enough respondents who acknowledged not reading the articles to re-estimate the partisan effects models in Table 3 (n=25), but none of the treatments had any aggregate effect on this small group of subjects. While these results do demonstrate a limitation of the experimental treatments described here, it also serves as some support for the claim that exposure to the content of the news stories is the source of the causal effects described above.

A growing literature on public opinion emphasizes the importance of “issue publics” (Krosnick 1990; Price et. al. 2006). This literature suggests that some individuals may become highly focused on a particular issue, develop a stronger substantive knowledge of that issue, and become more strongly committed to those views. Thus I asked respondents to rank in order of importance a set of seven issues facing the US Federal Government: the Iraq War, terrorism, the spread of weapons of mass destruction, job creation and economic growth, the environment and global warming, illegal immigration, and health care. The Iraq war was tied for third in importance with terrorism across the sample of respondents with about 16% ranking each of them as the most important issue. About 27% of the respondents ranked jobs and the economy first, while about 21% ranked health care as most important. Consistent with Krosnick (1990), and others, the impact of the experimental treatment is weaker for those

who rank the Iraq War as the most important issue. Conversely, the estimated effects are stronger than those described in Figure 4 for the 84% of respondents who did not rank Iraq as their most important issue. Among those who ranked Iraq as the second or third most important issue, for example, the event treatments yield stronger results than those displayed in Figure 4.

One final concern over the validity of the treatment effects concerns the use of President Bush as a cue-giver. By March 2008 President Bush's approval rating was hovering around 30%. For the purposes of this study, however, the more relevant measure of Bush is his approval among Republicans and the extent of partisan gap in approval of Bush. Among Republican subjects in this study, President Bush's approval rating stood at 82%, while only 9% of Democrats approved of the President.¹⁸ Thus Bush should have been a viable cue-giver for this study and should have received high rates of attentiveness from Republicans and very low attention from Democrats. As a check on this result, I reanalyzed the data using approval of Bush rather than party ID to measure predispositions.¹⁹ The results regarding surprising events remained essentially unchanged. With regard to elite opinions, the cautious cues from the President did reduce Republican perceptions of the success of the surge and reduced Republican opposition to a timetable, but the size of these effects were substantively modest (5% regarding the surge and 3% regarding a timetable). Neither of these effects was statistically significant

Investigating External Validity

Experimental analyses often have difficulty with issues of external validity because of concerns about the representativeness of the subject pool, questions about the length of time that causal effects will last, or doubts about the fidelity with which treatments will reflect circumstances the “real world.” I have already addressed concerns about the subject pool. There remain, of course, questions about the temporal persistence of these effects. Subjects in the experiment were asked to read a newspaper story and then immediately were asked a series of question about Iraq. The temporal distance between experimental treatment and casual impact is larger here than in survey question-wording experiments, but we should not expect exposure to a single story such as the ones in this study to alter public opinion in the long term. Indeed, since the results of this study suggest that individuals often respond to surprising information by updating their views, we should expect subsequent news events to continue altering opinions. If individuals were exposed to a series of such stories, however, we might expect these experiences to create longer-term shifts in public opinion.

For example, the fall of 2007 and the spring of 2008 witnessed a trend toward “good news” stories about progress in Iraq as a result of the surge. In March 2008 the Project for Excellence in Journalism gave the following assessment of press coverage of the Iraq War.

Through the first half of 2007, about half the stories from Iraq examined in a *PEJ* study were about the continuing drumbeat of daily violence. From July through October, that number fell to a little more than one-third. In November, stories filed from Iraq began to take greater notice of the surge’s success in reducing

violence, even as the volume of coverage tapered off, evidence perhaps of the old adage that no news is good news. (Jurkowitz 2008).

Following shortly after this shift in news coverage of events in Iraq, we also began to see an upswing in public optimism about the progress of the war. In September 2007 CBS News reported that 30% of Americans believed that the surge had “made things better” in Iraq, but by March of 2008, CBS reported that number had increased to 42%.²⁰ Similarly, ABC News reported in September 2007 that 36% of Americans believed that the US was making significant progress toward restoring civil order in Iraq. By February 2008 that number had increased to 43%. Thus the short term causal effects described in this study seem to be consistent with longer term shifts in public opinion that occur as a result of a change in the overall stream of news stories to which the public is exposed.

