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The Puzzle of Polarized Opinion

Elite Discourse, Mass Media, and U.S. Foreign Policy Attitudes

It was March 20, 2003. The United States was at war. Three nights earlier, in a prime-time address to the nation, President George W. Bush had issued Saddam Hussein an ultimatum: leave Iraq within forty-eight hours or face the prospect of an invasion "commenced at the time of our choosing." Hussein, the Iraqi dictator, had refused to flee.

And then, at 10:15 pm on the East Coast, Bush made good on the threat. He announced that he had ordered an attack on Baghdad. The U.S. military machine's "shock and awe" campaign had begun, the first salvo in a conflict that would prove bloodier and costlier than most Americans had anticipated, and whose political and economic consequences likely would be felt generations down the line.

Despite the inherent dangers and uncertainty that attend any military conflict, mainstream media coverage in the days surrounding the invasion highlighted the aura of national solidarity. With polls showing roughly seven in ten citizens endorsing military action, "Americans have rallied strongly around President Bush and accepted his call for war as the only practical way to remove Saddam Hussein and end the threat posed by his weapons of mass destruction," led a *Chattanooga Times Free Press* story. The president has "strong support for waging a war with Iraq," asserted the *Deseret News* of Salt Lake City. Even in the face of concerns about casualties and costs, the public was willing to "hang tough," an Associated Press wire report concluded. In a CNN/*USA Today*/Gallup Poll, Americans "applauded" Bush's ultimatum, according to the *New York Daily News*. "Broad" and "strong"

were among the words frequently used to describe the public majorities that expressed support for the president's actions.

These news media depictions, however, typically failed to note the most telling feature of public opinion during this period: that the views of Republicans and Democrats were more polarized about the launch of the Iraq War than at the outset of any major conflict in modern U.S. history. Bush's backing among Republican identifiers was overwhelming – monolithic even – with upward of 90 percent of his fellow partisans favoring the assault on Baghdad. Democratic support, however, fell below 50 percent in many polls, creating a level of partisan polarization more typically associated with hot-button social issues than with matters of national security. More independents indicated that they were with the president than against him, but significant numbers expressed reservations about the preemptive military strike. By contrast, partisan divisions before the first Gulf War typically hovered around twenty points, and very little polarization characterized the early years of the Korean, Vietnam, Kosovo, or Afghanistan conflicts.[1]

Such opinion polarization in itself is hardly remarkable. The two decades of U.S. politics spanning the turn of the twenty-first century have been marked by wide partisan divisions on a myriad of issues, from health care policy to global warming to same-sex marriage. But the rift on the Iraq War is striking because it stands starkly at odds with what most analysts of public opinion would have predicted.

The dominant academic theory of attitude formation predicts that mass polarization – Democrats and Republicans in the public at-large diverging substantially on a political issue – will occur only when domestic elite polarization occurs first. When Republicans and Democrats in Washington spar publicly, their co-partisans in the public, hearing these disagreements, tend to coalesce behind their respective party leaders' positions. But when the official representatives of the two major parties stand together, or when one party does not publicly challenge the other, mass polarization hardly ever occurs. In such instances, few differences should emerge in the attitudes of Republicans and Democrats in the public – especially in the realm of foreign policy, in which strong nationalistic tides tend to discourage dissent from official stances.

[1] See Pew Research Center survey (http://people-press.org/reports/pdf/175.pdf) and other national polls, and Jacobson (2007, 133–138).

To be sure, some leading Democrats, such as the late West Virginia Senator Robert Byrd, made impassioned arguments against going to war with Iraq. But for reasons both ideological and strategic, the party as a whole failed to wage a loud, consistent, unified, and visible fight against the push for an invasion. In fact, many congressional Democrats – including a majority of senators, among them the party's 2004 electoral standard bearers John Kerry and John Edwards, and the near-nominee in 2008, Hillary Clinton – voted for the October 2002 resolution authorizing Bush to use military force. As a result, mainstream U.S. news media reported very little Democratic dissent in the six months before the 2003 invasion. And neither did the mass media pay much attention to widespread antiwar protests or other nongovernmental efforts to express domestic opposition. In this, mainstream news was following its familiar script of downplaying and delegitimizing political demonstrations and social movements, but the continuing concerns over terrorism less than two years after the September 11 attacks probably added to the marginalization of domestic dissent.

