



Public Opinion and Foreign Policy

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John Zaller (1992)

- *Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion*
 - Most influential theory in public opinion literature
 - General theory of public opinion
 - Applied to many countries – Netherlands, Germany, U.K., Japan, others
 - Applied to all policy debates – foreign policy as well as domestic
 - “Elite-led opinions” – public opinion follows elites

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- Politics – lots of messages from media, politicians, and other “elites”
 - Try to convince people on an issue
- **Attention to Politics**
 - Some people ignore politics – do not care or find it confusing
 - “Low aware” people
 - Other people entertained by politics – follow closely and find it interesting
 - “High aware” people
- **“Predispositions”** – values and beliefs
 - Party attachment, religion, income, support for political figure
 - **Used to accept/reject information**
 - Accept message if consistent
 - Reject message if not consistent

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- “Every opinion is a marriage of information and predispositions...”
 - **Opinions = information x predisposition**
 - Information – how likely to *receive* messages?
 - Predisposition – how likely to *accept* messages?
- Information and Predispositions
 - High aware – strong predispositions
 - Low aware – weak predispositions
 - Thus, highest aware citizens are most likely to filter messages
- Cognitive process – **react like a robot**
 - No thinking and No deliberating

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- **Elite Discourse** – public opinion (mostly) reflects elite debate
- Elite debate about Iraq War
 - 2003 – not very divided
 - Democrats – some Democrats in Congress opposed war, but most had voted to invade Iraq
 - Republicans – almost all Republicans supported the war
 - 2008 – extremely divided
 - Democrats – almost all Democrats opposed the war; Pres. Obama campaigned on withdrawing the troops
 - Republicans – most Republicans supported the war; John McCain campaigned in support of the war

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- Public “Opinion” on Iraq War – 2003 and 2008

	2003	2008
	Right Decision	Right Decision
Republicans	90%	73%
Independents	66%	38%
Democrats	50%	17%

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- Another Example: NSA Surveillance Program

	2006 Bush Presidency	2013 Obama Presidency
	Acceptable	Right Decision
Republicans	75%	52%
Independents	44%	64%
Democrats	37%	53%

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- **“R.A.S” Model** – how people form “opinion”
 - *Receive* – only receive message if aware of politics
 - *Accept* – accept message if consistent with predisposition
 - Reject if not consistent
 - Iraq War example – Democrats accept pro-war messages from elites...
 - ...until their party changed its position
 - *Sample*
 - Person’s “opinion” – sample from the messages they accepted
 - “Opinion” – simply the average of messages in your head at that time

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○ Implications

- Change the messages = change the “opinion”
- Public opinion – **changes frequently**
 - Except for highly aware – blindly accept what their side says
 - Do not change opinions
 - Most people – opinions change frequently
- “Opinions” –not real attitudes
 - Temporary samples from recent information
 - Iraq War – shows that opinions are not deliberative
- **Citizens follow elites**
 - When elite debate changes – public “opinion” changes

Foreign Policy

- **“Traditional View”** – Almond and Lipset
 - Public opinion – too volatile to influence foreign policy
 - Attitudes – lack structure and coherence (non-attitudes)
 - Consequence – little impact on foreign policy
- Zaller – explains this volatility and lack of coherence
 - Most citizens – little awareness of foreign policy
 - Only highly aware (20% of public) have stable beliefs
 - Everyone else – not aware, not informed, and not stable
- Result – **politicians have freedom to make policy**
 - Public opinion has little influence on foreign policy

Foreign Policy

- Public opinion has very little **direct** influence on foreign policy
- Okay, so does public opinion have **any** influence foreign policy?
- Three **indirect** influences of public opinion:
 - Elections
 - Popularity of Leaders
 - Limits options available to policy-makers

Foreign Policy

Three **indirect** influences of public opinion:

- Elections – citizens don't vote on foreign policy, but choices determine foreign policy
- 2008 – Pres. Obama won election because of economy
 - Bad economy = blame Pres. Bush
 - Democratic foreign policy (somewhat) different than Republican foreign policy
- **Unintentional** change in policy by public

Foreign Policy

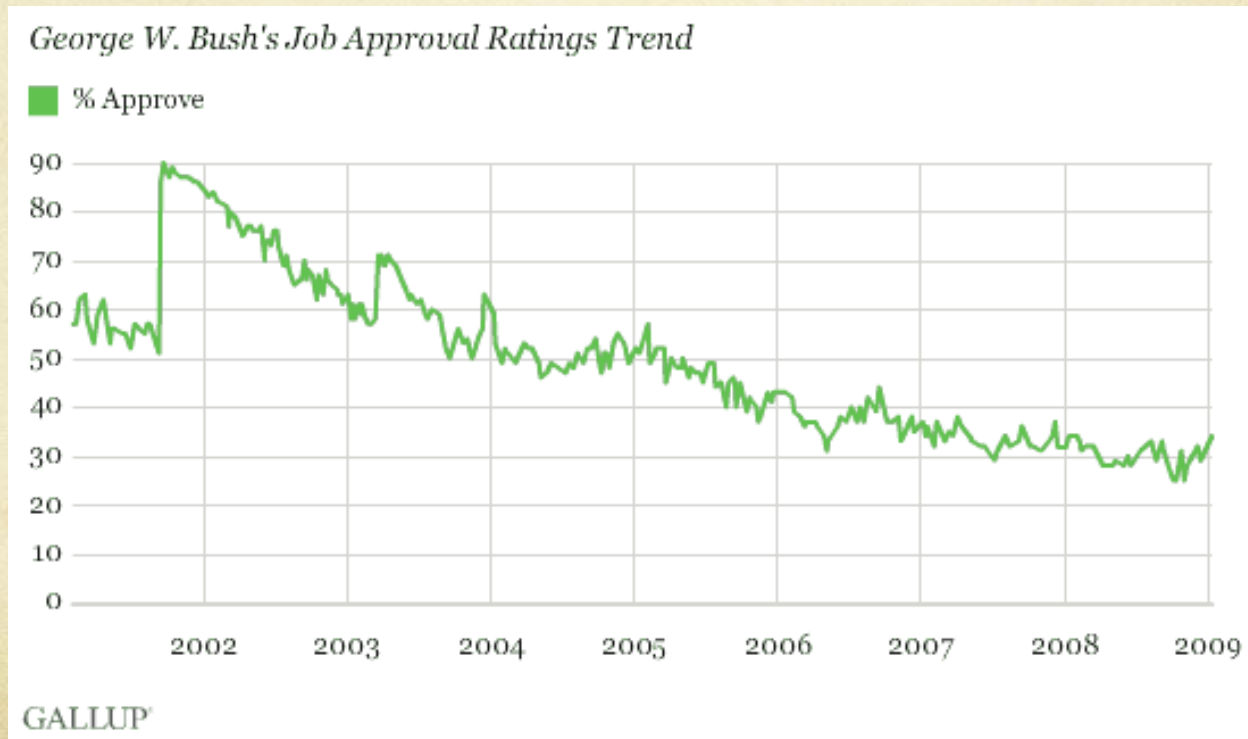
Three **indirect** influences of public opinion:

