Reality Asserts Itself: Public Opinion on Iraq and the Elasticity of Reality

The most widely accepted explanations for public support of U.S. uses of military force emphasize rational public responses to events as they unfold. Such “event-based” explanations hold that a president’s ability to sustain public support for a military engagement depends primarily on its degree of success, the number of or trend in U.S. casualties, or conflict goals. Yet, recent research into the framing of foreign policy has shown that public perceptions concerning the nature, success or failure, and implications of casualties vis-à-vis U.S. military engagements are often endogenous and malleable by elites. In this study, we argue that the qualities that make a given story persuasive to the public do not remain constant over time. In the initial stages of a conflict, elites have a substantial informational advantage. Consequently, from the public’s perspective, “reality” is very elastic. This frequently allows the administration to dominate the so-called “framing war.” Over time, as events unfold and as the public gathers more information about the conflict, the degree of elasticity recedes, thereby opening a space for alternative frames to challenge the administration’s preferred frame—particularly for viewers outside the president’s party. In the long term, we predict that the marginal impact of both rhetoric and reality will decrease, although a sustained and consistent change in events can temporarily restore their influence. We test our argument through a content analysis of news coverage of the Iraq war from 2003 through 2007, an original survey of public attitudes regarding Iraq, and partially disaggregated data (by party ID) from over 200 surveys of public opinion on the war. We find significant differences consistent with our theory in both the composition and impact of partisan messages on public opinion over time.

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INTRODUCTION

Speaking in St. Louis on July 5, 2008, Democratic presidential candidate Barack Obama outlined his approach toward the Iraq war: "The tactics of how we ensure our troops are safe as we pull out, how we execute the withdrawal, those are things that are all based on facts and conditions. I am not somebody—unlike George Bush—who is willing to ignore facts on the basis of my preconceived notions" (Loven 2008). In this statement, candidate Obama, in effect, accused President Bush of ignoring reality in his Iraq policies. This invites the question of what role “reality” actually plays in shaping assessments concerning the status of a military conflict.

At the time of this writing (August 2008) the present status and likely future outcome of the prolonged war in Iraq are still in doubt. Nonetheless, it seems clear in retrospect that in 2007 an important shift took place in the situation on the ground in Iraq, perhaps representing the moment this long-presumed-lost war began to be won. Whether or not this ultimately proves to be the case, recognizing this important turn of events proved exceptionally difficult not only for the entrenched politicians on both sides of the dispute over whether (and when) the U.S. should withdraw, but also for journalists attempting to communicate the Iraq story to the public and for citizens seeking to understand the status of the conflict.

Attempting to explain this dilemma, commentator Michael Yon complained, “No thinking person would look at last year’s weather reports to judge whether it will rain today, yet we do something similar with Iraq news. The situation in Iraq has drastically changed, but the inertia of bad news leaves many convinced that the mission has failed beyond recovery… whether it is good news or bad, whether it is true or untrue, once information is widely circulated, it has such formidable inertia that public opinion seems impervious to the corrective balm of simple and clear facts” (Yon 2007).
Consistent with prior research (Brody and Shapiro 1989, Brody 1991, Groeling and Baum 2008), we argue that public opinion regarding Iraq will tend to reflect (or be “indexed” to) media representations of elite debate in Washington concerning the conflict. We refer to this as the Opinion Indexing Hypothesis. When the public observes bipartisan elite support for a policy, they will tend to rally in support of it; if they observe partisan bickering, they will tend to support the positions of their fellow partisan elites, resulting in a smaller rally (if any at all). However, the original application of the Opinion Indexing Hypothesis to public opinion regarding foreign policy (Brody and Shapiro 1989, Brody 1991) purports only to account for the immediate post-conflict-initiation presence or absence of a rally-round-the-flag. It also assumes that media coverage accurately reflects the tenor of elite debate, thereby rendering the media in effect a passive conveyor belt (Groeling and Baum 2008).

We challenge this latter assumption and extend the Opinion Indexing Hypothesis beyond the so-called rally-round-the-flag period. We argue that because the public typically observes a conflict’s “reality on the ground” through the systematically distorted lens offered by the media, the effects of elite communication on public opinion are likely to persist, even after accounting for the state of events (that is, net of reality) well beyond an initial rally period. However, as the public gathers more information over time, the potential gap between reality and its representation (or framing) in the media is likely to recede, as is the public’s responsiveness to additional information. Following Baum and Potter (2007), we refer to this change in relative responsiveness as the “elasticity of reality.” As the elasticity of reality varies, so too, we anticipate, will the relative influence on public opinion of elite communication and objective indicators of reality.

The war in Iraq provides an ideal case for testing our theory. The circumstances described in the Yon quotation suggest that at the time he made these observations, the elasticity of reality
with respect to Iraq had effectively collapsed, to the degree that public opinion was almost wholly unresponsive to incremental changes in events or in elite rhetoric. Subsequently, as changes in events persisted and deepened, a gap reopened in the relative and absolute influences of rhetoric and reality, albeit to a limited extent. In this study, we explain both of these patterns. We begin by presenting our theoretical argument and deriving a series of hypotheses concerning the effects of elite rhetoric and “events on the ground” on public opinion regarding Iraq.

We next undertake a series of empirical tests. Testing dynamic patterns in public opinion poses a variety of substantive and methodological challenges. Many things vary over time, and it is difficult, if not impossible, to account for all potential causal factors. Consequently, rather than relying on any single test, we undertake three distinct empirical investigations, employing a variety of data sources and modeling techniques, in order to build as strong a suggestive case for our theory as possible given the limitations of each individual data source. We believe the weight of the combined evidence makes a more persuasive case for the theory than would be possible based on any one, or even several, of our empirical investigations. The final section offers concluding observations.

**THEORY AND HYPOTHESES**

As articulated, the Opinion Indexing Hypothesis is static—highlighting public responses to information at a single point in time—and hence incomplete. The public does not evaluate events or elite rhetoric about them in a vacuum. Rather, individuals presumably assess new information in part based on a retrospective assessment of the reliability of previous pertinent information they have consumed, as well as on their preexisting beliefs about the event (Thrall 2007). Early in a conflict, typical individuals will have limited information upon which to base such retrospective assessments as well as relatively fungible beliefs about it. Consequently, new
information may be relatively influential. Over time, they will acquire more information and their opinions will solidify, at which point the influence of additional new information is likely to recede. Consequently, the qualities that make a given story persuasive to the public are unlikely to remain constant over time.

To further clarify why a given piece of information is likely to exert less influence as an individual collects and retains more information, it is useful to review Zaller and Feldman’s (1992) “top-of-the-head” model of public opinion. According to this model, on any issue, typical individuals possess a range of considerations. When asked their opinion, individuals average across those considerations that are accessible at the time they are asked. They then respond probabilistically, based on the mix of accessible considerations on the pertinent issue. For instance, the greater the proportion of accessible considerations that point toward supporting the conflict in Iraq, the greater the probability that they will express support for the conflict.