Therefore, in the main, the public was exposed through the mass media to a one-sided discussion among the nations' leaders in 2002 and early 2003, a conversation that both explicitly and implicitly endorsed an invasion of Iraq. Under these conditions, the views of all – or nearly all – Americans should have converged, not diverged. What, then, explains the polarization of U.S. public opinion over the war?

In this book, we argue that the answer lies not within the United States, but abroad. Despite the conventional wisdom that Americans will not heed international critics of U.S. foreign policy, we contend that in the months leading up to the March 2003 invasion, public opinion was powerfully shaped by opposition to the war from official foreign voices. Because U.S. mass media outlets frequently reported the perspectives of international opponents of the Bush administration – especially leaders of traditionally allied countries, such as France, numerous politicians in the United Kingdom, and officials at the United Nations, most of whom preferred a diplomatic solution to the standoff – Americans were consistently exposed to substantial criticism emanating from overseas. Those voices, in turn, drove significant numbers of Democrats and independents in the United States to express opposition to the invasion. Although the nation's news pages and airwaves were largely devoid of domestic opposition to the Bush administration's plans, foreign elite criticism helped create significant domestic partisan polarization over the Iraq War. As a consequence,

President Bush and his advisors took the country to war in the face of a polity that was far more divided than it would have been had such overseas opposition not been broadcast by the news media. This left the president with a considerably weaker base of political support from which to draw as the war grinded on and the situation in Iraq deteriorated, hastening the slide in his approval ratings and accelerating public dissatisfaction with the conduct of the military operation.

In providing a solution to the puzzle of prewar public opinion, we contend that theoretical models of foreign policy opinion formation can no longer ignore the potential role played by elite discourse from abroad. Foreign voices have traditionally been set aside as irrelevant for domestic public opinion because observers have assumed that the U.S. media pay them little attention. And even when those sources make their way into the news, it is assumed they will not influence mass attitudes because Americans do not see the views of foreigners as credible. As one prominent scholar notes, foreign sources are "people whom Americans might well discount, mistrust, or ignore entirely. . . . The political culture encourages Americans to disregard foreign criticism of the United States," (Entman 2004, 55).

We argue, however, that under certain conditions, international actors can significantly affect Americans' attitudes about military conflict. Drawing on decades of research in communication, psychology, and political science, we show that individuals will be receptive to foreign opposition when international officials' arguments resonate with their basic values and beliefs, and when domestic elites fail to make similar, widely publicized arguments. This means that foreign voices will not always play a role in shaping domestic public opinion, and that they will have no effect on the attitudes of Americans whose predispositions lead them to resist foreign policy messages from abroad. But in certain cases, the influence of these elite sources can be profound and consequential. And the run-up to the Iraq War is clearly one such case.

Our theoretical framework has three principle components. First, Americans' exposure to elite discourse is significantly determined by the news media's decisions about how to cover foreign policy debates and which political actors' perspectives are worthy of attention. In contrast to much previous research, we contend that foreign policy attitudes rarely stem from people's independent assessments of "reality" or from unmediated events, such as rising casualties or key votes

in Congress or in the United Nations Security Council. Instead, news coverage plays a dominant role in determining how citizens interpret foreign affairs and, subsequently, in shaping their attitudes about specific foreign policy ventures, such as the invasion of Iraq.

