A Popular Myth of the President's Popularity: Contextualizing the Rally 'Round the Flag Effect

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Introduction

Most of the current literature surrounding the relationship between the use of force and its effects on public opinion are dominated by what is called the "rally 'round the flag effect" and its logical descendant: the diversionary use of force. The rally 'round the flag describes the swell in public opinion that U.S. presidents tend to receive in response to crises abroad and the use of military force in its conduct of international affairs. What then follows from this principle is that rationally motivated politicians concerned with their domestic popularity, whether for political capital or concerns of re-electability, will use force abroad in order to artificially spur a rally and garner increased support.

However, the evidence on both of these theories is outright discrediting at worst and occasionally mixed (or heavily conditioned) at best. All of the research, theorizing, and data are grounded in the assumption that it is a valid question to even be asking in the first place: asking "what is the effect of rallies and when do rallies have an effect?"(Baum 2002; Chatagnier 2012; Lian and Oneal 1993). What they all fail to consider is whether this tenuous causal relation even matters. To what extent do rallies from the use of force explain the ebbs and flows of public opinion? If there is an effect, the significance of that effect is irrelevant if it has little explanatory capacity in regards to public opinion. When it is found to be significant, is that significance significant?

Conceptualizing the 'Rally' and the Diversionary Use of the Force

Before analyzing the rally 'round the flag effect and the diversionary use of force, their definitions must be clearly established. The rally 'round the flag effect is understood as the increase in public support that the president receives following international crises (Lian and Oneal 1993, 279–80). The concept is that whenever the country is faced with a significant international crisis, it experiences a patriotic rally behind its primary decision maker in the use of force in response: the president. What then follows is that rationally driven politicians motivated by the desire to be re-elected and for increased political capital domestically will use force abroad to create rally events and boost their public approval. This is the concept of the diversionary use of force, where the president can use his powers as commander-in-chief for political self-promotion (Lian and Oneal 1993; Nickelsburg and Norpoth 2000; Smith 1996). It is a concept that is utilized and referenced in numerous scholarly works, and is also referenced in the media as an explanation for presidents' use of force abroad (Lian and Oneal 1993, 279).

The underlying mechanism for rallies and the diversionary theory of war is that the public, as an aggregate, evaluates the president in terms of the country's response to the perceived threat environment. Psychologically, at the individual level, this stems from the public's emotions of anger in response to threats (Lambert, Schott, and Scherer 2011). External threats stir up anger towards a proscribed out-group (the enemy in the crisis) within the in-group (the country's populace). This makes them both more accepting of war in responding to these threats and more approving of the president (345–6). When all of these individual psychological responses are aggregated, it is reflected as a bump in the approval rating of the president.

In order to understand how this linkage between individual perceptions and public opinion is made, the criteria that the president is being evaluated on must be clarified. It is the evaluation of the image of the president by these criteria that is the primary driver of the public's approval. In the eyes of the public, the president is evaluated by competence in bringing about positive eco-

nomic and foreign policy outcomes (Smith 1996). It is important that the president appear that he is acting effectively in these two arenas. This finding has been validated empirically to show that the president is equally evaluated on his ability to perform in the areas of foreign policy and the economy (Nickelsburg and Norpoth 2000). The approval of the president is determined by his competent economic and foreign policy performance. The president can use force abroad to enhance his foreign policy competency and, therefore, his approval in the eyes of the public (Smith 1996, 137–9).

However, the research shows that this theorized increase in public opinion ratings for the president following international crises and the use of force abroad is not automatic. In fact, there, on average, is almost no effect of international crises on the president's approval; even when that crisis is perceived as being a truly consequential threat to US interests and is prominently covered in the media, the average rally effect is small and not consistently positive (Lian and Oneal 1993). The type of event and how much it is discussed in the media increase the rally effect, but still not enough to make it significant on average. In terms of specific subsets of the population that are most affected by the rally, those who belong to the opposite party of the president and are less politically sophisticated are more likely to be affected by rally events (Baum 2002). Rallies may not be universal across the population but instead only affect certain people because of their individual characteristics.

But is the rally phenomenon still important when the population is partitioned and divided like this and few events can have an impact? When the population is analyzed in specific subsets in search of a significant result to explain the rally effect, the overall impact of the findings needs to be considered in the context of the size of the populations that the findings are applicable to. Public opinion is best understood in the aggregate, and these small populations will have little impact on aggregate opinion. Additionally, a lot of the evidence that indicates that domestic concerns can drive the president to use force abroad are the spurious result of selection bias. Domestic crises are temporally correlated to crises abroad leading to their erroneous association with the use of force abroad, and, when these selection effects are controlled for, only international factors are found to have an effect on the decision of the president to use force (Meernik 1995, 2000). Many of the models that did find a significant rally effect only considered changes before and after uses of force without including the total variability in the changes of the approval of the president over time (Lian and Oneal 1993; Baum 2002; Chatagnier 2012). The foundations of the rally 'round the flag effect and the diversionary theory of war are shaky, and its significance in a greater context is questionable.

Data

Response Variable: Presidential Public Approval

The response variable under study by this model is the approval rating of the president measured as the percentage of the total respondents who approved of the president; the data for this variable was obtained the from the American Presidency Project, which compiled and adapted their poll data from Gallup (Peters and Woolley 2018).[1] In this dataset, the average public approval rating for a president was 52% with a standard deviation of 4.94 percentage points. Figure 1 below

1. Full Question: "Do you approve or disapprove of the way [first & last name] is handling his job as President?". Recorded responses were "Approve", "Disapprove", or "Unsure".

presents presidential approval rating plotted over time for each president.