Now consider an individual who at time \( t \) possesses, say, five considerations regarding Iraq. Suppose three of the five considerations are favorable. If we assume that each consideration is equally accessible, then, when asked her opinion of the conflict, the individual is likely to express support 60 percent of the time. If that individual accepts two additional pieces of negative information about the conflict, her propensity to express support for the war when queried would, ceteris paribus, decline from 60 to 43 percent of the time. If, however, that same individual possessed 50 considerations, then an additional two negative pieces of information would have a much smaller effect. In this case, if we assume the identical ex ante favorable-to-unfavorable proportion of considerations, the propensity to express a supportive opinion would decline from
the initial 60 to 58 percent, representing hardly any change at all.\(^1\)

This is in many respects analogous to the role of metanarratives in presidential politics (Jamieson and Waldman, Kovach and Rosenstiel 2001, Rosenstiel 2004, Mendelsohn and Crespi 1970, PEJ 2008). Once the media, and as a consequence, the public, settle on a particular narrative regarding a candidate—such as “Al Gore is dishonest” or “George W. Bush is unintelligent”—this metanarrative tends to be continually referenced and thereby reinforced. Over time, it becomes increasingly resistant to challenges, even if it is based on faulty assumptions (as many believe is the case with both of the aforementioned examples). In the context of a military conflict, once a given narrative frame becomes entrenched, only large and sustained changes in events “on the ground” are likely to influence it.

Such dominant frames, in turn, can take hold fairly rapidly, as the media repeatedly exposes citizens to them. As retired U.S. Army Lieutenant General Ricardo S. Sanchez commented regarding the effects of war reporting on public opinion in a speech to military reporters and editors, “Once reported, your assessments become conventional wisdom and nearly impossible to change…in your business ‘the first report’ gives Americans who rely on the snippets of CNN…their ‘truths’ and perspectives on an issue” (Sanchez 2007).

Presumably, as the U.S. engagement in Iraq has continued—nearing 5 1/2 years as of this writing—typical citizens have, to varying degrees, increased their store of information about the conflict. As a consequence, attitudes regarding the war have solidified. As noted, early in the

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\(^1\) This logic is consistent with Bayesian updating. That is, the higher the probability assigned to one’s prior belief, the greater the weight (that is, probability) assigned to that belief in calculating the posterior probability, and hence the larger the influence of that prior belief on an individual’s posterior belief (i.e., probability assessment) (Zalta 2008).
conflict, elites and journalists enjoyed a substantial informational advantage over the public, thereby granting them substantial leeway in the framing of events. The public was thus inclined to accept information relatively uncritically and as reliable.

Because news is in many ways an experience good–whose value cannot be observed prior to consuming it (Hamilton 2003)–consumers can, over time, retrospectively evaluate the reliability of information consumed in the past. In other words, individuals must generally consume news before they can determine its quality. This may lead to a shift in the balance of previously stored considerations–as some negatively or positively tagged information is retagged, based on a retrospective revision in the consumer’s reliability assessment–as well as a coloring of assumptions regarding the reliability of new information. While an inattentive public might tend to have difficulty retroactively retrieving and updating the assessed valuation of information consumed in the murky past, and may be relatively unmotivated to do so, the prominence of the administration’s initial efforts to gain publicity for the desired frame should help citizens recall it later. For example, the Bush Administration’s rhetorical reliance on Saddam Hussein’s alleged Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) program to justify the war made it easier for critics to dredge up such claims later to undermine the administration’s credibility on future claims.

As this process unfolds, and as elites’ informational advantage recedes over time, the influence of new information inconsistent with the (updated) prevailing media representation of reality presumably recedes. In other words, as individuals gather additional considerations and update their beliefs about the reliability of those considerations (in large part based on the weight of prior news coverage), they are proportionately less influenced by subsequent considerations,

2 See http://www.publicintegrity.org/WarCard/ for a comprehensive listing of the Bush Administration’s allegedly deceptive statements on Iraq.
especially those deemed likely to be unreliable. Consequently, the elasticity of reality—that is, the capacity of elites to alter the framing of events independently from the true status of those events—declines over time. Only a fairly dramatic and sustained change in the valence of information would foster significant change in opinion once the prevailing narrative is firmly established.

Figure 1 illustrates this process. It traces the typical path of the foreign policy informational advantage leaders enjoy relative to the public (that is, the elasticity of reality). Specifically, Figure 1 focuses on the effects of reality (that is, the true nature of events on the ground) relative to the representation of that reality by elites via the mass media. The “Communication/Elite Rhetoric Effects” curve represents the influence on public opinion of the framing of events (e.g., positive, negative, neutral valence, offensive vs. defensive foreign policy goals, etc.) embedded in media reporting of elite rhetoric about the conflict. The “Reality Effects” curve, in turn, represents the influence of actual events on the ground. The gap between the two curves represents the elasticity of reality—that is, the range of frames of events, with varying degrees of distance from the true tenor of events that the public will accept as reliable.

[Figure 1 here]

At the outset of the conflict (at time \( t_0 \)), the public has little or no independent information about the situation on the ground. At this stage, the public depends on a representation of events provided by elites, the construction of which in turn depends on media framing. Absent any capacity to retrospectively assess the reliability of this information, the elasticity of reality is extremely large, approaching infinite (albeit presumably bounded in some manner by longer-term public attitudes, values, and perhaps experience in prior conflicts). After a little time passes, but still relatively early in a conflict, say at time \( t_1 \), the true tenor of events should still matter relatively less than media framing of elite rhetoric regarding those events. If media coverage
diverges from reality, the former is likely to exert greater influence than the latter, as shown by the gap between $C_1$ (communication/rhetoric effects at time $t_1$) and $R_1$ (reality effects at time $t_1$), which represents the elasticity of reality at time $t_1$. The two are likely to converge over time, with news increasingly reflecting actual events, as shown in Figure 1 at time $t_2$, where $R_2=C_2$. If one allows that some media outlets might favor a particular party in their coverage, such outlets should be expected to resist this convergence to the degree to which it damages their favored party. However, in the face of continued impingement by contrary real-world data, partisan media are likely to converge as well, though more gradually than nonpartisan media (or more rapidly, if they perceive the real-world data as beneficial to their preferred party).

Eventually, however, as the public’s store of information about the conflict increases, and as the public retrospectively updates its reliability assessments, the marginal influence of new information will recede. This decline is likely to be more rapid for communication effects, which exerted a disproportionate influence early on and consequently have more room to fall. Given public skepticism regarding information that diverges from its updated assessment regarding reality, as the elasticity of reality collapses, the capacity of news coverage to influence opinion independent of actual events diminishes while actual developments on the ground continue to contribute–albeit presumably at a reduced marginal rate–to net public assessments. This period is represented by the area shaded in blue between times $t_2$ and $t_3$, where reality exerts a greater influence on public opinion than news coverage, at least for a time.