Finally, we must consider whether the treatments applied in this study are analogous to the way in which individuals will experience newspaper reporting in the “real world.” The treatment stories in this study differed from the usual experience of news reporting in at least two ways. First, while the content and structure of the news stories was very similar to actual reporting of mainstream newspapers, the positive and negative events were artificially sorted into “positive” and “negative” stories despite the fact that many reports from Iraq combined a mixture of these events. Moreover, both the events and opinion treatments were fairly strongly positive or negative inasmuch as they manipulated both the level of violence and the extent of political progress in Iraq. Thus the “real world” experience of news is not likely to be as distinctly positive or negative.

The most likely result of this difference is that exposure to an individual “real world” news story is likely to be more muted than the impact of the treatments in this study. This fact underlines the point that aggregate public opinion is likely to respond to broad trends in the overall coverage that repeatedly alter the experience of the news – such as the shift in coverage during the “surge.”

A final difference is that this study presents subjects with a randomly selected story to read, while individuals in the real world select the stories they read and even get to choose whether to follow the news at all. Americans now have a much wider range of news sources available to them than ever before. Moreover, the content of the news from these outlets appears to be increasingly partisan – especially in terms of the content available online (Baum and Groeling 2008). Fox News and the Wall Street Journal have become outlets of choice for many conservatives (Morris 2005), while NPR, MSNBC and the New York Times are often viewed as “liberal” media outlets. The results of this study have demonstrated that individuals will update their beliefs about foreign policy issues when exposed to surprising news events, but the partisan labeling of news may allow individuals avoid these surprising stimuli.

Self-selection of news coverage does provide a plausible explanation for the wide partisan gaps we observed in this study despite the fact that individuals seemed to shift toward the center when presented with surprising news events. Interestingly, Baum and Groeling (2009) report that news outlets are viewed as more credible when they are reporting “costly” (i.e. “surprising”) stories that are perceived as contrary to their partisan bias. If this is true, then translating the impact of news events such as the ones in this study into the real world may depend critically on the willingness of news organizations

to engage in “surprising” reporting. Changing public perceptions of success in Iraq, for example, may have depended on the willingness of “liberal” news outlets such as MSNBC and the New York Times to report on the reduction in violence in Iraq.

Conclusion

What shapes the American public's attitudes toward military conflict? Given the public's inability to gain direct personal experience or information regarding American military operations, individuals must inevitably rely upon cues that they receive from elite sources. But in an environment filled with potential cues, which ones do Americans tend to rely upon when deciding whether to support an ongoing military operation? And how do they use the cues to which they attend? The growing literature on casualty tolerance has become increasingly divided on at least two dimensions: 1) scholars who emphasize the importance of news events as cues shaping public opinion versus those who emphasize partisan opinions; and 2) scholars who emphasize the public's reliance on new or surprising cues versus those who emphasize “motivated processing.”

While many studies have investigated the use of cues in the formation of public opinion, relatively few have examined the selection of cues that individuals will use when more than one is available. The experiment in this study used the presentation of two distinct cues within the context of a newspaper story to test four theoretical models of the public's reliance on cues. The results of the experiment provided fairly consistent support for the “surprising events” model of opinion formation, which suggests that individuals will attend to news events from Iraq that do not comport with their current views of the conflict in an effort to update their attitudes toward the war. These results are important

because they indicate that even in the context of long war that has become widely unpopular and has become the subject of bitter and deep partisan division, individuals continue to attend to news events from the battlefield and reformulate their opinions. Moreover, these results provide relatively strong support the cost/benefit perspective on the formation of public opinion toward war that underpins much of the literature on casualty tolerance (Larson 2000; Gartner 2008; Gelpi, Feaver, and Reifler 2009).

On the other hand, the experiment yielded relatively little direct support for arguments suggesting that elite partisan opinion - whether "surprising" or "reinforcing" - had much impact on attitudes toward Iraq. Of course, the wide partisan gap in overall support for the war and the importance of party identification in shaping responses to news events both indicate that partisanship plays an important role in opinion formation toward the Iraq War. Moreover, the unwillingness of Democrats to abandon their support of a timetable for withdrawal, and the reluctance of Republicans to reevaluate America's prospects for success in Iraq suggest that partisan cues issued repeatedly outside the context of this experiment can make individuals reluctant change their attitudes in response to news events. Finally, it is worth noting that elite opinions may well have shaped subjects' attitudes prior to their participation in this study, and those elite opinions may partially account for the deep partisan divisions with which subjects entered the experiment.