Second, the extent to which official international voices appear in the U.S. media during foreign policy debates is strongly influenced by the deeply embedded journalistic norms that structure how reporters go about their daily business. In cases of domestic elite consensus, news outlets may turn to foreign elite opposition in an effort to create stories that are characterized by a measure of balance and conflict, two key ingredients in contemporary journalistic value frameworks. During the Iraq debate, U.S. reporters' largely implicit sense of news caused them to be unsatisfied with the developing consensus within the U.S. government about the desirability – and the virtual inevitability – of a military confrontation with Iraq. As a result, journalists sought out differing opinions in official international discourse. Moreover, when non-U.S. voices are viewed as important to the development or the resolution of a foreign policy debate – that is, when journalists perceive foreign actors or institutions as possessing power to affect events – these voices will receive significant media attention. Therefore, the extent to which foreign sources are deemed relevant to a U.S. policy debate depends on journalists' professionally socialized determinations of whether they are "newsworthy," where newsworthiness is largely defined by the institutionally sanctioned authority to affect the prospects for or the conduct of war.

Third, when such voices are made available to the U.S. public through the news media, and when domestic sources of opposition are virtually absent in the mass communication environment, citizens' attitudes can be affected by those foreign perspectives. Not all Americans, of course, will be influenced by discourse from international elites. But people whose general predispositions make them amenable to the arguments emanating from overseas and who are consistently attentive to political news have a high probability of responding to those voices. This means that most Americans' foreign policy attitudes are ultimately shaped by mainstream media decisions about which perspectives are newsworthy, by levels of exposure to media discourse, and by individual-level predispositions that orient people toward receptivity to particular kinds of voices in the news.

Our argument explains why mass opinion polarized even as domestic elites did not in the lead-up to the Iraq War. Foreign elite voices,

given attention by U.S. journalists, articulated opposition that resonated with some Americans' relatively antiwar predispositions. These citizens – principally politically aware Democrats and independents – responded by articulating their own opposition to the proposed invasion, leading to the partisan polarization that was evident in the polls as the war loomed in 2003.

But even as we train our empirical attention on Iraq, this argument has broad implications for the study of foreign policy attitudes and political communication in the twenty-first century. Our research recommends that scholars devote considerably more attention to the inclusion of non-U.S. elite voices in U.S. foreign policy news, and to the potential effects of those voices on citizen attitudes in the post–Cold War context. The 2011 conflict in Libya and the ongoing debates over responses to Iran's alleged nuclear ambitions have demonstrated the increasingly important role that international organizations and foreign governments play in U.S. foreign policy. In addition, in a geopolitical environment that lacks the strong unifying thread of anticommunism, episodes in which consensus elite opinion in the United States differs considerably from that expressed by leaders of traditional allies (such as France and Germany), not to mention erstwhile enemies and now uneasy strategic partners (such as Russia), may become more frequent (Althaus et al. 1996).

While there is little doubt that the September 11-inspired "war on terrorism" has to a significant extent filled the U.S.-led strategic-ideological vacuum once taken up by the Cold War, key aspects of this vision as articulated by the Bush administration met serious resistance from officials in Europe, the Middle East, and elsewhere in 2002 and 2003. In part because of a particularly high level of elite dissensus between the United States, on the one hand, and other major nations and international institutions, on the other, the pre–Iraq War debate is perhaps the paradigm case for examining the possible role of official foreign opposition in U.S. media coverage and public opinion in the context of the new anti-terrorism framework. Our findings suggest that political observers and scholars can no longer assume that foreign voices are irrelevant to U.S. public opinion, especially in an increasingly interconnected world marked by the global flow of people, information, and commerce. And our argument raises important normative questions about mainstream media's role as an arbiter of foreign policy discourse in a democratic society.

Foreign Elite Voices in U.S. Foreign Policy Debates

The dominant model of public opinion formation, articulated most thoroughly by Zaller (1992), and updated recently by Berinsky (2009) and Baum and Groeling (2010), is founded on the fact that most people pay relatively little attention to politics and know even less (see Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996; Luskin 2002; Prior and Lupia 2008). As a result, most people's policy attitudes are marked by ambivalence and some measure of malleability (Feldman and Zaller 1992; Zaller and Feldman 1992), and can be significantly affected by the substance of news reporting about an issue.