Of course, the precise rate of convergence shown in the figure is arbitrary; the figure is intended solely to illustrate the theoretical point. Presumably the actual rates of convergence, as well as the slopes of and gaps between the two curves, will vary across events. For instance, all else equal, given journalists’ preferences for covering conflict over harmony among elites
(Groeling and Baum 2008), the rates of convergence seem likely to be faster when elites are divided rather than unified in support of the policy. Nonetheless, regardless of the precise locations and slopes of the curves, eventually public judgment becomes relatively fixed, by time $t_3$. At this point, absent a fairly dramatic and sustained change in the tenor of events, neither events nor rhetoric seem likely to exert much influence. Several hypotheses regarding public opinion follow:

**H1) Longer-term Communication Effects**: Elite rhetoric regarding a war will continue to influence public attitudes independent of objective indicators of reality beyond the rally period, but, absent a substantial and sustained change in the tenor of events, the marginal effects of such rhetoric will recede over time.

**H2) Longer-term Reality Effects**: Over time, absent a substantial and sustained change in the tenor of events, the marginal influence of objective indicators of a war’s progress on public attitudes will first increase and then eventually recede.

**H3) Rhetoric vs. Reality**: Over time, the marginal influence of elite rhetoric will decline more than the marginal influence of objective indicators of a war’s progress.

Of course, such declines are unlikely to be uniform throughout the public. We anticipate that such declines should be more precipitous for the non-presidential party (NPP), relative to the presidential party (PP). After all, statements by a president should remain more credible to his fellow partisans over time than to opposition partisans or Independents, all else equal (Groeling and Baum 2008). This suggests a corollary to H1 (Long-Term Communication Effects):

**H4) Partisan Long-Term Effects**: After the initial rally period following initiation of a conflict, negative (positive) events or elite rhetoric will tend to decrease (increase) the support of NPP (PP) partisans in the electorate more quickly and sharply than that of Independents, who, in turn, will be more affected than (NPP) PP partisans.
Figure 1 and its corresponding hypotheses rest on an important assumption: that the fundamental nature of reality remains relatively constant. In other words, our discussion thus far presumes that war-related events follow a consistent, reinforcing path, while the media—and hence the public—gradually recognize that path and converge toward an accurate understanding of it. But it is always possible that the tenor of events might swing substantially in a different direction. If so, depending in large measure on where the prior state of events lies along the elasticity timeline in Figure 1, we anticipate at least a partial reset. In other words, a major, sustained change in reality seems likely to reopen the elasticity of reality, at least to some extent, and perhaps following some lag, during which time journalists—and by extension the public—seek to determine whether the change is real or illusory. Figure 2 graphically illustrates the effects of such a shift in events.

[Figure 2 here]

Figure 2 presents three curves separately tracking the effects of a fundamental shift in the tenor of events for PP and NPP partisans and Independents. In the left side of the curve, events are uniformly negative for an extended period of time. As the true, bleak nature of events becomes clearer over time, all three groups grow less susceptible to positive pronouncements about the conflict. However, PP partisans are far slower than NPP partisans or Independents to lose faith in the president. NPP partisans are particularly quick to begin discounting presidential rhetoric.

If events begin improving substantially, PP partisans will relatively quickly regain confidence in the president’s positive rhetoric, while NPP partisans will remain skeptical for a considerable period of time before beginning to recognize and accept the change in reality, and consequently reassessing. Independents will again fall in between. Eventually, all three groups will renew at least some of their initial confidence in the credibility of the administration’s positive rhetoric, although, depending on how long the prior, negative tenor of events persisted,
and hence how firmly public opinion is entrenched, they may not return to levels comparable to those at the outset of the conflict.

With respect to Iraq, even after political elites did begin to partially reassess the state of events, the opposition party predictably remained far more skeptical than the president’s fellow partisans. For instance, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-CA) declared on February 10, 2008—nearly a year after the start of the Surge—that the war “is a failure.” She also criticized the Surge itself, noting that, on the one hand, “the troops have succeeded, God bless them,” but, on the other, “the purpose of the Surge was to create a secure time for the government of Iraq to make the political change to bring reconciliation to Iraq. They have not done that” (Allen 2008). Senator Hillary Clinton (D-NY) offered a similarly skeptical assessment of the Surge in her response to testimony from General David Petraeus, commander of U.S. forces in Iraq: “…I think that the reports that you provide to us really require the willing suspension of disbelief” (Clinton 2007). Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid, in turn, echoed Senator Clinton, stating: “I believe…that this war is lost, and this surge is not accomplishing anything…” (AP 2007).

One can easily imagine the opposing case, in which events are proceeding well and public confidence in the administration is high, followed by a significant turn for the worse. The U.S. intervention in Somalia in 1992-93 appears to have been such a case (Baum 2004). In Somalia, the initial U.S. humanitarian mission was regarded as an overwhelming success, resulting in public euphoria and support. However, in the wake of a seemingly unsuccessful nation-building effort in the Spring and Summer of 1993—including a failed military campaign against Somali warlord Mohamed Farah Aideed—this euphoria and support was replaced by frustration and disappointment. Eventually, both partisans and Independents lost confidence in presidential claims contrary to the declining state of affairs. However, consistent with Figure 2, the rate at which the loss of
confidence occurred, and the lag between the change in events and the onset of declining confidence, varied with partisan affiliation. Most notably, in Fall 1993 Republicans predictably (given a Democratic Commander-in-Chief) began advocating a U.S. withdrawal from Somalia well before Democrats (Koppelman 2006).

This discussion suggests two additional corollaries to H1 (Long-term Communication Effects) and another to H2 (Long-term Reality Effects). The first corollary addresses how the public processes a change in reality that is not matched by a change in elite rhetoric; that is, rhetoric consistent with the prior state of the world, but not with a recent shift in events (see Baum and Groeling [N.d.] for a discussion of how elite rhetoric appearing in the news can systematically diverge from actual events and even from a fair sample of elite rhetoric). The corollary also addresses variations in such processes across partisan subgroups.

(H1a) Event-Shift Communication Effects Corollary: Following a significant and sustained change of events, the public will be more susceptible to influence by elite rhetoric in the media (that is, relative to reality) than would be the case over the longer-term absent such a change. Given a positive (negative) change of events, the president’s fellow partisans will be more (less) susceptible to such influence relative to NPP partisans and Independents.

The second corollary replicates the first, focusing on the influence of actual events on the ground, depending on the nature of those events.