Nonetheless, the results found here suggest the continuing importance of news events from the battlefield as individuals continue to update their views of an ongoing war - even one as deeply partisan as the war in Iraq. Moreover, the impact of news events within such a partisan atmosphere also highlights the importance of "surprising" or

"costly" coverage by news organizations (Baum and Groeling, 2009). It seems likely, for example, that the willingness of liberal news outlets to report on "good news" for Republican policies or "bad news" for Democratic ones as well as the willingness of conservative news outlets to report on "bad news" for Republican policies and "good news" for Democratic ones will be critical in translating the experimental effects found in this study into the real world of public opinion and American foreign policy.

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Table 1: Levels of Political Interest in 2008 ANES and Matched Opt-in Internet Panel

Political Interest			Voter Registration		
	2008 ANES	Matched Opt-in		2008 ANES	Matched Opt-in
Extremely	12%		Yes	92%	90%
	352	48%		1478	892
Very	32%	480	No	8%	10%
	942			128	93
Moderately	36%	40%	Difference of Proportions not significant p< .20		
	1072	401			
Slightly	15%	11%			
	447				
Not At All	6%	110			
	171				

Table 2: The Impact of Events and Elite Cues on Attitudes Toward the Iraq War

	Success of the Surge		Success of Iraq War		Oppose Timetable	
	Pooled Effects	Partisan Effects	Pooled Effects	Partisan Effects	Pooled Effects	Partisan Effects
Positive Events	0.686 (3.87)**	1.034 (4.01)**	0.613 (3.41)**	0.687 (2.71)**	0.362 (2.10)*	0.724 (2.87)**
Negative Events	-0.008 (0.04)	0.486 (1.80)	0.043 (0.24)	0.174 (0.66)	-0.151 (0.87)	0.148 (0.57)
Confident Bush	-0.126 (0.71)	-0.238 (0.90)	-0.097 (0.54)	-0.347 (1.33)	0.035 (0.20)	0.080 (0.31)
Cautious Bush	-0.184 (1.05)	-0.344 (1.34)	-0.172 (0.97)	-0.500 (1.98)*	-0.029 (0.17)	-0.228 (0.91)
Democrat	-1.118 (6.40)**	-0.807 (2.10)*	-1.045 (6.16)**	-1.401 (3.61)**	-1.078 (6.61)**	-0.831 (2.36)*
Republican	1.552 (8.71)**	1.982 (5.09)**	1.859 (9.70)**	1.718 (4.26)**	1.360 (7.46)**	1.765 (4.37)**
Positive Event X Democrat		-0.480 (1.14)		-0.006 (0.01)		-0.749 (1.89)
Positive Event X Republican		-0.920 (2.00)*		-0.328 (0.67)		-0.614 (1.27)
Negative Event X Democrat		-0.760 (1.67)		-0.122 (0.28)		-0.325 (0.81)
Negative Event X Republican		-1.092 (2.49)*		-0.372 (0.80)		-0.886 (1.96)*
Confident Bush X Democrat		0.116 (0.27)		0.609 (1.46)		-0.107 (0.26)
Confident Bush X Republican		0.337 (0.75)		0.345 (0.73)		0.084 (0.18)
Cautious Bush X Democrat		0.183 (0.42)		0.570 (1.34)		0.446 (1.12)
Cautious Bush X Republican		0.421 (0.99)		0.787 (1.69)		0.306 (0.70)
Constant	-0.416 (2.48)*	-0.603 (2.75)**	-0.338 (2.00)*	-0.223 (1.05)	-0.009 (0.05)	-0.167 (0.79)
Observations	998	998	997	997	995	995

Absolute value of z statistics in parentheses
 * significant at 5%; ** significant at 1%

Figure 1: The Construction of Attitudes Toward Foreign Policy

		Source of Informational Cues	
		News Events	Partisan Opinions
Content of Informational Cues	Surprising	Surprising Events Model	Surprising Opinions Model
	Reinforcing	Reinforcing Events Model	Reinforcing Opinions Model

Figure 2: Validating the Matched Opt-in Panel Method
 “Right Thing,” Success, and Support for the Iraq War

