Public Opinion and War

Assuming the Costs of War:
Events, Elites, and The American Public

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Silent Voices

Over the past 70 years, opinion polls have come to pervade American politics.

Limitations are well known, but polls seem to broadly represent public sentiment.

I argue that the process of collecting information on public preferences may bias our picture of those preferences.
I focus on those individuals who abstain from survey questions.

If “don’t knows” are random — if there is no rhyme or reason to the decision to abstain from survey questions — the traditional view of polling is correct.

But if there is a systematic process to the decision to offer a don’t know response — If the same factors determine both the direction of opinion and the ability to give an opinion — particular interests will be excluded from collective opinion.

This exclusion bias may generate distortions in political “voice,” as measured in opinion polls.
Public Opinion and Foreign Policy

- Three cases in Silent Voices
  - Race
  - Social Welfare Policy
  - Vietnam War

- Began a line of work on public opinion and foreign policy
  - “Making Sense of Issues through Media Frames: Understanding the Kosovo Crisis.” Forthcoming.  
    *Journal of Politics*
  - Public Opinion and World War II
Overview of Book Project

1. Introduction: The Myths and Meaning of Public Opinion and World War II
2. The Calculation of Costs: An Innocent Public
4. The Role of Ethnic Identity
Positions of Senators:

- **Party A: Opposition**
  - “Americans are going to be killed. They are going to come home in body bags, and they will be killed in a war that Congress has not declared.”
  - “I am afraid we may be starting something we can't get out of; I am afraid we might be there for years and years and years.”

- **Party B: Support**
  - “While I know some of my colleagues believe strongly that the administration has not articulated forcefully, consistently and clearly the mission and goals of this use of force… we cannot let these kinds of atrocities and humanitarian disasters continue if we have it in our power to stop them. I believe that it is our duty to act.”

Public Opinion

- Considering everything, do you think the United States did the right thing in getting involved in a military conflict, or do you think it was a mistake?
  - Party A: 46% say it was the right thing.
  - Party B: 66% say it was the right thing.
Positions of Senators:

- **Party A: Opposition**
  - “Americans are going to be killed. They are going to come home in body bags, and they will be killed in a war that Congress has not declared.” Robert Bennett (R-UT)
  - “I am afraid we may be starting something we can't get out of; I am afraid we might be there for years and years and years.” Don Nickles (R-OK.)

- **Party B: Support**
  - “While I know some of my colleagues believe strongly that the administration has not articulated forcefully, consistently and clearly the mission and goals of this use of force… we cannot let these kinds of atrocities and humanitarian disasters continue if we have it in our power to stop them. I believe that it is our duty to act.” Paul Wellstone (D-MN)

Public Opinion

Considering everything, do you think the United States did the right thing in getting involved in a military conflict, or do you think it was a mistake?

- **Party A**: 46% say it was the right thing. Republicans
- **Party B**: 66% say it was the right thing. Democrats
What drives public opinion on war?

- **Mood theory: Almond**
- **External events: Mueller (Casualties)**
  - As casualties rise, costs of war rise
  - Public will not tolerate high costs
  - More general theories of C/B calculations
  - Not explicitly political. Rests on notions of collective rationality
- **Elite discourse: Zaller**
  - **Mainstream Pattern**: If elite discourse is unified, more informed citizens will be more supportive of war
  - **Polarization Pattern**: If elite discourse is split, more informed citizens will follow leaders who share their political views
  - Role for political process and conflict
Testing Theories

- Different explanations with different mechanisms
- In Korea and Vietnam, the mechanisms of both theories are collinear with time.
  - Over time, cumulative casualties increase
  - Over time, elite discourse splits
Testing Theories

- Iraq: Casualty Information has minimal role in determining war support
  - Casualty estimates influenced by partisanship
  - Correcting misperceptions has a small effect on support

- World War II: a critical test
  - Over time, cumulative casualties increase, but elite discourse remains unified
  - I find evidence of a move from polarization to mainstream pattern in 1941, following patterns of elite discourse, not casualty levels.
Iraq: Estimates of War Deaths

Do you happen to know how many soldiers of the U.S. military have been killed in Iraq since the fighting began in March 2003?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Estimate</th>
<th>Percent of Respondents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Under</td>
<td>42%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Correct</td>
<td>47%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Over</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Knowledge Networks Poll, July 23-August 2, 2004
October 1945: How many American soldiers, sailors, and airmen were killed in the war – just your best guess?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Range</th>
<th>Response</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>&lt;100,000</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>100,000-200,000</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>200,000-250,000</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>250,000-260,000</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>260,000-300,000</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>300,000-500,000</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>500,000</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>500,000-750,000</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>750,000-1,000,000</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1,000,000-1,500,000</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1,500,000-2,000,000</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&gt;2,000,000</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D.K.</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Median – 300,000-500,000
## Predicted Probability of Causality Estimates

