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Public Support for Military Interventions across Levels of Political Information and Stages of Intervention: The Case of the Iraq War

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Abstract

This study examines the effect of political information levels and intervention stages on the formation and continuity of public support for military interventions by analyzing survey data pertaining to the 2003 military intervention in Iraq. The results show that before and immediately after the launch of the intervention, politically uninformed individuals expressed higher support for the war compared to politically informed ones. However, as the intervention proceeded and casualties were incurred, higher rates of decrease in support were observed among the politically uninformed. Politically informed individuals, on the other hand, demonstrated more stable levels of support throughout the course of the intervention.

Keywords

political information, military interventions, public opinion, Iraq War

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Public opinion plays an important role in foreign policy decision making, especially in conducting costly military interventions.¹ In studying public opinion on military interventions, scholars have investigated numerous factors, including the role of casualties, intervention objectives, mass media, perceived success, and justness of war. Amid this diversity of factors that have received notable scholarly attention, two other major factors—political information and structural changes during an intervention—have been largely overlooked. Regarding political information, most studies in this area of research examine the public as an undifferentiated mass that reacts uniformly to a military intervention. On a parallel basis, studies tend to disregard the dynamics of public opinion across different stages of an intervention, thus foregoing the possibility that the nature of public support may change throughout a given intervention. To address these issues, this study examines the formation and continuity of public support for military interventions as a function of political information levels and intervention stages by analyzing survey data pertaining to the 2003 military intervention in Iraq.

The case of the Iraq War offers an exceptional opportunity to analyze public support for military interventions for several reasons. Above all, the availability and quality of public opinion data on the Iraq War is almost unsurpassed compared to other military interventions. Also important, the Iraq War is a military intervention that has gone through substantial structural changes throughout its course. Specifically, the fact that the war in Iraq started as an offensive intervention and evolved into a state-building operation facilitates the identification of different intervention stages without much ambiguity. Moreover, given that the combat operations in Iraq were among the most covered news stories, such coverage provided people the opportunity to acquire (in varying degrees) policy-specific information regarding the war. In short, public opinion data on the war in Iraq serves as a highly valuable resource for exploring how political information levels and intervention stages affect public support for military interventions.

Public Support for Military Interventions

For studies on public support for military interventions, the role of military casualties has often been a primary focus of interest. Early on, Mueller's seminal study showed that U.S. public support for the Vietnam War declined as a function of increasing military casualties.² Building on and expanding this earlier work, a number of studies began investigating the role of other factors to explain variations in public opinion. For example, Russett and Nincic find that a country's geographic proximity to and level of economic interdependence with the United States affect U.S. public support for military assistance to that country.³

More recent studies on public support for military interventions suggest that the objective of a given military intervention is an important factor in determining the level of public support and casualty tolerance for such intervention. For instance, Jentleson proposes two different types of "principal policy objectives."⁴ The first

type of objective is “foreign policy restraint,” which entails military interventions against an adversary that threatens one’s national interests. The second type of objective is “internal political change,” which refers to “force used to engineer internal political change within another country whether in support of an existing government considered an ally or seeking to overthrow a government considered an adversary.”⁵ Jentleson and Britton later add “humanitarian intervention” as a third type of objective.⁶ Specifically, Jentleson and Britton argue that the public will perceive military actions with “foreign policy restraint” goals as important missions that are worth a substantial cost. By comparison, “humanitarian intervention” missions enjoy public support only if the costs are relatively small. Public support for “internal political change” missions, however, tends to be generally low.⁷

Alternatively, some scholars argue that the public’s casualty tolerance and support for a military intervention is influenced by domestic elite opinion.⁸ According to this view, when elites reach a consensus in supporting a military mission, a “mainstream effect” is likely to occur in the form of increased public support, particularly among those who are most attentive to such uniform elite discourse favoring the mission.⁹ On the other hand, if elites are divided about the mission, a “polarization effect” is likely to emerge leading to partisan divisions in the public, especially among politically aware individuals with more defined partisan alignments.¹⁰

In examining major determinants of public support for an intervention, a number of scholars also point to people’s expectations of success with regard to the fulfillment of an intervention objective. For instance, Feaver and Gelpi argue that when people believe that victory is likely, they will continue to support a military mission even in the presence of rising costs.¹¹ However, when the public thinks that a mission will fail, even small costs will decrease support. Gelpi et al. refine this argument by suggesting that, in addition to the perceived likelihood of winning, public support and casualty tolerance are shaped by beliefs concerning the justness of a given war.¹² Finally, several studies suggest that public support for a military mission will be higher if other countries also support such mission.¹³