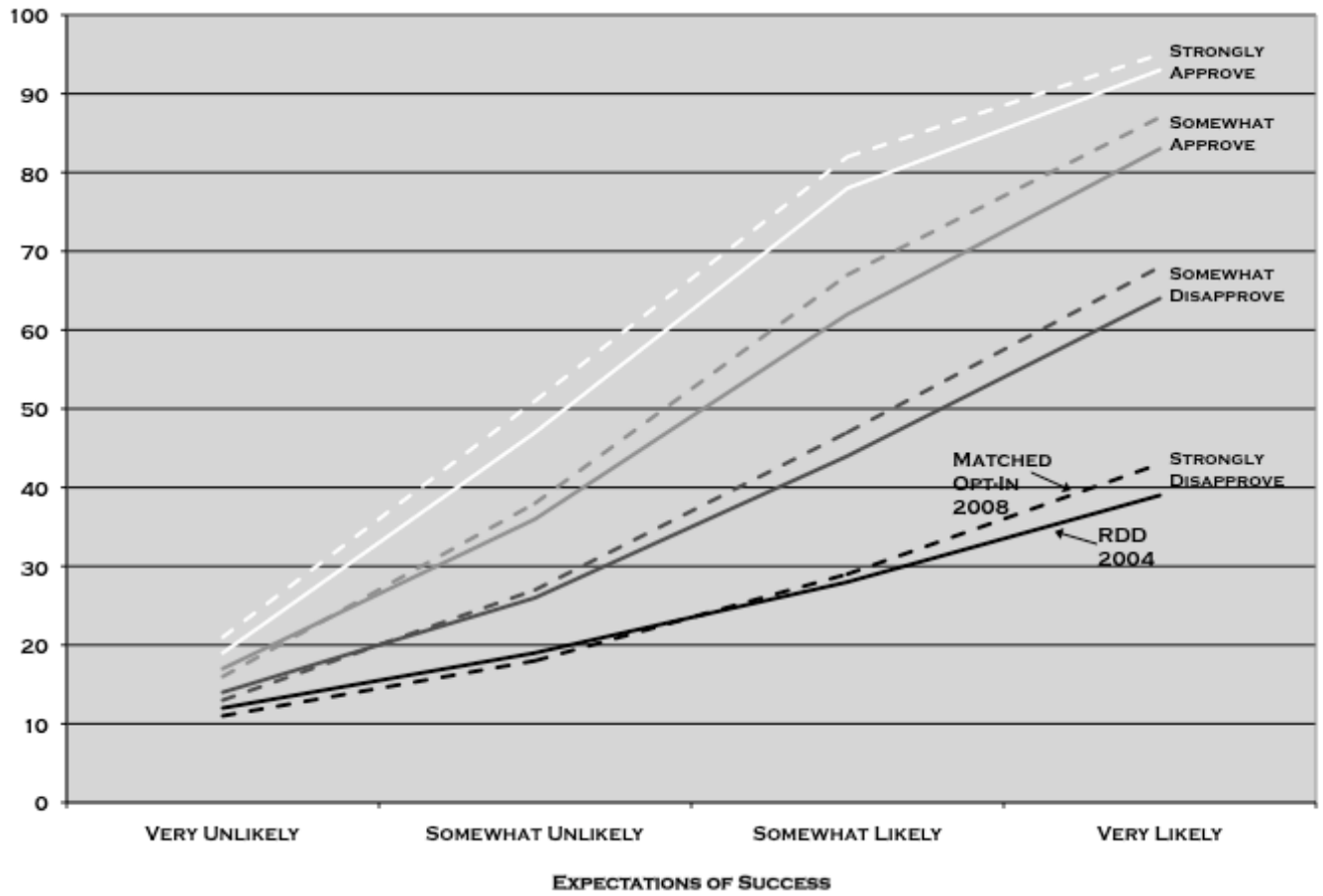


Figure 3: Experimental Design on the Impact of Cues on Attitude Formation

		Presidential Response Cue		
		None	Positive	Negative
Military Event Cue	None	Treatment A: No Presidential Cue, No Event Cue	Treatment B: Positive Presidential Cue, No Event Cue	Treatment C: Negative Presidential Cue, No Event Cue
	Positive	Treatment D: No Presidential Cue, Successful Event Cue	Treatment E: Positive Presidential Cue, Successful Event Cue	Treatment F: Negative Presidential Cue, Successful Event Cue
	Negative	Treatment G: No Presidential Cue, Unsuccessful Event Cue	Treatment H: Positive Presidential Cue, Unsuccessful Event Cue	Treatment I: Negative Presidential Cue, Unsuccessful Event Cue