(H2a) Event-Shift Reality Effects Corollary: Following a significant and sustained change of events, the public will be more susceptible to influence by the true tenor of events—as represented by media coverage of events—than would be the case over the longer-term absent such a change. Given a positive (negative)
change of events, the president’s fellow partisans will be more (less) susceptible to such influence relative to NPP partisans and Independents.

STATISTICAL INVESTIGATIONS

Individual Attitudes

Hypothesis 2 predicts that the effect(s) of reality on public opinion will recede over time. Its corollary, in turn, predicts that a substantial change in the tenor of events may reinvigorate the effects of reality on public opinion, with PP partisans tending to be more quick (slow) to reassess reality in response to events perceived as favorable (unfavorable) to their party’s president, relative to Independents or members of the NPP (H2a). H1 and its corollary (H1a) offer similar predictions regarding the effects of rhetoric on public opinion. Our theoretical argument further implies that the effects of rhetoric will emerge more rapidly than those for reality (given a “reset” on the elasticity of reality curve in Figure 1).

In order to test these predictions at the individual-level, we surveyed a national population sample (provided by Polimetrix) concerning their attitudes regarding Iraq. (See Appendix for question wording and coding.) We asked respondents about the trend in casualties and the prospects for a U.S. victory in Iraq, as well as about the ability of the Bush Administration to influence public opinion on Iraq. Figure 3 presents four graphics, which together summarize the key results by party.

[Figure 3 here]

Beginning with the top-left and top-right graphics in Figure 3, we see that—as of December 2007 (when the survey was in the field)—Democrats and Independents believed that the U.S. prospect for victory had remained largely unchanged over the preceding year (top-left graphic) and that the Surge had produced virtually no effect on the U.S. prospect for victory in Iraq (top-right graphic), as both groups hover near the zero line (representing a response of “unchanged”).
In sharp contrast, Republicans believed by large margins that the prospects for victory had improved (top-left graphic) and that the Surge had improved the U.S. chances of victory (top-right graphic). The differences between Democrats and Independents, on the one hand, and Republicans, on the other, are highly significant ($p < .001$ in both cases).

The bottom-left graphic presents the results of a question asking whether respondents believed the rate of U.S. military and Iraqi civilian casualties in Iraq had increased, decreased, or remained about the same since the start of the Surge in March 2007. The results are consistent with those discussed above; Democrats and Independents believed (incorrectly) casualty rates had remained roughly constant between March and December 2007, while Republicans, again by large margins, believed (correctly) that the average monthly casualty level had receded over that same time period. Once again, the differences between Democrats and Independents, on the one hand, and Republicans, on the other, are highly significant ($p < .001$ in both cases).

These results support our predictions, particularly H2a. While opposition partisans and Independents are slow to even recognize changes in events favorable to the president, let alone acknowledge their significance, the president’s fellow partisans are substantially quicker to positively reassess and to do so in large numbers.

Additional national survey data provide further evidence of a partisan divide in perception following a shift in real-world events. According to a series of Pew Center surveys beginning in February 2007 (shortly after the announcement of the Surge strategy in Iraq), members of the public differed starkly in their perceptions of the conflict in precisely the manner predicted by H2a. As shown in Figure 4, Republicans began to perceive progress in Iraq within months of the initiation of the Surge, increasingly believing the U.S. was making progress defeating Iraqi insurgents and preventing a civil war.
In contrast— and also consistent with H2a—Independents and especially Democrats remained skeptical that any such progress was emerging, even as late as September 2007. Indeed, Democrats actually perceived a deteriorating situation with respect to the insurgency between February and September 2007. Only later did Democrats and Independents begin to join Republicans in believing that the U.S. was actually making progress in these areas.

Finally, returning to our Polimetrix survey in Figure 3, the bottom-right graphic presents the results from a question asking whether the Bush Administration’s capacity to influence public opinion on the war has increased, decreased, or remained relatively constant since the start of the war. This tests H1 and H1a, which predict that absent a major shift in the tenor of events, the effects of elite rhetoric on public attitudes will recede over time (H1), and that this effect will be weakest among the president’s fellow partisans (H1a). The results indicate, consistent with H1, that, on average, all respondents—Democrats, Republicans, and Independents—agreed that the influence of the Bush Administration on public support for the war had receded since the start of the conflict. Moreover, consistent with H1a, Democrats and Independents were far more likely than Republicans to hold this view. There are certainly multiple factors contributing to these assessments, and self-reports concerning the influence of the Bush Administration may be unreliable. Hence, these latter results represent only indirect, and hence suggestive evidence. Nevertheless, they are precisely what H1 and H1a would predict.

**Trends in Effects of Media Coverage and “Reality” on Public Opinion**

We next investigate whether, and in what manner, media framing of elite rhetoric influences public opinion over the longer term, independent of the true tenor of events in a conflict, as well as the influence of events themselves. Recall that H1 (Longer-term Communication Effects) predicts that
media representations of elite rhetoric regarding a war will continue to influence public attitudes beyond the rally period, but that absent a substantial change in the tenor of events “on the ground,” the extent of that influence will recede over time. H2 then predicts that the marginal influence of “reality” on public attitudes will first increase and then eventually recede.

The corollaries to H1 (H1a: Event Shift Communication Effects) and H2 (H2a: Event Shift Reality Effects) then predict that a significant change in the tenor of events may lead to at least a partial reset in the relationship between rhetoric and, on the one hand, reality and on the other, public opinion. The public should thus once again grant disproportionate credibility to elite rhetoric—particularly media representations of that rhetoric consistent with the prior state of reality—and then gradually shift to recognize the new state of events on the ground, with the president’s fellow partisans doing so more rapidly than opposition partisans or Independents.

To test these predictions, we employ two key causal variables: (1) *New York Times* coverage of U.S. military and Iraqi civilian casualties in Iraq, and (2) actual trends in civilian and military casualties. While, as we have argued elsewhere (Groeling and Baum 2008, Baum and Groeling N.d.), media coverage clearly does not represent a faithful proxy for the true tenor of elite rhetoric, it does reflect the representation of elite rhetoric selected by the media and thereby capable of influencing public opinion. Our purpose in this analysis is to determine the nature and extent of such influence, as well as that of actual events.

**Data and Methods**

To measure trends in the effects of elite rhetoric via the media on public opinion regarding Iraq, we assembled a monthly time series data set, running from May 2003 through November 2007. This yields a total of 55 monthly observations. The dependent variable is the monthly percent change in the percentage of Americans indicating that they supported the war in
Iraq in a series of surveys. Following Jacobson (2006), our war support series aggregates results from over 200 different polling questions regarding support for the war in Iraq. We include questions from 15 different polling organizations, addressing: whether removing Hussein or the result of the war were worth the loss of lives, whether the respondents approve of military action in Iraq, whether the U.S. did the right thing in going to war, whether they support or oppose the current U.S. military presence in Iraq, whether they favor or oppose having gone to war, whether it was the right decision despite the CIA report on WMD, whether the war was a mistake, and whether their view of the war was favorable (See Jacobson [2006] for details about the surveys included in this analysis, including question wording and sponsors). We employ LOESS smoothing (i.e., locally weighted polynomial regression) on the aggregate series to account for variation across survey wordings and organizations.³

Our first key causal variable measures the valence of coverage of casualties (U.S. and Iraqi, civilian and military) in the New York Times, lagged one month. We coded the valence of all articles mentioning casualties during the time frame of our analysis, measuring whether each article’s coverage of casualties was positive, negative, or neutral with respect to the state of the conflict, including U.S. involvement.