Variations in Public Support during the Course of a Military Intervention

A number of scholars suggest that the level of support for an intervention that is already in progress may differ significantly from the level of support observed in the preintervention period.¹⁴ In fact, several studies have shown that political leaders often enjoy significant boosts in their approval ratings immediately following a high-profile foreign policy event (as in the case of a military intervention), even when public support was low just prior to the event.¹⁵ Scholars refer to this phenomenon as the “rally-round-the-flag” effect.¹⁶

Once the short-term rally effect starts to abate, other dynamics of a military intervention come into play—such as the number of troops, military and civilian

casualties, and intervention duration—which may lead to differences in public perceptions of costs, benefits, and expectations of success. As Larson puts it, “support can be thought of as a constant rebalancing of the benefits and prospects for success and a determination of whether the outcome is judged worth the costs.”¹⁷

Scholars have often sought to employ time-series analyses to systematically examine the effects of various factors that influence public opinion on military interventions.¹⁸ Nevertheless, as Sullivan points out, reliable and comprehensive public opinion data on military operations are limited.¹⁹ Several studies have tried to overcome this problem by pooling all available data from multiple interventions into a single data set.²⁰ However, pooling data from polls covering multiple interventions that were conducted at different time points may produce unreliable results and lead to false inferences, mainly because the direction and significance of the factors that influence public opinion before the launch of an intervention may differ once an intervention is underway.

The Role of Political Information in Shaping Public Opinion on Foreign Policy

One may broadly refer to political information as an individual’s range of factual knowledge about politics.²¹ Regarding political information levels on foreign policy issues, early studies referred to the U.S. public as being extremely uninformed with highly volatile policy preferences.²² More recent research on the U.S. public, however, has found that people can meaningfully organize their foreign policy opinions via heuristics without necessarily possessing high levels of information.²³ Nevertheless, even though politically uninformed individuals are able to compensate for their low information levels with the use of cognitive shortcuts, scholars still point to unremitting differences between highly informed and uninformed members of the public regarding their political attitudes and behavior.²⁴ Moreover, although several scholars suggest that U.S. citizens hold foreign policy preferences that are somewhat sensible and responsive to world politics,²⁵ most studies indicate that a large number of Americans are still highly uninformed about international politics.²⁶

Policy-Specific and General Political Information

A number of scholars who study political information disagree on whether policy-specific or general political information matters more in molding public opinion. Several scholars depict individuals as “information generalists,” while others suggest that citizens are “information specialists” who are knowledgeable about only a few issues that are salient to them.²⁷ Scholars who depict people as information generalists primarily focus on the influence of general political information on public opinion.²⁸ On the other hand, scholars who argue that the acquisition of political information is domain-specific suggest that policy-specific information has a more direct influence on political judgments, opinion change, and policy preferences.²⁹

With this debate in mind, one objective of this study is to explore whether policy-specific or general political information has a greater effect on public support for military interventions.

Theoretical Framework

Recent scholarship on public opinion on military interventions has largely employed a rationalist perspective. Several scholars argue that one's decision to support a given military intervention is based on a rational expected utility calculation, which consists of one's (1) evaluation of the utility of that intervention's objective, (2) expectations of success in attaining that objective, and (3) perception of the costs involved.³⁰ Therein, many scholars suggest that casualties are the most salient, visible, and systematic measure of costs associated with military interventions.³¹ Several scholars also address the notion of belief-updating through incoming information during the course of an intervention.³² Building on and extending this line of research, this study offers a more nuanced rational approach for exploring the micro foundations of public support for military interventions by taking into account variations in levels of support across different political information levels and intervention stages.

Specifically, this study argues that an individual's rational decision-making capacity is, to a certain extent, a function of that individual's level of political information, which in turn affects his or her policy preferences regarding a military intervention. As previous studies have shown, politically informed individuals are likely to consider more policy options and a higher number of cost-benefit dimensions in the decision-making process compared to uninformed ones.³³ For instance, a politically uninformed individual may decide whether or not to support an intervention by looking solely at the price of gasoline and/or the number of casualties, whereas a politically informed individual may choose to consider additional dimensions, such as diplomatic credibility or sunk costs. Furthermore, individuals can be exposed to the same estimates of costs and utilities, but the perceived value of these estimates may differ in line with their level of political information. For instance, politically informed and uninformed people may react differently to the same number of casualties because they differ in their perceptions of (and their tolerance for) such casualties.

Along with dissecting the public into different segments of political information, this study also disaggregates a military intervention into different stages. By conceptualizing military interventions across different stages, one can introduce important considerations, such as perceived success of a previous intervention stage, to the investigations of public support for military interventions. Disaggregating interventions into different stages also enables one to more systematically examine the dynamics of belief-updating as reactions to structural changes throughout the course of an intervention.