Figure 4: The Impact of Battlefield Events on Attitudes Toward the War in Iraq

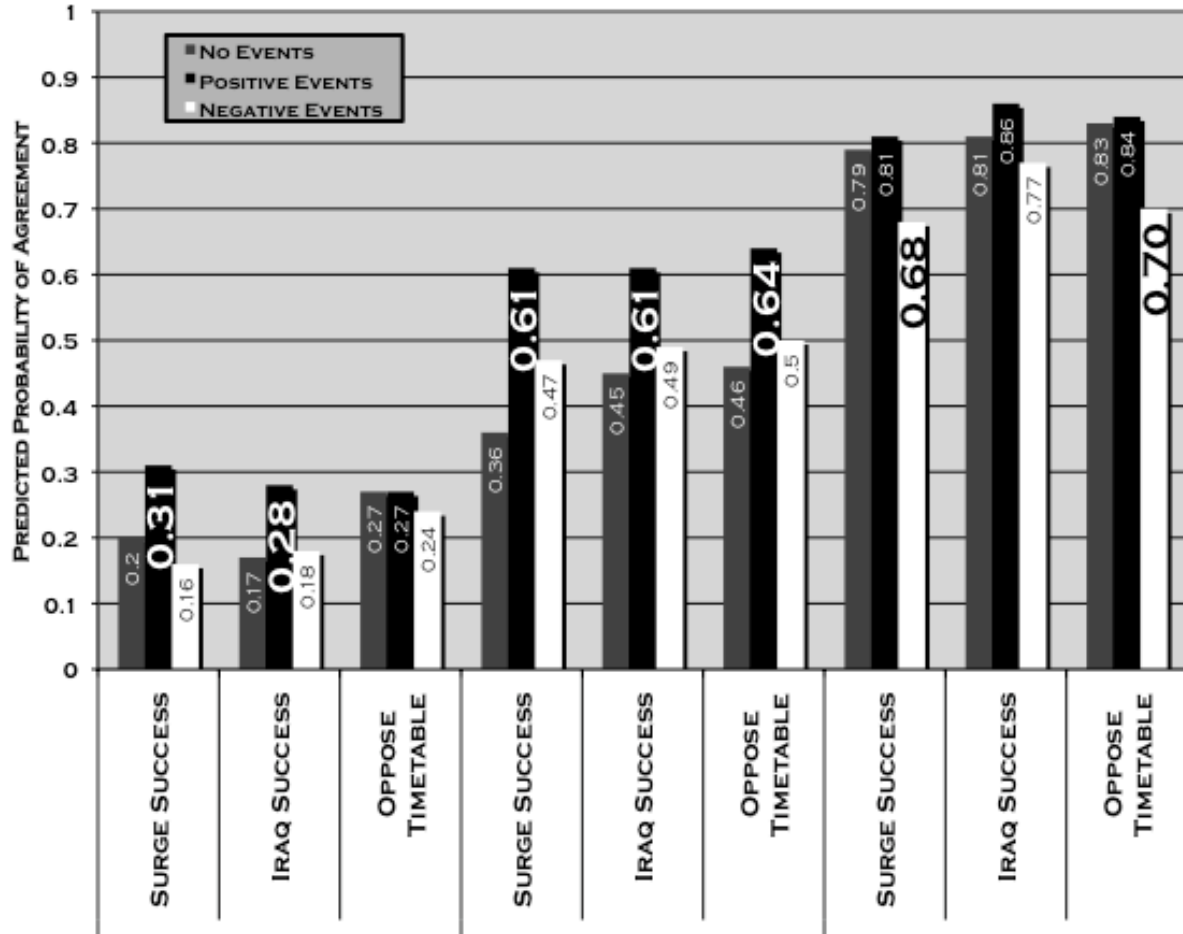
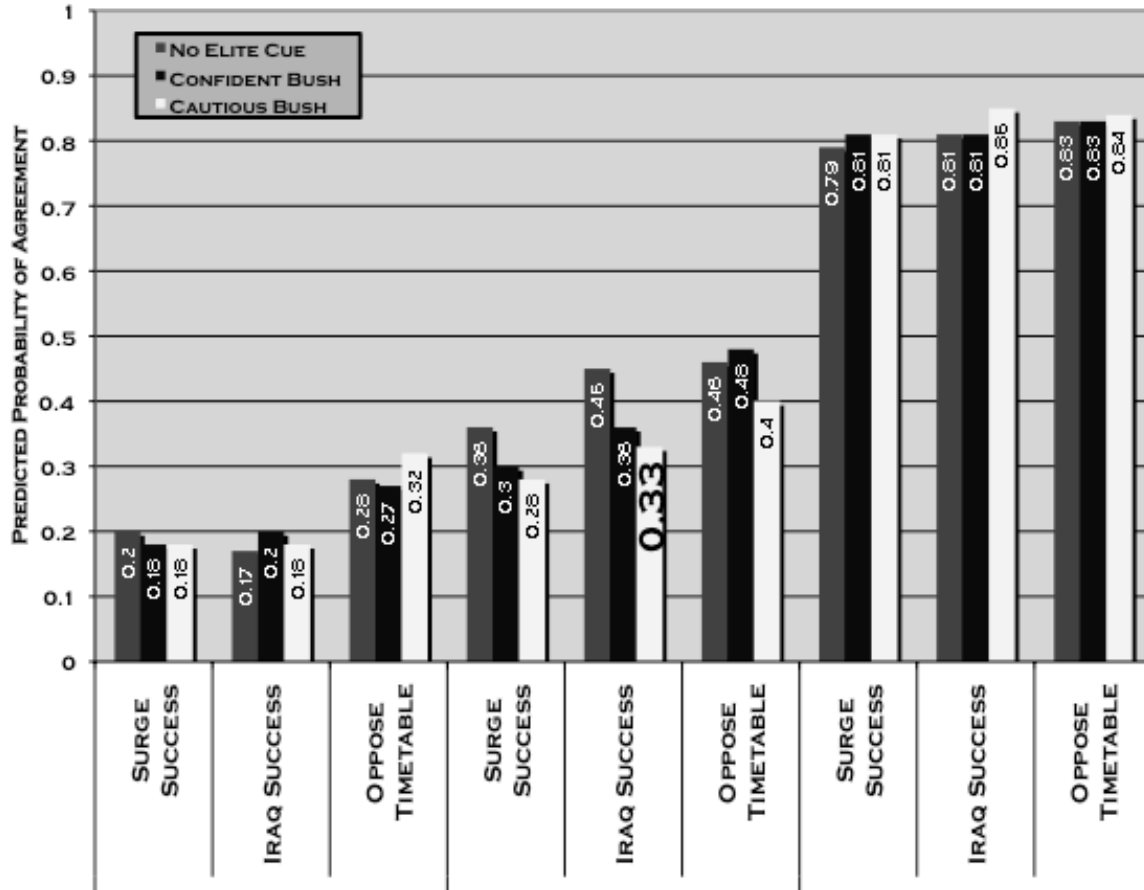