- Popularity of Leaders
 - More popular = more influence
 - Why did Democrats in Congress support Iraq War?
 - Pres. Bush approval rating 2002 – 76%
 - Minority party – oppose unpopular president; bend to a popular one

Foreign Policy

Three **indirect** influences of public opinion:

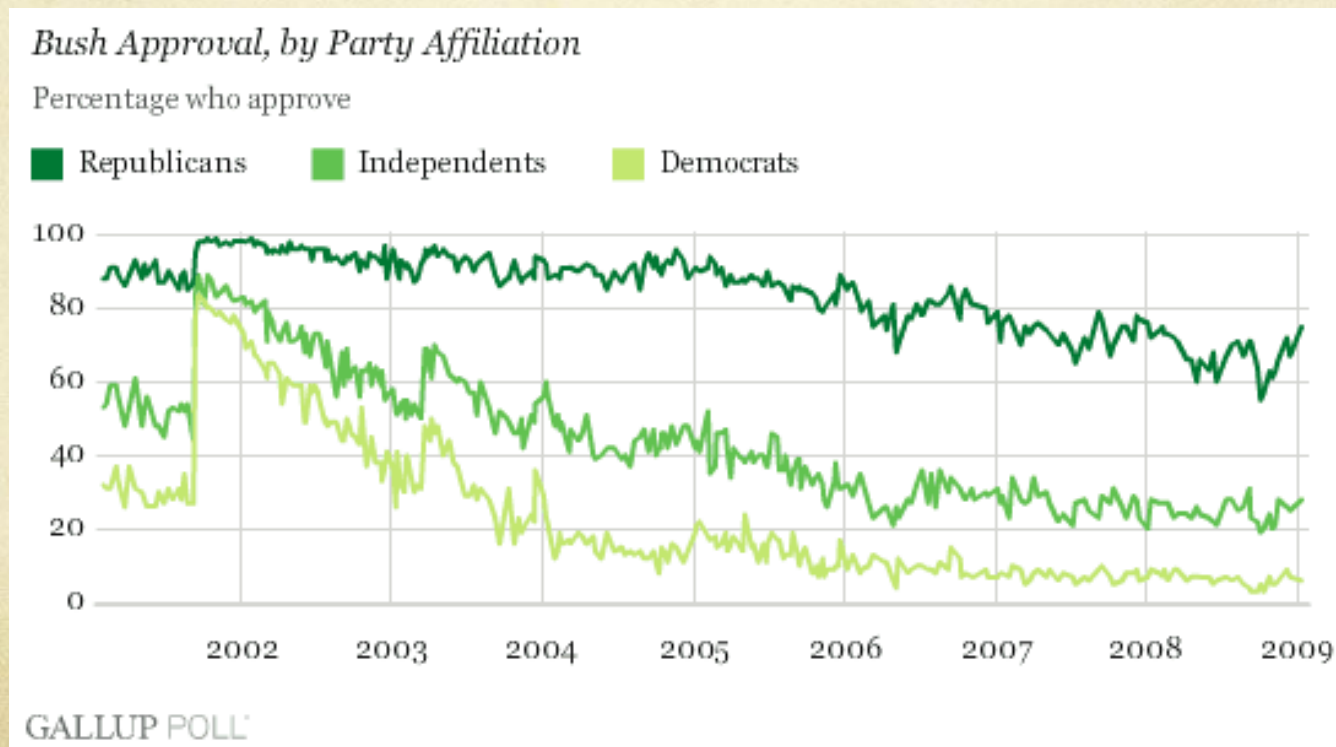
- Popularity of Leaders



Foreign Policy

Three **indirect** influences of public opinion:

- Popularity of Leaders



Foreign Policy

Three **indirect** influences of public opinion:

- Limits options available to policy-makers
 - Some things the public will not accept
 - Foreign policy-makers – work within constraints
 - But...only weak constraints

Summary

- Public opinion – weak influence on foreign policy
 - Some indirect influences:
 - Mostly elections and approval of leaders
- Conclusion:
 - If you want to understand American foreign policy...
 - ...look at elites and elite debate, not at the public opinion