This study identifies and categorizes different intervention stages as follows. The preintervention stage (stage 1) is the stage when there are considerations of a possible intervention, but the military operation has not yet been launched. The starting stage (stage 2) is the very beginning stage of the intervention. At this stage, the intervention has just begun such that it is too soon to receive steady feedback concerning the current progress and costs of the operation. This stage can also be referred to as the rally stage of an intervention. The intervention then proceeds to stage 3 (and further stages) when structural changes occur in the course of the intervention resulting in changes in costs, utilities, and the probability of success, thus leading to changes in the public perceptions of the intervention. Finally, one can determine a cutoff point for the final stage post hoc.³⁴ In short, at the core of determining different intervention stages lies the identification of structural changes during the course of an intervention. Such structural changes are mainly driven by major decision points and key events (e.g., the launch of major combat operations or transition of a military operation into an “advise-and-assist” mission).

Hypotheses

A number of studies point to differences in people’s reactions to political events and policy issues based on their political and economic interests, as well as on their level of attentiveness.³⁵ Regarding support for the external use of force, several scholars suggest that fully informed individuals tend to be relatively more dovish than uninformed ones.³⁶ For instance, Jaros et al. argue that the most critical aspect about being politically uninformed “is not that it leads directly to a preference for aggressive policies, but rather that it leads to a desire for simple, readily understood solutions.”³⁷ As such, the perceived utility of engaging in a military intervention to deal with an international crisis is likely to be high for politically uninformed people partly because such policy option represents a clear-cut foreign policy solution. By comparison, given that political information increases awareness of multiple policy options beyond military solutions, politically informed individuals are likely to be more capable of weighing the costs and benefits of the military option against those of other options.

Another possible reason for the proclivity of politically uninformed individuals to support a military intervention decision is that they are generally more susceptible to political rhetoric and manipulation employed by a leader seeking to justify his or her decision to intervene by exclusively focusing on the benefits of such military intervention and overstating the probability of success while discounting the potential costs. By comparison, politically informed individuals are often less prone to be affected by such one-sided manipulative discourses.³⁸ As Zaller points out, political awareness engenders relative resistance to the political communications of governing authorities, particularly by increasing one’s sensitivity to the countervailing arguments.³⁹ These considerations lead to the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1: Politically uninformed individuals are likely to show higher levels of support for a military intervention than politically informed ones at the preintervention and starting stages of that intervention.

In terms of the change in levels of support from the preintervention stage to the starting stage of a military intervention, one may expect that politically informed individuals are likely to preserve their initial perceptions of the expected costs, utilities, and likelihood of success regarding that intervention. In fact, several studies suggest that unlike politically uninformed individuals who often display volatile political opinions, highly informed individuals are less likely to change their opinions because they can successfully counterargue any dissonant new information.⁴⁰ For example, by aggregating data from the post–World War II period, Baum finds that the least politically aware individuals demonstrate a higher rate of increase in their presidential approval ratings than the most politically aware individuals in the immediate aftermath of using force abroad.⁴¹ These considerations lead to the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 2: Moving from the preintervention stage to the starting stage of a military intervention, politically uninformed individuals are likely to show higher rates of increase in support for that intervention than politically informed ones.

Once a military intervention proceeds from the starting stage to subsequent stages, casualties may occur. Because politically informed people are likely to have more accurate estimates of expected costs to begin with and be more cognizant of the realities of a military intervention, they are also likely to show less severe reactions to the actual costs, including casualties, compared to the politically uninformed. Indeed, Gelpi et al. suggest that one's level of education is positively associated with one's tolerance for casualties.⁴² Their findings indicate that a college-educated respondent in the United States is about 20 percent more likely to tolerate at least 1,500 casualties in Iraq than a respondent who has not completed high school. Moreover, Feaver and Gelpi find that one's casualty tolerance is also positively correlated with one's perceived importance of a military mission and confidence in achieving a successful outcome from that mission.⁴³ One should also note that the heightened sensitivity that politically uninformed individuals tend to have for military casualties may, to a certain extent, result from the fact that socioeconomically disadvantaged and less-educated segments of society disproportionately bear most of the human costs of war.⁴⁴ These considerations lead to the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 3: Once actual casualties are incurred, politically uninformed individuals are likely to show lower levels of support for a military intervention than politically informed ones in the subsequent stages of that intervention.

As actual costs (particularly, military casualties) begin to accumulate in an intervention, the dynamics of expected utility calculations change accordingly. As Sullivan puts it, “as a result of concerns about the losses associated with withdrawing from a military engagement once it is underway, some individuals who would not have supported initiating the use of force at a given set of cost and risk parameters may nonetheless support sustaining an ongoing operation with those parameters.”⁴⁵ That said, an individual’s sensitivity to the costs of continuing the mission versus the costs of withdrawing may vary according to one’s level of political information. Gomez and Wilson point out that politically informed individuals have an abundant reservoir of knowledge along with a variety of ways to integrate newly acquired information, which allows them to make global as well as local attributions.⁴⁶ As such, politically informed individuals are more likely to look beyond the most obvious causal factor in a given situation, typically the number of actual casualties in the context of a military intervention. In contrast, politically uninformed individuals are likely to be less cognizant of the long-range foreign policy goals, the importance of mission accomplishments, and, in the face of mounting casualties, less aware of the logistical difficulties and political costs of a rapid withdrawal.⁴⁷ These considerations lead to the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 4: As the number of actual casualties increases, politically uninformed individuals are likely to show higher rates of decrease in support for a military intervention than politically informed ones when moving from one intervention stage to the next.