We counted a maximum of one positive and one negative code per article. However, an article coded as positive or negative could not also be coded as neutral. Two research assistants—working separately and independently—coded each article. Two other research assistants serving as arbitrators resolved disagreements between the first two coders. Inter-coder reliability on the

³This process fits a series of simple models to localized subsets of the data to build up a function that describes the deterministic part of the variation in the data, point by point.
initial coding was 76%, while that for our two arbitrators was 87%. To create our final indicator, we employ positive coverage as a percentage of all casualty coverage (positive, negative, or neutral), to create a “net positive” casualty coverage indicator. We then averaged the indicator for each month. This variable runs from 0 to 1, where 0 represents the least positive casualty coverage, and 1 represents most positive coverage ($\mu=.1, \sigma=.18$). To capture variance in the effects of media coverage over time—and thereby test our hypotheses—we interact the lagged New York Times casualty coverage valence indicator with a variable counting the number of months since the beginning of our series, as well as with its quadratic.

Our second key causal variable measures actual trends in casualties in Iraq. We separately measured monthly total Iraqi civilian and U.S. military casualties. We normalized each total to a 0-1 interval and then added them together. We then normalized the summary variable to a 0-1 interval to form our final casualty indicator ($\mu=.46, \sigma=.21$). Our indicator takes into account the substantially greater weight placed by typical Americans on U.S. casualties, relative to Iraqi casualties. For our final indicator, we employ a one-month lag on the summary casualty variable. In order to account for the distinction between media coverage of casualties and the actual casualty trend, we interact the summary casualty measure with our month counter and its quadratic (as we did with the New York Times casualty coverage valence indicator).

We also include seven control variables. To account for the intensity of media coverage of casualties in Iraq, our first two controls measure the percentage of the combined total number of

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4 The arbitrators’ reliability measure is based on dual coding of 10% of the data set.

5 For evidence on the importance of proximity to the relationship between casualties and public support for war, see Gartner and Segura 2000. On the disproportionate value placed by Americans on U.S. casualties, relative to foreign military casualties, see Boettcher and Cobb (2006).
stories about Iraq in television (ABC, CBS, NBC, and CNN) and print (New York Times, Washington Post, LA Times, USA Today, and Wall St. Journal) news reports that mentioned casualties. For our third control variable, we account for the president’s political capital by including presidential approval lagged one month (based on CBS News and Gallup polls). Fourth, to account for the political effect of Hurricane Katrina, we include a dummy coded 1 during the month of the hurricane (September 2005) and the subsequent four months.\(^6\) Fifth, we include a dummy for the 2004 presidential election (coded 1 for September through November 2004, including the immediate post-election period). Sixth, to account for the state of the economy, we include the national average price of gasoline, lagged one month.\(^7\) Finally, to account for possible serial autocorrelation, we include a one-month lag on the dependent variable in our OLS models.

**Results**

Table 1 presents the results of our OLS analysis testing Hypotheses 1 and 2, as well as their corollaries (H1a and H2a). To ease interpretation we employ Clarify (King et al. 2000) to estimate the expected percentage of respondents supporting the war as New York Times casualty coverage varies from no positive coverage to one standard deviation above the mean level of positive coverage, with all control variables—including monthly changes in casualties—held constant at their mean values. We repeat this simulation for each month in our series. Figure 5 presents the trend in the magnitude of the effects of changes in New York Times coverage of casualties and actual casualties on public support for the war.

[Table 1 and Figure 5 here]

Looking at the origin of the curve in Figure 5, the New York Times coverage curve

---

\(^6\) We tested numerous variants of the Katrina control. This indicator outperformed all other specifications.

\(^7\) This variable outperformed consumer sentiment in our models.
indicates that in the first month of our series (May 2003), movement from the no positive casualty coverage to one standard deviation above the mean level of positive casualty coverage is associated with about a 4 percent increase in smoothed public war support ($p<.01$). The magnitude of the positive effect of favorable coverage on public war support recedes gradually, albeit remaining statistically significant and substantial in magnitude, through March 2004, 11 months into our series and 13 months into the war. The implication is that variations in media coverage of casualties in Iraq continued to influence public opinion, net of the effects of the actual trend in casualties, over a year into the conflict. This is obviously far beyond the so-called “rally period” at the outset of the conflict. In addition to offering support for H1 with respect to media representations of elite rhetoric, these results also confirm a core assumption underlying our theory: that in foreign policy, communication matters over both the short- and longer-term.

After August 2005, the mean effects continue to decline through January 2006—with the direction of the relationship briefly, albeit statistically insignificantly, turning negative. This implies that in the darkest days of the conflict, the actual state of events seems to have dominated public opinion, resulting in a greatly reduced independent influence of press coverage of casualties. Indeed, presumably due to the effects of reality, during this period positive coverage of casualties might have (insignificantly) led to further decreases in public support. As conditions on the ground began to improve, however, the relationship for press coverage eventually becomes direct again (that is, positive coverage is associated with more positive public attitudes about the conflict, and vice versa). Given the apparent turnabout in events in Iraq in the second half of 2007—that is, significantly reduced Iraqi civilian and U.S. military casualties arguably attributable to the

---

8 Even though we lose the first several months of our series due to transformations of the dependent variable, we employ Clarify to simulate the values for those months.
Surge in the U.S. troop presence in Iraq—the return to a direct relationship between the valence of *New York Times* coverage and public war support appears consistent with H1a. Because, however, neither the post-July 2005 declines in the effects of increased positive coverage, nor the upward turn in such effects in the second half of 2007 are statistically significant, these latter results must be interpreted as more suggestive than definitive. Nonetheless, the direct relationship in late 2007 approaches significance ($p<.20$), and the upward trend in the positive effects from its low point in early 2006 is itself statistically significant ($p<.10$). This suggests that these patterns in all likelihood represent real shifts rather than random noise.

It is, however, important to note that the most important rhetorical shift across these two periods was not so much a change in positive evaluations, which only increased by around 11% (from an average of 1.125 per month in the first eight months of 2007 to 1.25 during the September to November 2007 period); rather, the late-2007 balance of rhetoric primarily reflected a massive 68% drop in negative evaluations (from 6.25 per month to only 2). Thus, even as rhetoric began to regain traction and correlate more directly with public opinion, net changes in that rhetoric were mostly limited to fluctuations in *negative* evaluations. Negative evaluations continued to outpace positive ones throughout 2007, albeit at a reduced rate during the fall.