This is especially likely in the realm of foreign and national security policy, in which government control of information (especially by the executive branch) and powerful nationalistic pressures tend to generate deference to presidential prerogatives (Mueller 1973), unless alternative views from credible sources make their way into media discourse in sufficient magnitudes. Therefore, when the mass communications flow about an issue is "one-sided" – reflecting partisan institutional elite consensus – public opinion tends to coalesce behind the dominant position (Zaller 1992). When the flow is more balanced, or "two-sided," opinion tends to polarize in response to polarized elites. This uniformity or divergence in mass policy attitudes is typically driven by the most politically aware citizens – that is, those who habitually attend to public affairs and therefore possess relatively more factual information and have at their cognitive disposal relatively more numerous considerations (or idea fragments that are useful for connecting their basic predispositions to the policy-specific discourse they encounter in the media). It is these people who are most likely to be exposed to – and to comprehend – political arguments in the news.

In most empirical work in this domain, however, researchers have focused almost exclusively on the influence of persuasive arguments made by domestic political elites (e.g., Baum and Groeling 2010; Berinsky 2007, 2009; Feldman, Huddy, and Marcus 2007; Zaller 1992). Scholars typically posit that politically aware Republicans in the electorate take cues from Republican elites, and politically aware Democratic identifiers respond to signals from Democratic elites. Although the information sources potentially available to citizens are myriad, on most major issues – especially in the realm of foreign policy – this seems to be a reasonable theoretical simplification. Mainstream

news reports are generally dominated by voices emanating from the centers of U.S. government power (Bennett 1990; Bennett, Lawrence, and Livingston 2007; Lawrence 2000; Mermin 1999). When nonofficial domestic voices appear in mass media coverage – which remains the primary source of political information for the vast majority of Americans (Graber 2009) – it is usually only when their views echo those expressed by institutional elites or, alternatively, when their perspectives are summarily denigrated as outside the bounds of acceptable opinion (Entman and Rojecki 1993; Gitlin 1980; Hallin 1994; McLeod and Hertog 1992; Shoemaker 1991; Wittebols 1996).

One implication of this perspective is that foreign elite voices – leaders of other countries or officials from international organizations, for instance – show up infrequently in mainstream U.S. media coverage of foreign policy, except when they are depicted as hostile to U.S. interests. Moreover, most scholars suggest that even if non-U.S. sources appeared with regularity, they would be irrelevant for explaining mass opinion because they lack credibility with U.S. audiences (Entman 2004; Mermin 1999). Mermin's (1999, 13) explanation of his decision to exclude foreign voices from most of his empirical analyses of news coverage during eight cases of U.S. military action is broadly representative of this perspective: "Foreign critics, as a rule, do not phrase arguments in terms that speak to American interests or concerns and often argue in ways that are bound to strike Americans as outrageous, irrational, or simply bizarre." Similarly, Entman (2004) argues that even in cases in which foreign voices appear with some frequency, ordinary Americans are unlikely to take them seriously, except as stock villains destined to provoke negative reactions.

But recent work suggests that, in the context of contemporary post–Cold War foreign policy, it is unwarranted to assume that foreign elite discourse reported in U.S. mass media is irrelevant for public opinion formation. The few scholars who have systematically examined the prevalence of foreign sources in U.S. news content have found impressive evidence. For example, in his exhaustive study of Gulf War television coverage, Althaus (2003, 390) showed that foreign officials and citizens comprised more than one-quarter of the voices quoted in the news. Similarly, Althaus et al. (1996) and Entman (2004) found that journalists frequently relied on foreign sources for oppositional perspectives in covering the U.S.-Libya episode during the 1980s. And Entman's (2004, 50–75) analyses of *The New York Times* and network television coverage of the invasions of Grenada and Panama

demonstrate a heavy reliance on foreign sources for oppositional discourse absent significant congressional dissent from administration policies, even in the context of the late Cold War.[2] With the collapse of the Soviet Union and the demise of a clear bipolar global power structure, U.S. media outlets – continually in search of the professional holy grails of elite balance and conflict – may increasingly incorporate the perspectives of non-U.S. actors into their depictions of foreign policy debate (Althaus et al. 1996; Livingston and Eachus 1996).