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Political Information</th>
<th>Pr (Under)</th>
<th>Pr (Correct)</th>
<th>Pr (Over)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Low</td>
<td>0.51</td>
<td>0.31</td>
<td>0.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High</td>
<td>0.36</td>
<td>0.56</td>
<td>0.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Difference</td>
<td>-0.15</td>
<td>+0.25</td>
<td>-0.11</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Follow News About Iraq?</th>
<th>Pr (Under)</th>
<th>Pr (Correct)</th>
<th>Pr (Over)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Not At All</td>
<td>0.66</td>
<td>0.24</td>
<td>0.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very Close</td>
<td>0.25</td>
<td>0.67</td>
<td>0.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Difference</td>
<td>-0.41</td>
<td>+0.43</td>
<td>-0.03</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Partisanship</th>
<th>Pr (Under)</th>
<th>Pr (Correct)</th>
<th>Pr (Over)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>S. Rep</td>
<td>0.48</td>
<td>0.44</td>
<td>0.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S. Dem</td>
<td>0.35</td>
<td>0.54</td>
<td>0.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Difference</td>
<td>-0.13</td>
<td>+0.10</td>
<td>+0.04</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## Effects of Causality Estimates on Support for the Iraq War

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>U.S. Made Correct Decision</th>
<th>War Has Been Worth Fighting</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Coefficient (SE)</td>
<td>Coefficient (SE)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>1.69 (0.36)</td>
<td>1.23 (0.35)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Log(Casualties)</td>
<td>-0.05 (0.11)</td>
<td>-0.01 (0.11)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PID</td>
<td>-2.09 (0.17)**</td>
<td>-1.95 (0.17)**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>609</td>
<td>610</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LL</td>
<td>-335.76</td>
<td>-343.31</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**=p<.05; *=p<.10
Effect Of Information Treatment On Support For Iraq War

Did The U.S. Make The Right Decision in Using Military Force against Iraq?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Condition</th>
<th>Right Decision</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Estimate War Deaths Condition</td>
<td>52%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Corrected Information Condition</td>
<td>56%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

N=252; $\chi^2(1)=0.40$ Pr=0.53

Has The Current War in Iraq Been Worth Fighting?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Condition</th>
<th>Worth Fighting</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Estimate War Deaths Condition</td>
<td>42%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Corrected Information Condition</td>
<td>47%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

N=253; $\chi^2(1)=0.71$ Pr=0.40
Effect Of Information Treatment On Support For Iraq War

Among Over-estiamtors

Did The U.S. Make The Right Decision in Using Military Force against Iraq?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Condition</th>
<th>Right Decision</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Estimate War Deaths Condition</td>
<td>58%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Corrected Information Condition</td>
<td>58%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

N=57; $\chi^2(1)=0.00$ Pr=0.95

Has The Current War in Iraq Been Worth Fighting?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Condition</th>
<th>Worth Fighting</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Estimate War Deaths Condition</td>
<td>42%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Corrected Information Condition</td>
<td>48%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

N=57$\chi^2(1)=0.26$ Pr=0.61
Patterns of Polarization in Attitudes Toward the Iraq War

U.S. Made Right Decision to Go To War

Iraq War Worth Fighting
November 1939

Evidence of Two-Sided Flow

January 1941

Approve of Changes to Neutrality Law

More Important to Help England Than to Stay Out of War
Evidence of Two-Sided Flow

Let Germany Keep Land in Exchange for Peace?

Go To War Now?

Information Level

Probability Opposes

- Pro-FDR
- Anti-FDR

Information Level

Probability Supports

- Pro-FDR
- Anti-FDR
Evidence of Two-Sided Flow

June 1941

Use Navy to Convoy Ships to England?

Information Level

Probability Support

Pro FDR  Anti-FDR

August 1941

Use Navy to Convoy Ships to England?

Information Level

Probability Support

Pro FDR  Anti-FDR
Evidence of One-Sided Flow

June 1942

Take Active Part in World Affairs after the War

March 1943

U.S. Should Take Active Role in an International Organization after War
Evidence of One-Sided Flow

August 1943

Oppose Peace with Germany Even if Hitler Overthrown

June 1944

Oppose Peace with Germany Even if Hitler Overthrown
Roper February 1944: Difference in Domestic Policy

Work with Businessmen over Taking Care of People
An Interlude: The 1940 Election

October 1940 Gallup

Help England if British Loose War Without Aid?

Send Airplanes to England?

Information Level

Probability Support

Pro FDR

Anti-FDR
Conclusions: The Importance of Events?

- What determines flow of Elite discourse
  - What are conditions under which elites remain unified?
  - Perhaps arguments that have been made about the mass public (aversion to casualties, cost/benefit analysis) can be applied to elites
    - Gartner et al. show that cross-sectional variation in casualties affects the positions that legislators take on war
Conclusions: Implications for Democracy

Domestic and International Politics

- Reiter and Stam (2002) argue that democracies are hesitant to enter war and only become involved in wars they are likely to win.
  - Attribute constraint to casualty sensitivity
  - But political elites have the agency and flexibility to interpret the meaning of ambiguous wartime events
  - It is how the war experience gets filtered through domestic politics that matters most.
  - Potential for elite manipulation