Public Support for the U.S. Military Intervention in Iraq

To test the hypotheses, this study analyzes public opinion survey data on the Iraq War across six major intervention stages: (1) the preintervention stage, (2) the starting “rally” stage, (3) the major combat stage, (4) the occupation stage, (5) the sovereign Iraq stage, and (6) the sectarian violence stage. The preintervention stage is the period prior to the launch of the military intervention in Iraq, which occurred on March 19, 2003. The starting “rally” stage of the intervention begins thereafter with the initiation of the military campaign in Iraq. The rally stage refers to the short period of time immediately following an intervention, which in this case lasted for approximately the first two weeks of the intervention.

To identify the next three intervention stages following the starting “rally” stage, this study employs the coding provided by Gelpi et al.⁴⁸ Gelpi et al. divide the military intervention in Iraq into three periods based on media accounts drawn from the Tyn-dall Report.⁴⁹ Specifically, they code the “major combat stage” of the war as the period covering the initial invasion of Iraq, the toppling of the Baath regime, and the movement of coalition forces into a position of occupation. The “occupation stage” then begins in late May 2003 and continues until the coalition’s transfer of sovereignty to Iraqi authorities in June 2004, which marks the initiation of the “sovereign Iraq

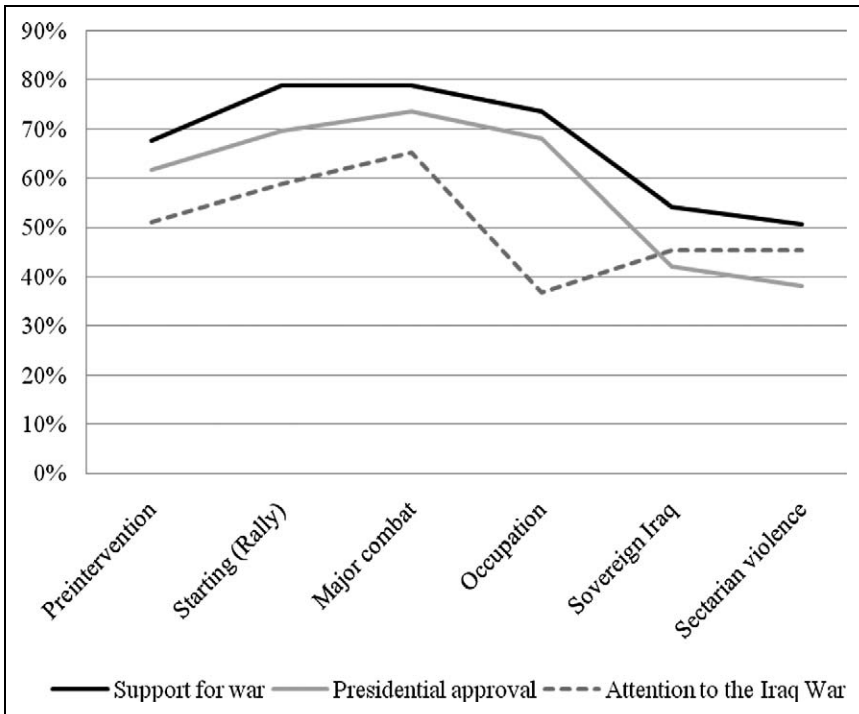


Figure 1. Changing trends in the Iraq War

stage.” Thereafter, a significant rise in intergroup bloodshed in Iraq from late February 2006 onward (following the bomb attack on an important Shia shrine, the al-Askari mosque, on February 22, 2006) led to the escalation of civil conflict in Iraq, which this study identifies as the “sectarian violence stage” (sixth stage) of the intervention.⁵⁰

Data and Research Method

To analyze public support for the military intervention in Iraq, this study compiles a data set that includes six surveys conducted within the specified time frame of the six intervention stages for the period March 2003 to December 2006.⁵¹ All the surveys for the analyses came from the Roper Center Public Opinion Archives.⁵² These surveys were conducted via telephone interviews with nationally representative samples. During the period under investigation, there was a high amount of variation in support for and attention to the Iraq War, as well as in presidential approval ratings across all intervention stages (see Figure 1).