Turning to the Actual Casualties curve, we find a quite distinct pattern. In the initial months of our series, variations in civilian and military casualties have no significant effect on public war support. The curve begins briefly in negative territory, suggesting, not entirely surprisingly, that increased casualties at the outset of the war were greeted with *increased* public support. It then gradually moves upwards until, in February 2005–25 months into our series and 27 months into the war—the effects of declines in casualties (from one standard deviation above the mean to zero) become statistically significantly positive. That is, beginning in February 2005,
declines in casualties are associated with significant increases in war support. They remain significant until January 2007, peaking in December 2005, when a decline in casualties from one standard deviation above the mean to zero is associated with nearly a five percent increase in public war support ($p<.05$). The curve then moves into negative territory, indicating that falling casualties are associated with decreases in war support. This seemingly paradoxical reversal is not statistically significant, however, and so is of questionable substantive importance. Overall, these results clearly support H2, as the effects of reality—in this case trends in civilian and military casualties—emerge gradually, and subsequently recede over time.

Also important for our theory, the two curves are themselves statistically distinct from one another during the first three months of our series, through July 2003 ($p<.10$ or better, indicated by the shaded region at the start of the curves in Figure 5)—with positive *New York Times* coverage having a significantly larger positive effect on public opinion than (statistically insignificant) variations in casualties—after which they become statistically indistinguishable until May 2005. From May 2005 through November 2006, declines in casualties exert a statistically significantly larger positive effect on public war support than positive news coverage (shown by the shaded region in the mid-section of the top graphic in Figure 5). After November 2006, the curves again become statistically indistinguishable until September 2007. Beginning in that month, positive *New York Times* casualty coverage again exerts a stronger positive effect on public opinion ($p<.10$ or better, again indicated by the shaded region toward the ends of the curves in Figure 5) than declines in actual casualties, which exert no significant effect on opinion.

Overall, the empirical patterns in Figure 5 are strikingly consistent with the theoretical model depicted in Figure 1. Initially, as predicted, rhetoric (measured by media coverage of casualties) yields a greater influence than reality (measured by actual casualty levels).
Subsequently, reality begins to exert itself, outpacing rhetoric during the “medium-term” (represented by the middle part of our time series). Eventually, both rhetoric and reality fade to insignificance. Though the influence of both recedes over time (albeit at different times), consistent with H3 (Rhetoric vs. Reality), statistically significant effects persist far longer for reality than for rhetoric (19 vs. 11 months).

Our theory also predicts that even after a long period of consistent rhetoric and events on the ground, a noteworthy change in the tenor of events—such as the substantial and sustained drop in Iraqi civilian and U.S. military casualties associated with the Surge—can eventually (after some lag period) lead to at least a partial “reset,” whereby the public takes a second look at a conflict and is again amenable to at least some influence by media—and by extension elite—framing of events. In this instance, the return to a positive relationship between net positive New York Times coverage of casualties and public war support—as well as of a statistically significant difference between the effects of news reports about casualties and actual casualties—takes place in Fall 2007. Presumably not coincidentally, this is the period where journalists began to take notice, after several months of skepticism, of declining casualty trends in Iraq (Baum and Groeling N.d.). Finally, it is worth noting that the pattern in Fall 2007 essentially mirrors that from the beginning of the war, with rhetoric again exerting a greater influence on opinion than reality (albeit at more attenuated levels). These latter results support H1a and H3, and are again strikingly consistent with the theoretical model depicted in Figure 1.

**Presidential Rhetoric and the Elasticity of Reality**

We next investigate trends in the responses of citizens to presidential rhetoric regarding Iraq. In doing so, we test H1 (Longer-term Communication Effects), which predicts that, all else equal, the effects of elite rhetoric on public opinion regarding a conflict will tend to diminish
over time. We also test H4 (Partisan Long-Term Effects), which predicts that after the initial rally period following initiation of a conflict, negative (positive) events or elite rhetoric will tend to decrease (increase) the support of NPP (PP) partisans more quickly and sharply than that of Independents, who, in turn, will be more affected than (PP) NPP partisans.

Data and Methods

For this analysis, we assembled a dataset on all public presidential speeches, addresses, press conferences and press statements pertaining in significant measure to the conflict in Iraq. We employed as our universe of data a White House web site that archives transcripts from all 347 statements by President George W. Bush that the White House defined as significantly focused on Iraq (http://www.whitehouse.gov/infocus/iraq/archive.html). We include all statements by President Bush in which, in the judgments of our coders, Iraq constituted at least one third of the content of the statement. This yielded 74 cases, of which 67 were primarily (that is, over 50%) focused on Iraq.

Our research assistants coded each transcript along a variety of dimensions, including the type of statement (e.g., address to the nation, press conference, joint appearance, etc.) and frequency of references to Iraq. (See Appendix for a complete listing of variables and coding rules.) Pairs of coders independently dual coded all transcripts, subsequently resolving any disputes by discussing the disagreement until they achieved consensus.\(^9\) Intercoder reliability testing indicated that our coders agreed on 85% percent of all initial (that is, first-round) coding decisions on our primary variables of interest.

Our dependent variable measures variations in public opinion regarding Iraq in the periods prior to and immediately following presidential statements, based on the same smoothed war

\(^9\) Because this coding was relatively straightforward (merely entailing tallies of “hits” from Lexis-Nexis searches), we elected not to undertake arbitration of initial disputes by a third coder.
approval data as in the prior analysis. In this instance, however, we employ partially disaggregated data based on partisan affiliation. While the smoothing process reduces the random variance in the series, it also greatly reduces its systematic variance. Consequently, the remaining variability in the series is quite small (significantly smaller than in aggregate series). In fact, the maximum change in smoothed war support from a month \( t \) to month \( t+1 \) is just .85 percentage points (for Independents from November to December 2003). Presumably due at least in part to the relatively small monthly variations in these partisan indicators, transforming them into percent changes results in several observations dropping from the model. Hence we employ as our dependent variable the simple difference between partisan war support at time \( t \) and at time \( t+1 \).

To distinguish statements predominantly focused on Iraq from those where a majority of the content focused on other issues, we include a dummy variable, coded 1 for the 67 speeches in which over half of the content focused on Iraq. Statistical testing indicated that these 67 statements produced materially distinct effects from the remaining seven less-Iraq-centric statements. Consequently, to isolate the effects of the predominantly-Iraq-oriented statements, we interact the Iraq focus dummy with a count variable measuring the date on which a given statement occurred. Because we anticipate that any trends are unlikely to be linear–or at least non-monotonic–we include the quadratic of the date counter and also interact the quadratic with the Iraq focus dummy.