Despite the potential for significant foreign elite influence on American public opinion, however, several decades of empirical research has found weak or nonexistent effects. Page, Shapiro, and Dempsey's (1987; see also Page and Shapiro 1992) landmark study, for example, examined the influence of news messages from various sources on a variety of domestic and foreign policy attitudes. Whereas the views of U.S. actors – including media commentators, policy experts, and presidents themselves – moved opinion, the perspectives of foreign officials registered no effect (Page et al. 1987, 32). Similarly, in an analysis of thirty-two foreign policy cases from the late 1960s to the early 1980s, Jordan and Page (1992) found no significant direct influence on aggregate opinion that could be traced to either "friendly" or "unfriendly" non-U.S. sources on network television news. And in a study of the lead-up to the 1991 Gulf War, Brody (1994) argued that rising criticism of administration policy from foreign elites on television news – coupled with falling criticism from domestic leaders – actually led to increased job approval ratings for President George

[2] Although Jordan and Page (1992) found no evidence of direct effects on public opinion, they, too, documented a substantial volume of foreign sources on network news, amounting to nearly 22% of the total number of distinct story segments they coded as attributable to a source across their thirty-two policy cases. And even as he assumes their virtual irrelevance for public opinion formation – and therefore chooses not to include them in most of his empirical analyses – Mermin (1999, 31) found that foreign sources constituted a substantial presence on the *MacNeil/Lehrer Newshour* during the eight policy cases he examined: foreign sources comprised 11% of the total guests on this PBS program (ranking behind U.S. government and former government officials, and journalists themselves). In contrast, Hallin (1994) found that non-U.S. voices constituted an extremely small portion of political actors who appeared in network television news stories about Vietnam between 1965 and 1973. For example, South Vietnamese and other allied officials, on the one hand, and North Vietnamese and Communist guerilla leaders, on the other, each comprised less than 5% of total sources. Hallin does not elaborate on this finding, but it is plausible that the Cold War backdrop of the conflict was a significant factor.

H. W. Bush. Brody (1994, 219) interpreted this as evidence of a backlash dynamic in which the mass public becomes reluctant to express negative opinions of the U.S. commander-in-chief, when doing so appears to "symbolically make common cause with our enemies."

But even though there certainly are policy cases in which we would not expect Americans to be persuaded by the pronouncements of foreign actors, the conventional wisdom that foreign elites are reflexively viewed by the entire U.S. public as hostile and non-credible stands on shaky conceptual and methodological ground. All of the existing work that has examined the possible impact of international voices in the news media has treated Americans' opinions as an undifferentiated mass. Perhaps in part because of data limitations, researchers have typically analyzed aggregate-level opinion only, rather than breaking down survey results by demographic characteristics and other individual-level factors. This is a crucial shortcoming in light of dominant psychological theories of attitude formation and change, which posit that citizens' social, ideological, or value predispositions – as well as their preexisting levels of general public affairs knowledge – play important roles in shaping their responsiveness to political arguments carried in the media (e.g., Chong and Druckman 2007; Druckman 2001; Sniderman and Theriault 2004; Zaller 1992). Most citizens, chronically uncertain about politics, regularly delegate policy judgments to elites or other presumed experts (Lau and Redlawsk 2001; Lupia 1994; Popkin 1994), and they are most responsive to credible voices (Hovland and Weiss 1951; Petty, Priester, and Brinol 2002) who send messages that resonate with their general predispositions.

Whether characterized as partisan attachments, basic ideological orientations, or general social values, these predispositions mediate people's responsiveness to the political information and discourse they encounter in the news (Zaller 1992, 23–24).[3] However, although predispositional tendencies point citizens in general directions during public policy debates, they rarely provide an adequate guide for people to articulate preferences on specific issues. Unless they encounter information and arguments that connect these policy debates to their more general (and often inchoate) predispositional orientations, most people

[3] By predispositions, we mean the basic, relatively enduring orientations toward the political world that people form over time through socialization experiences involving family, peers, school, the workplace, longer-term mass media exposure, and other mechanisms (e.g., Feldman 1988).