Given the dichotomous nature of the dependent variable (support for the military intervention), this study employs probit as the method of analysis. The unit of

analysis is the individual. All significance tests employ robust standard errors to account for any unspecified heteroscedasticity.⁵³

Dependent Variable

The dependent variable is support for the military intervention in Iraq. At the preintervention, starting, and major combat stages of the intervention, people express their support for (or opposition to) taking military action in Iraq. Thereafter, in the occupation, sovereign Iraq, and sectarian violence stages, people express their support for (or opposition to) sustaining military presence in Iraq. At each stage of the intervention, a code of “1” is given if the respondent was in favor of the military intervention in Iraq and “0” otherwise.

Major Independent Variables

Policy-Specific Information

Survey questions suitable for measuring an individual’s level of policy-specific information are extremely scarce and only a few are consistently asked across different time points of an intervention. Given these data constraints, a proxy measure is employed for constructing the variable of policy-specific information using the following question posed in all the surveys conducted within the six specified stages of the intervention in Iraq: “How closely have you been following the news about the situation with Iraq—very closely, somewhat closely, not too closely, or not at all?” A code of “1” is given for the responses *not at all*, “2” for *not too closely*, “3” for *somewhat closely*, and “4” for *very closely*. As such, an ordinal measure of policy-specific information is constructed ranging from 1 to 4.⁵⁴

Although using such a proxy measure for policy-specific information is not ideal, it nevertheless provides a means to capture the variation in people’s level of information concerning military interventions. Many scholars acknowledge that the mass media is the primary way people obtain information about politics.⁵⁵ Indeed, some scholars find that political knowledge, political interest, and media exposure have fairly similar effects as proxies for political awareness and political information.⁵⁶ As Barabas and Jerit show, “the volume, breadth, and prominence of news media coverage increase policy-specific knowledge above and beyond common demographic factors.”⁵⁷ Concerning military interventions, Bennett and Flickinger find that attention to news significantly influences one’s knowledge about military casualties.⁵⁸

General Political Information

To measure general political information, most studies use indicators such as factual test items, self-descriptions, interviewer evaluations of the respondents, attitudinal consistency across policy issues, or proxy indicators such as levels of

formal education. Regarding the latter practice, numerous studies find that education is significantly correlated with political information.⁵⁹ Since it is readily available across all the surveys in the data set, the respondents' education level is used as an ordinal proxy measure of general political information. Based on the generic question "What was the last grade in school you completed?" the level of education is coded as "1" if the respondent is not a high school graduate, "2" if she or he graduated from high school, "3" if she or he attended college, "4" if she or he is a college graduate, and "5" if she or he completed any postgraduate work/degree.

Control Variables

Several factors, which are commonly included in the analyses of public opinion and military interventions, are controlled for: presidential approval, perceived success,⁶⁰ party identification, ideology, and key sociodemographic factors (i.e., gender, age, race, and income).⁶¹

Results

The results in Table 1 show that both policy-specific and general political information indicators have a statistically significant and negative impact on one's likelihood to support the initiation of the military intervention in Iraq at the first two stages. These results thus corroborate Hypothesis 1, which proposes that politically uninformed individuals are likely to show higher levels of support for a military intervention than politically informed ones at the preintervention and starting stages of that intervention.

In the major combat stage of the Iraq War, the United States began to suffer a significant number of casualties. The survey used for the analysis of the major combat stage was completed on May 4, 2003, by which time the number of U.S. casualties had reached 140.⁶² According to Hypothesis 3, once actual casualties occur, the support of politically uninformed individuals in the subsequent stages of a military intervention is likely to be lower than that of politically informed ones. The results concerning the major combat stage, however, demonstrate that only the coefficient sign of the policy-specific information indicator is positive whereas the coefficient sign of the general political information indicator remains negative.

The reason for the opposite coefficient signs for the policy-specific and general political information indicators at this stage may be because policy-specific information about a military intervention may have a more direct and immediate effect on the level of support for that intervention than general political information. As such, even though the effects of policy-specific and general political information indicators may eventually converge, individuals who possess general political information may have delayed reactions to changes that occur during the course of a military intervention compared to those with more policy-specific information. In fact, the results concerning the occupation stage indicate that the effect of policy-specific

Table 1. Probit Analyses of Public Support for the Iraq War across Intervention Stages