For our control variables, in order to account for potential autocorrelation, we include the lagged value of our dependent variable.\(^{10}\) We also include dummies for radio addresses in the news coverage models and statements to the press (including press conferences) for the opinion

\(^{10}\) In these models, the difference substantially outperformed the level among Independents, performed similarly among Democrats (albeit slightly less strongly), and virtually identically among Republicans. We thus settled on the difference form of the variable, which, on balance, slightly outperformed the level.
models. These two dummies, respectively, capture the only types of addresses that differed materially from the others, with radio addresses less likely to influence media coverage and press statements less likely to influence public opinion, relative to other types of statements.

To capture the state of events in Iraq, we include measures of the level and weekly changes in U.S. and Iraqi civilian casualties. To account for trends in the volume of media coverage of Iraq, we also control for the number of mentions of Iraq on the nightly newscasts of ABC, CBS, NBC, and Fox News’ *Special Report with Brit Hume*.

All models include controls for the number of mentions of Saddam Hussein by President Bush in each statement. Perhaps due to the familiarity to Americans—and hence broad accessibility—of the Saddam-Hussein-as-villain narrative (Baum 2003), this variable proved a reasonably strong predictor of media attention, independent of variations in the overall intensity of the president’s focus on Iraq. Finally, all models also include three indicators of the state of the U.S. economy—the monthly change in consumer sentiment, the rate of inflation, and average gas prices—as well as a variable measuring the number of days in between presidential statements in the data set.11

**Results**

Models 1-3 in Table 2 present the results from our tests of H1 and H4. Once again, we employ Clarify to transform the OLS coefficients into expected percentage point changes in war support in response to presidential statements on Iraq, over time. Figure 6 illustrates the results.

[Table 2 and Figure 6 here]

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11 Some models exclude up to two influential outliers, the inclusion of which modestly weakens, but does not fundamentally alter, the reported results. We replicated all results with base models, excluding all or nearly all control variables, with similar results. Due to space limitations, we do not report the base models here. (Results are available from the authors upon request.)
For all three partisan groups, a presidential statement is associated with an increase in approval of the war (either hypothetically, prior to its initiation, or retrospectively, during the conflict). Democrats display the strongest such relationship, with a presidential statement associated with about a 2.2 percentage point increase in support for going to war against Iraq in January 2002 ($p<.01$). The corresponding increases for Republicans and Independents are 1.2 and 1.5 percentage points, respectively ($p<.05$ in both cases).

The relatively higher effect on Democrats is presumably attributable to lower baseline approval rates among Democrats at the time of the survey. They simply had more room to rise in response to a presidential statement. Moreover, in January 2002, President Bush was in the midst of the largest and most sustained rally-round-the-flag approval spike ever recorded in response to the events of 9/11. Hence, at this time, Democrats were more inclined to rally in response to appeals by President Bush than was the case later in his presidency.

All three partisan groups display diminishing responsiveness over time to presidential appeals, reaching the zero point about the same time, albeit with the Democrats, as anticipated, falling farthest and fastest (though the differences between the partisan subgroups are not statistically significant). The effects of presidential statements turn negative beginning in early 2005—with statements by the president associated with subsequent declines in war support—and remain so across all three partisan groups for the remainder of the series. Among Democrats, a presidential statement on Iraq in the final month of our series is greeted with about a .77 percentage point decline in war support ($p<.05$). The corresponding declines among Independents and Republicans are approximately .51 percentage points in each case ($p<.05$).

These results offer clear support for H1, across all three groups the influence of presidential rhetoric on public support for the Iraq war clearly declines over time, approaching and then
surpassing zero, and ultimately turning negative. Consistent with H4, in turn, we observe the largest and most rapid declines among opposition partisans (Democrats), and the shallowest decline among presidential party partisans (Republicans). However, because these latter differences are statistically insignificant, they must be interpreted as suggestive rather than definitive support for H4.

CONCLUSION

In Common Sense, Thomas Paine observed that, “Time makes more converts than reason.” Interestingly, and consistent with the assumptions underlying the elasticity of reality framework, in the first half of our data series “reason” (i.e. elite rhetoric) predicted changes in war support to a greater extent than our indicators of reality for two of three partisan subgroups (Republicans and Independents), while in the second half of our series the pattern reversed, with our reality indicators better predicting changes in war support for two of three partisan subgroups (again, Republicans and Independents). This suggests that as the elasticity of reality shrinks, over time, so too does the capacity of political elites to frame events to their own advantage, at least to the extent that such frames contradict the tenor of actual events. As VandeHei and Harris (2007) observed in Fall 2007 with respect to public opinion regarding Iraq, “[I]t turns out that Washington matters less than many Democrats and even many journalists supposed in determining political momentum in the Iraq debate. Events on the ground—including … evidence that security is improving somewhat in the wake of the military’s ‘Surge’ policy–matter more.”

The implications of these findings for American foreign policy are ambiguous. On the one hand, in an increasingly partisan and polarized media and public opinion environment, maintaining support for any foreign policy–much less a costly, protracted one–would seem more difficult for America’s leaders than in the past. On the other, one might take heart from the apparent limits we have documented on the capacity of elites to indefinitely manipulate public perceptions of reality.
Sooner or later, it would seem, the public can discern the true merits of a conflict, to at least some degree, regardless of elite efforts to spin events to their own partisan advantage.

Unfortunately, as we saw in our examination of the Surge in late 2007, sometimes a perceived record of distortion and manipulation on the part of an administration can prevent the public from accurately perceiving the reality of a conflict, even when that reality has actually shifted. For instance, it seems clear in hindsight that President Bush’s May 2, 2003 speech aboard the aircraft carrier U.S.S. Abraham Lincoln—in which he declared that “In the Battle of Iraq, the United States and our allies have prevailed” (CBS News 2003) before a large banner reading “Mission Accomplished”—later reduced the persuasiveness of his assertions that the U.S. military was making progress in Iraq. Indeed, much like the boy who cried wolf, politicians who are too quick to claim victory or the accomplishment of a mission risk having no one believe them if or when their long-promised victory actually arrives.

Appendix: Survey Question Wording

Polimetrix: (1) Do you believe the prospects for a U.S. victory in Iraq (as you define it) are better, worse, or about the same as they were a year ago?; (2) In your opinion, has the Bush Administration's ability to influence public opinion regarding the Iraq War increased, decreased, or remained about the same since 2003?; (3) Has the "surge" (that is, the U.S. counterinsurgency campaign begun in 2007 that increased the U.S. troop presence in Iraq by over 30,000) increased or decreased the likelihood of a U.S. victory in Iraq, or has it had no significant effect on the likelihood of victory?; (4) Have the average monthly U.S. military and Iraqi civilian casualties in

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12About a month later, on June 5, 2003, in a message to U.S. troops at Camp Asayliyah, President Bush reiterated his mission accomplished declaration, stating, “America sent you on a mission to remove a great threat and to liberate an oppressed people, and that mission has been accomplished” (Keen 2003).
Iraq increased, decreased, or stayed at about the same level since the start of the “surge”?

