

Crossing the Water's Edge: Elite Rhetoric, Media Coverage, and the Rally-Round-the-Flag Phenomenon

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The most widely accepted explanation for the rally-round-the-flag phenomenon is a relative absence of elite criticism during the initial stages of foreign crises. In this study we argue that the nature and extent of elite debate may matter less than media coverage of any such debate and that these often systematically diverge. We also argue that not all messages in this debate matter equally for public opinion. Rather, the persuasiveness of elite messages depends on their credibility, which, in turn, arises out of an interaction between the sender, receiver, and message. Hence, only by understanding the interactions between elites, the public, and the press can we account for variations in public responses to presidential foreign policy initiatives. We test our theory by examining public opinion data and a new dataset on network news coverage of all major U.S. uses of military force from 1979 to 2003. We content analyze all congressional evaluations of the president and the executive branch of government from the three network evening newscasts within 61-day time periods centered on the start date of each use of force. Our results offer strong support for the theory.

In August 2005, senators Chuck Hagel (R-NE) and George Allen (R-VA) appeared together on ABC's *This Week* to discuss the current and future status of American involvement in Iraq. The senators were of comparable stature; both were considered credible aspirants for the 2008 Republican presidential nomination, both were forceful and articulate for their respective positions, and both spoke for similar lengths of time. Yet in the two weeks following the interview, journalists broadcasted over 20 times more television stories about Hagel's criticism of the war than Allen's defense of it.¹ In this study, we argue that the differential coverage of these prominent Republicans was both predictable and representative of an important limitation in our understanding of the dynamics of public support for the president, especially in times of foreign policy crisis.

Scholars have long debated the causes and consequences of public support for the overseas application of military force (e.g., Almond 1950; Baum 2003; Eichenberg 2005; Holsti 2007; Lippmann 1934; Page

and Bouton 2006; Rosenau 1961). To explain variations in public support, research in this area has focused on the characteristics of the conflicts themselves (hereafter "event-based" explanations), the internal characteristics of individual citizens ("individual-level" explanations), or on the domestic political circumstances surrounding them ("domestic political" explanations).

Event-based explanations focus primarily on longer-term public opinion, arguing that a president's ability to sustain public support for a U.S. military engagement depends primarily on its degree of success (Feaver and Gelpi 2004; Gelpi, Feaver, and Reifler 2005/2006; Kull and Ramsay 2001) or the number of U.S. casualties (Gartner and Segura 2000; Mueller 1973). Such explanations cannot, at least in many instances, account for the presence or absence of a public opinion rally at the outset of a military conflict, before the public observes either the ultimate costs or outcome (for a critique of these literatures, see Berinsky 2007).

¹Our search of Lexis-Nexis' online transcripts produced nine hits for stories that only mentioned Allen, and 277 that only mentioned Hagel (61 stories mentioned both).

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