Variables	Preintervention stage	Starting "rally" stage	Major combat stage	Occupation stage	Sovereign Iraq stage	Sectarian violence stage
Policy-specific information (News attention)	-.156* (.11)	-.223* (.13)	.164* (.10)	.251*** (.06)	.102** (.05)	.123** (.06)
General political information (Education)	-.137** (.06)	-.139** (.08)	-.197*** (.06)	.062 (.05)	.176*** (.04)	.107*** (.04)
Presidential approval	1.05*** (.15)	1.80*** (.16)	1.87*** (.13)	.588*** (.13)	.902*** (.12)	.991*** (.12)
Success	.660*** (.15)	.742*** (.14)	-	.205*** (.07)	.417*** (.06)	.307*** (.06)
Party identification	.221** (.09)	.252** (.11)	.283*** (.09)	.070 (.08)	.179*** (.07)	.102* (.06)
Ideology	.299*** (.10)	-.061 (.11)	.091 (.09)	.167*** (.08)	.058 (.06)	.059 (.06)
Age	-.009** (.004)	-.008** (.005)	-.002 (.004)	.003 (.003)	.002 (.002)	.005*** (.002)
Race	-.063 (.20)	.399** (.19)	.403*** (.17)	.113 (.15)	.647*** (.12)	.481*** (.13)
Income	-.090* (.06)	-.103* (.06)	.062 (.05)	-.016 (.04)	.101*** (.03)	.138*** (.03)
Gender	-.048 (.14)	.090 (.15)	-.014 (.12)	-.139* (.10)	-.425*** (.09)	-.251*** (.09)
Constant	.451 (.55)	-1.31*** (.80)	-1.40*** (.51)	-1.01*** (.44)	-2.84*** (.36)	-2.78*** (.37)
N	502	690	862	717	1092	1031
Wald χ^2 (12)	173.30***	233.64***	307.29***	64.71***	375.31***	307.61***
Pseudo R ²	.30	.53	.45	.08	.31	.25
Log likelihood	-219.86	-162.94	-241.44	-362.37	-516.24	-529.37

Note: Robust standard errors in parentheses.

* $p \leq .1$.

** $p \leq .05$.

*** $p \leq .01$.

information on one's support for the intervention remains positive and significant whereas the general political information indicator lacks statistical significance. Nevertheless, in the sovereign Iraq and sectarian violence stages, both policy-specific and general political information indicators display a statistically significant and positive effect on one's level of support for the intervention. The results thus corroborate Hypothesis 3 for the major combat, occupation, sovereign Iraq, and sectarian violence stages vis-à-vis the effect of policy-specific information indicator, whereas the effect of the general political information indicator is in line with Hypothesis 3 only with respect to the sovereign Iraq and sectarian violence stages.

Regarding the control variables, the level of support for the Iraq War is generally higher for those who approve of the president and who perceive the intervention as successful. In addition, party identification is significantly related to one's opinions about the war. Specifically, Republicans are generally more likely to support the war in Iraq than Democrats and Independents.⁶³ Ideology demonstrates a significant effect at the preintervention and occupation stages, indicating that conservatives have higher levels of support for the war than moderates and liberals. With respect to age, while younger respondents are initially more supportive of the war, they become less supportive as the intervention proceeds. As per race, white respondents generally show more support for the Iraq War. In addition, people with lower levels of income are initially more supportive of the war but become significantly less supportive toward the last two intervention stages. As previously mentioned, these results may partly reflect the disproportionate number of casualties that military actions generally impose upon younger generations, non-whites, and less wealthy segments of the public. Finally, there is no statistically significant difference between male and female respondents for the first three stages of the war. However, starting from the occupation stage, women are significantly less supportive of the war in Iraq.

To further illustrate and interpret the effect of political information on one's level of support for the war in Iraq across different intervention stages, a graph was generated using the "Clarify" program in Stata.⁶⁴ Figure 2 demonstrates the changes in the predicted probability of support for the intervention using two alternative scenarios—one with a low level of political information and one with a high level of political information across the six intervention stages.

Specifically, the graph illustrates that the probability of support for the military intervention in Iraq across stages 1 through 6 steadily declines when the level of political information is low. By comparison, the probability of support among respondents with a high level of political information shows less change across different intervention stages. That said, for stages 1 and 2 (the preintervention and starting stages of the intervention), there is no statistically significant difference between politically informed and uninformed individuals in terms of the probability of support for the military intervention. This finding does not corroborate Hypothesis 2, which proposes that going from the preintervention stage (stage 1) to the starting stage (stage 2) of a military intervention, politically uninformed individuals are likely to show a higher rate of increase in support for that intervention than politically informed ones.