*Presidential Public Rhetoric Data Analysis*

**Days Since Last Statement:** Number of days since last presidential statement on Iraq.

**Pre-war:** Dummy coded 1 prior to March 20, 2003.

**Press Statement/Conference:** Dummy variable, coded 1 for press statements or conferences.

**Bush Mentions of Saddam:** Number of times Saddam Hussein was mentioned in the speech.

**Iraq Focus:** Coded 1 if Iraq was primary focus of presidential statement, .5 if Iraq was one of two major issues covered in statement and 0 if Iraq was one of three or more issues covered.

**%ΔNetwork Iraq Stories:** Percent Change in network news stories mentioning Iraq (weeks \( t \) to \( t+1 \)).

**Presidential Approval_{t-1}:** Most recent Gallup or CBS presidential approval poll rating prior to date of presidential statement on Iraq.

**Gas Prices:** Average weekly gas prices ([http://tonto.eia.doe.gov/dnav/pet/pet_pri_gnd_dcus_nus_w.htm](http://tonto.eia.doe.gov/dnav/pet/pet_pri_gnd_dcus_nus_w.htm)).


**ΔUS Casualties:** Weekly Change in Hostile US Casualties (same source as above).


**ΔConsumer Sentiment:** Monthly change in consumer sentiment ([www.economagic.com](http://www.economagic.com)).

**ΔCPI:** Monthly net change in consumer price index ([http://inflationdata.com/inflation/Consumer_Price_Index/CurrentCPI.asp](http://inflationdata.com/inflation/Consumer_Price_Index/CurrentCPI.asp)).
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Downloaded on May 29, 2008. (“http://www.hks.harvard.edu/presspol/research_publications/reports/Character%20and%20the%20Primaries%20of%202008.pdf)


October 22, 2007. Downloaded from http://www.michaelyon-online.com/wp/resistance-is-futile.htm


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<th>Variable</th>
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<td>Civilian &amp; Military Casualties&lt;sub&gt;t-1&lt;/sub&gt;</td>
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<td>Period (month or week)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Period&lt;sup&gt;2&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>.0001 (.00003)**</td>
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<tr>
<td>Casualties&lt;sub&gt;t-1&lt;/sub&gt; x Period&lt;sup&gt;2&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
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<tr>
<td>NY Times Coverage&lt;sub&gt;t-1&lt;/sub&gt; x Period</td>
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<td>Hurricane Katrina (5-month dummy)</td>
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<td>Proportion of TV Iraq Coverage Focusing on Casualties</td>
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<td>Proportion of Newspaper Iraq Coverage Focusing on Casualties</td>
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<td>Constant</td>
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<td>R2 (N)</td>
<td>.59 (N=52)</td>
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*p<.10, **p<.05, ***p<.01, ****p<.001; Note: In Table A1.1, base category is both stories equally interesting
TABLE 2. OLS Analyses of Effects of Bush Iraq Statements on Partisan War Support

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Model 1</th>
<th>Model 2</th>
<th>Model 3</th>
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<td>1.754 (.487)**</td>
<td>2.638 (1.041)**</td>
<td>1.451 (.679)*</td>
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<td>Statement Date</td>
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<td>.005 (.002)*</td>
<td>.004 (.002)*</td>
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<td>-.003 (.001)*</td>
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<td>-.008 (.003)**</td>
<td>-.006 (.002)**</td>
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<td>.003 (.001)**</td>
<td>.003 (.001)**</td>
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<td>%ΔNetwork Iraq Stories</td>
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<td>-.007 (.110)</td>
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<td>-.305 (.175)$^\wedge$</td>
<td>-.145 (.171)</td>
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<td>ΔUS Casualties</td>
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<td>.015 (.008)$^\wedge$</td>
<td>.008 (.007)</td>
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<td>Weekly US Casualties$_{t-1}$</td>
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<td>.014 (.009)</td>
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<td>ΔIraqi Casualties</td>
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<td>.009 (.004)*</td>
<td>.011 (.003)**</td>
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<td>Pre-war</td>
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<td>Bush Mentions of Saddam</td>
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<tr>
<td>Presidential Approval$_{t-1}$</td>
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<td>-.041 (.017)*</td>
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<td>ΔConsumer Sentiment</td>
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<td>.004 (.003)</td>
<td>.000 (.003)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gas Prices</td>
<td>.003 (.001)**</td>
<td>.005 (.001)$^{***}$</td>
<td>.004 (.001)$^{**}$</td>
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<td>ΔCPI</td>
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<td>.023 (.057)</td>
<td>.023 (.057)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Days Since Last Statement</td>
<td>.000 (.000)</td>
<td>.001 (.000)$^\wedge$</td>
<td>.000 (.000)</td>
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<td>Constant</td>
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<td>.49 (N=71)</td>
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$^\wedge$p<.10, *p<.05, **p<.01, ***p<.001

Note: “x1000” indicates that, for presentational purposes, listed coefficients have been multiplied by 1000.
FIGURE 1. Elasticity of Reality for a Given State of Events

- Communication/Elite Rhetoric Effects
- "Reality" = Rhetoric
- "Reality" > Rhetoric
- "Reality" Effects

Influence on Public Opinion

Elasticity of Reality $t_f$

$R_2 = C_2$

$R_1$

$R_0 = R_3 = C_3$

$t_0$ - Rally period

$t_1$ - Conflict Initiation

$t_2$ - Short-term

$t_3$ - Medium-term

$t_4$ - Long-term

Time
FIGURE 2. Persuasiveness of Presidential Rhetoric Over Time, by Party

- PP Partisans
- Independents
- NPP Partisans

Events Uniformly Negative

Events Uniformly Positive

Probability that Positive Administration Rhetoric Will be Persuasive

Time
FIGURE 3. Evolution of Public Opinion Regarding Iraq Conflict

Note: Reported Figures based on averages across respondents, coded: Increased=1, About Same=0, Decreased=-1.
FIGURE 4: Perceived U.S. Progress in Iraq Since Start of “Surge,” by Party

Data are from the following Pew survey question: As I read a few specific things about Iraq, tell me if you think we are making progress or losing ground in each area. First, are we making progress or losing ground in [Preventing Civil War/Defeating Insurgents]? Data available at: http://people-press.org/reports/display.php3?PageID=1258.

Note: Large circles indicate statistically significant (p<.10 or better) effects of news coverage or casualties; shaded regions represent statistically significant differences between effects of casualties and news coverage.