Figure 5: The Impact of President Bush on Attitudes Toward the War in Iraq



Endnotes

¹ Messages from speakers with interests that conflict with the listener might still be useful because listeners could simply “do the opposite” of the suggestions from such speakers (Lupia 1994). Such messages not as useful to listeners as those from speakers with common interests, however, because of the possibility of strategic speech (Boudreau 2006a).

² Elites, of course, may respond to news events, but our focus here is on the process of opinion formation among the mass public.

³ It is important to recognize that Figure 1 is a typology of mechanisms, not theorists. Thus while the figure describes four distinct mechanisms driving the formation of public attitudes, a single theory of opinion formation may include more than one of these mechanisms. Zaller (1992), for example, argues that relatively informed individuals will respond to surprising cues from partisan elites (the “surprising opinions model), but expects less informed individuals to cling to expected party positions. Similarly, Layman and Carsey (2001) argue that more politically aware individuals respond strongly to partisan cues while others do not.

⁴ A substantial segment of the international relations literature on elite decision-making has also emphasized the impact of “motivated processing.” See, for example, Jervis (1976), Larson (1985), and Kaufman (1994).

⁵ Indeed these scholars suggest that individuals will change their attitudes in order to comply with their party’s positions on issues.

⁶ While the casualty tolerance literature figures prominently in this study, I chose not to measure casualty tolerance directly. The measures used by Gelpi, Feaver and Reifler are costly in terms of survey time and as the analyses in Figure 2 indicate, the simpler “timetable” question seems to measure the same concept while speaking more directly to the policy debate over Iraq at the time of this study.

⁷ So as to avoid affirmation bias, respondents were presented with the following statement prior to the timetable question: “[s]ome people believe that the best policy for the United States in Iraq is to maintain the level of troops that

are there right now and withdraw them in the future as conditions in Iraq improve. Others believe that the best policy for the United States in Iraq is to set a timetable with a specific date for withdrawing all American troops deployed there.”