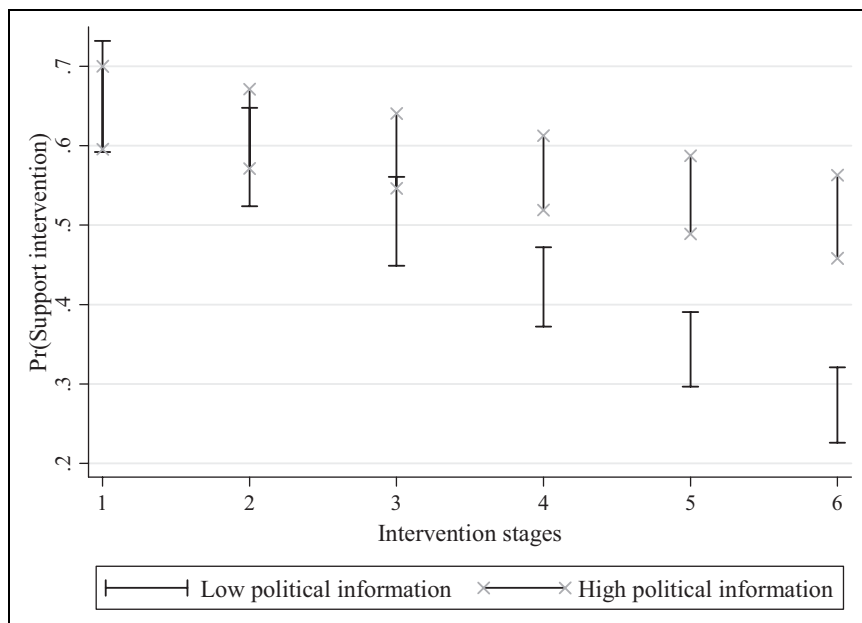


Figure 2. The effect of political information on the probability of support for the Iraq War across intervention stages

At stage 3 (the major combat stage), the difference in the probability of support between people with a low level of political information and a high level of political information falls on the borderline of statistical significance. At stages 4–6, which correspond to the periods in which the U.S. military suffered significant numbers of casualties, the probability of support becomes significantly higher among respondents with a high level of political information than among ones with a low level of political information. These results thus corroborate Hypothesis 3. In addition, the graph shows a significant drop in the probability of support among politically uninformed individuals, whereas the likelihood of support among politically informed individuals is fairly stable across stages 4–6.⁶⁵ Accordingly, these results corroborate Hypothesis 4, which proposes that in the presence of actual casualties, politically uninformed individuals are likely to show higher rates of decrease in support for the intervention than politically informed ones when moving from one intervention stage to the next.

Discussion and Conclusion

This study investigated the effects of political information levels and intervention stages on public support for military interventions in the context of the Iraq War. Specifically, the study dissected the Iraq War into different stages and divided the

public into different political information segments, thereby offering a more nuanced approach to exploring the dynamics of public support for military interventions. As such, the study and its findings parallel Gartner's suggestion that "public support for a conflict is not a blank check. Combat provides information people use to update their expectations about the outcome, direction, value, and cost of a war."⁶⁶

While this study provides a useful exploration of how political information affects public support for military interventions across different intervention stages, further exploration of the topic is warranted. One future avenue of research may involve replicating the analyses for other military interventions (such as the war in Afghanistan) and eventually develop a more comprehensive cross-national time-series data set that covers multiple military interventions. Another future step in this line of research may involve collecting panel data, which would allow for a more direct investigation of change in support for an intervention at the individual level.

As per the policy implications of the findings, this study suggests that a politically informed public—one that is more equipped to consider different alternatives (along with associated costs and benefits) in responding to an international crisis—may prompt a leader to be more cautious about initiating a military intervention. At the same time, once a leader decides to launch a military intervention, politically informed individuals may be less hasty in demanding an immediate termination of such mission in the face of mounting casualties. More broadly, depending on a certain stage of an intervention, political information may significantly influence the level of costs that a political constituency is willing to bear. If a leader misperceives the public as a single mass that is unconditionally casualty-phobic and cost-averse, this may result in poor foreign policy decisions and outcomes, as in the case of the United States prematurely terminating the humanitarian mission in Somalia following the deaths of nineteen U.S. soldiers in October 1993. The Clinton administration's refusal to intervene in the Rwandan Genocide in April 1994 and belated response to the Bosnian War (only after the Srebrenica massacre in 1995) may also be partly attributed to such misperceptions.⁶⁷ In sum, this study suggests that scholars and decision makers may better understand the dynamics of public opinion regarding military interventions if they take into account the role that political information levels and structural changes can play during the course of such interventions.