⁸ Data for replication of this study are available at <http://jcr.sagepub.com> and from the author’s website at XXXXX.

⁹ It is possible, of course, that differences in survey mode are also affecting these results. For example, ANES respondents might have been more likely to state that they were registered to vote because they were embarrassed to admit otherwise in a face-to-face survey. Nonetheless, these results suggest that the net impact of the differences in sample selection and survey mode between the matched opt-in sample and ANES on levels of political interest are quite modest in this case.

¹⁰ Since the concerns about using opt-in panels relate to Polimetrix's ability to match the data according to party identification and other demographic variables, I do not include the controls for party identification, gender, age, race and education used by Gelpi, Feaver and Reifler (2005/2006).

¹¹ It is worth noting that the individual level relationships between perceptions of success and willingness to stay in Iraq have remained constant over time, but the aggregate level of optimism about success and support for remaining in Iraq have declined between the 2004 and 2008 studies.

At the same time, the decline in violence in Iraq has led to an increase in optimism about the mission by 2009 since its nadir in early 2007. Interestingly, however, because of the changing role of the “timetable” question in the debate over Iraq, this increased optimism has not led to a decline in support for a timetable for withdrawal. By late 2008 even the Bush Administration had accepted the notion of a “time-horizon” for US withdrawal, changing the terms of the debate to focus on how long and rigid such a “time-horizon” should be. Thus while the timetable question is a good measure of willingness to remain in Iraq at the time of this study, its relevance waned somewhat as the terms of the debate shifted.

Nonetheless, increased optimism about the Iraq mission has significantly reduced public pressure for a swift withdrawal from Iraq. In March 2009, for example, President Obama announced a three-month delay in his plan to withdraw American troops. Moreover, he announced that 35,000 to 50,000 troops (about one-third of force levels at the time) would remain in Iraq well beyond the new 19-month deadline. Nonetheless, a CNN poll on March 12-15 2009 indicated that 70% of Americans (including 84% of Democrats) approved of leaving one-third of US forces until at least the end of 2011. This level of patience in withdrawing from Iraq contrasts sharply with the strong demands by most Democrats and many Independents in 2007 to remove US troops as quickly as possible.

¹² A slight variation on this argument would suggest that Democrats and Independents may also respond to a cautious cue from the President because such a cue would be so surprising.

¹³ Another variation on this process of opinion formation suggests that Democrats and perhaps even Independents may indeed be influenced by cues from the President, but in the opposite direction. That is, if individuals infer the speaker's interests are directly opposed to theirs, they might infer that they oppose anything that the speaker supports (Lupia 1994). According to this view, optimistic statements by the President should make Democrats more pessimistic. However, the existence of diametrically opposed interests that is necessary to generate this result is arguably quite unusual, and more generalized theoretical analyses of persuasion suggest that listeners cannot reliably infer anything from speakers who are not facing external constraints and with whom they do not share common interests.

¹⁴ Given the directional nature of the treatments and the hypothesized effects I rely on one-tailed tests for statistical significance.

¹⁵ As noted above, the use of realistic cues and asking subjects about current events has the advantage of bolstering the external validity of the study at the risk of altering treatment effects based on subjects' prior knowledge and experience. Future research should continue to explore these models in more hypothetical contexts.

¹⁶ Importantly, the apparent impact of surprising cues rather than reinforcing ones cannot be attributed to floor and ceiling effects. One might imagine, for example, that it would be difficult to drive Democratic war support lower or

Republican war support higher than it was at the outset of the study. But the impact of the event treatments on Independents – who share the negative predispositions of Democrats, but to a significantly lesser degree – demonstrate that the impact of reinforcing cues are not hidden by floor or ceiling effects.

¹⁷ The results in Figures 4 and 5 are very similar to those obtained by a simple bivariate crosstabulation of the treatment conditions with each partisan group, further suggesting the lack of any strong interaction between treatments.

¹⁸ Approval of the president was asked prior to exposure to the experimental treatments and so could not have been influenced by them.

¹⁹ I also examined these treatment effects among those who stated that they read the newspaper story carefully. The results did not change.

²⁰ The responses in this study were consistent with the CNN data. Specifically, 44% of the respondents who did not receive any cues regarding news events or Presidential statements agreed that the surge had “made things better.”