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Notes

1. See Rodger A. Payne, "Public Opinion and Foreign Threats: Eisenhower's Response to Sputnik," *Armed Forces & Society* 21 (1994): 89-111; James A. Nathan and James K. Oliver, "Public Opinion and U.S. Security Policy," *Armed Forces & Society* 2 (1975): 46-62.
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16. But see Matthew Baum and Timothy Groeling, *War Stories: The Causes and Consequences of Public Views of War* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010). Baum and Groeling argue that contemporary war coverage in the media is continuously dominated by partisanship and negativity (even at the initial stages of an intervention), which casts doubt on the scholarly practice of differentiating between short-term (rally period) and long-term time horizons.
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47. See, for example, James Burk, "Public Support for Peacekeeping in Lebanon and Somalia: Assessing the Casualties Hypothesis," *Political Science Quarterly* 114 (1999): 53-78.
48. Gelpi et al., "Success Matters," 17-18.
49. See <http://www.tyndallreport.com>.
50. Some may argue that the arguments and findings of this study do not apply beyond the period analyzed here. In addressing this concern, I echo Gelpi et al.'s sentiments in suggesting that the main research objective is to propose a model of the structure of public support for military interventions in relation to the levels of political information across different intervention stages. Accordingly, my analyses using data from the Iraq War serve primarily as empirical tests of the general logic of my theory and hypotheses rather than as simply describing a given intervention within a certain time frame. See Gelpi et al., "Success Matters."
51. The surveys were conducted on March 4-5, 2003 (the preintervention stage), April 2-3, 2003 (the starting "rally" stage), April 30 to May 4, 2003 (the major combat stage), June 19 to July 2, 2003 (the occupation stage), October 6-10, 2005 (the sovereign Iraq stage), and December 6-10, 2006 (the sectarian violence stage).
52. See <http://www.ropercenter.uconn.edu/>. The main criteria for choosing a survey for the analyses were whether the time at which the survey was conducted corresponded to a certain intervention stage and whether the survey included questions required for the measure of policy-specific information and other controlled factors. Searching within the databank of the Roper Center Public Opinion Archives, it was determined that CBS News poll data met the criteria for the first two intervention stages, whereas the Pew Research Center poll data fit the requirements for the last four stages. Although it would have been

- more desirable to employ surveys from a single polling organization to avoid potential “house effects,” survey data that covered all intervention stages and included the necessary measures was not available from a single organization. Nevertheless, there were no major differences among the surveys from the two polling organizations in terms of question formats, coding, methodology, or sampling. See Tom W. Smith, “House Effects and the Reproducibility of Survey Measurements: A Comparison of the 1980 GSS and the 1980 American National Election Study,” *Public Opinion Quarterly* 46 (1982): 54-68.
53. One limitation pertinent to this study is the lack of panel survey data on support for the Iraq War collected within the time period that corresponds to the intervention stages analyzed in this study with measures of political information. This constitutes a challenge since one of the objectives of this study is to examine changes in levels of support across different stages of an intervention. As Bartels points out, a panel design offers more direct evidence of change at the individual level by comparing the same respondents at different times. Accordingly, research topics that require a panel design are often set aside due to the scarcity of panel survey data. However, rather than setting aside this important topic, this study employs a practical alternative to panel design—the longitudinal design—to infer change from aggregate comparisons of survey responses at different times. See Larry M. Bartels, “Panel Effects in the American National Election Studies,” *Political Analysis* 8 (1999): 1-20.
 54. Several studies find that different forms of media exposure (such as watching television news versus reading newspapers or searching the Internet) and particular media outlets (such as Fox News versus CNN) may lead to variations in the makeup of one’s political information, policy attitudes, and judgments. As such, it would be ideal to include control variables for the forms and sources of media exposure in the statistical models. Unfortunately, the surveys used for the analyses of the Iraq War did not include questions to allow for such controls. See Baum and Groeling, *War Stories: The Causes and Consequences of Public Views of War*; Steven Kull, Clay Ramsay, and Evan Lewis, “Misperceptions, the Media and the Iraq War,” *Political Science Quarterly* 118 (2003/2004): 569-98.
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59. See, for example, R. Michael Alvarez and John Brehm, *Hard Choices, Easy Answers* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002); Converse, "The Nature of Belief Systems in Mass Publics"; Krause, "Voters, Information Heterogeneity, and the Dynamics of Aggregate Economic Expectations."
 60. Unfortunately, the survey for the major combat stage did not include any question that could be used as a measure of perceived success.
 61. See, for example, David L. Leal, "American Public Opinion toward the Military: Differences by Race, Gender, and Class?" *Armed Forces & Society* 32 (2005): 123-38. The details regarding the operationalization and measurement of these control variables are available upon request.
 62. See http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/ops/iraq_casualties.htm. At the time of the completion of the surveys used for the analyses of the occupation, sovereign Iraq, and sectarian violence stages, the number of casualties had reached 208, 1954, and 2906, respectively.
 63. Considering the effect of party identification in conjunction with news attention, one may infer that the most attentive (and well-informed) Democrats and Republicans may be the farthest apart in their attitudes concerning the Iraq War. See Gary C. Jacobson, *A Divider, Not a Uniter: George W. Bush and the American People* (New York: Pearson Longman, 2006).
 64. Michael Tomz, Jason Wittenberg, and Gary King, *CLARIFY: Software for Interpreting and Presenting Statistical Results, Version 2.0* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001).
 65. One should note the possibility that some people who have turned against the intervention may have stopped closely following the news about the war because they have made up their minds. Nevertheless, the cross-tabulations show that the respondents who oppose the war are not disproportionately represented among those who follow the news less closely.
 66. Gartner, "The Multiple Effects of Casualties on Public Support for War," 95.
 67. See Jentleson and Britton, "Still Pretty Prudent."

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