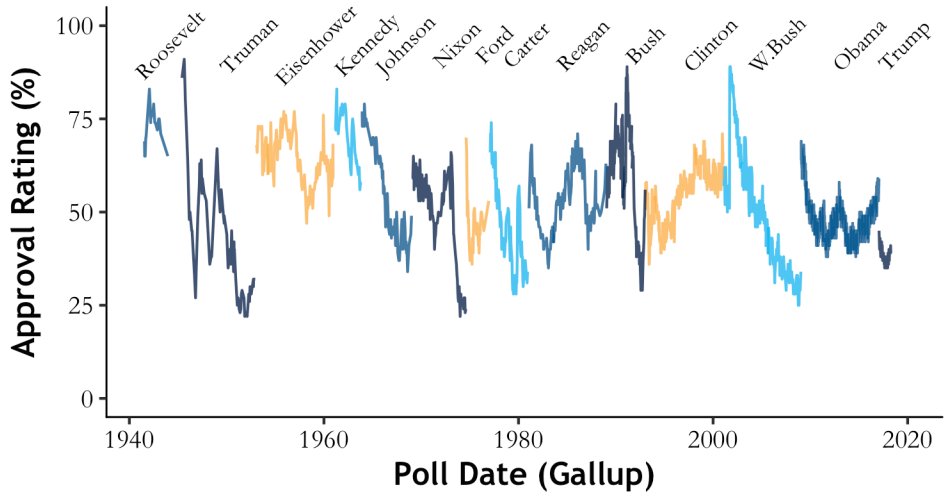

Figure 1: Presidential Public Approval (Aug. 1941–Apr. 2018)

In order to better understand how the use of force explains the variability in presidential approval, a change term that reflects the change in public opinion for the president since the last poll was derived from the data for use in the analysis. This was calculated by taking the approval rating from the next poll and subtracting it from the approval rating for the current poll.[2] Thus, this term reflects the percentage point changes in public approval between polls rather than percent change in public approval.

$$\Delta Approval = Approval_{t+1} - Approval_t$$

The average change in public opinion from one poll to the next was approximately 0 (–0.05 percentage points change) and the standard deviation was 2.69. Figure 2 below presents the percentage change in approval for each president between polls.

Explanatory Variable: Uses of Force

Selecting what cases of the use of force to analyze is key to forming a sound analysis. In order to be able to analyze the effects of different intensities of force on public opinion, the analysis uses data from the Correlates of War Project's Militarized Interstate Dispute Dataset (Version 4.1), which records disputes from 1816–2010 (Palmer et al. 2015). This dataset was then filtered to just

2. Utilizing this change term also solves the issue of autocorrelation between temporally proximate observations, wherein the primary determinant of approval at time t is approval at time $t-1$. In this data, this autocorrelation was quite severe ($\rho_{x_t, x_{t-1}} = 0.96$) but was diminished using the change term ($\rho_{\Delta x_t, \Delta x_{t-1}} = -0.23$). This change variable was calculated with the data grouped by each president, so the term resets at 0 for each new president and changes only are measured within each president's terms and not across presidents. Because of this, the first poll of each president's first term was not reflected in the data.

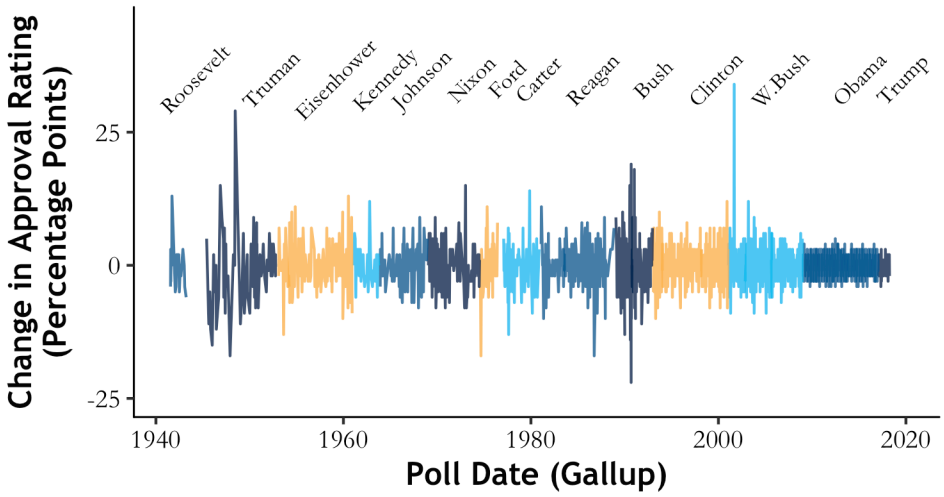

Figure 2: Change in Presidential Public Approval

look at US conflict monads from 1946–2010. The dataset recorded the hostility level according to the criteria outlined in Table 1 below.

Control Variable: Time Periods

In order to examine if there are significant shifts in the effect of the use of force on presidential approval between different periods, variables were coded for whether or not the conflict occurred during the following periods: the 'Imperial Presidency' period, the post-Tet Offensive period, the post-Cold War period, the post-9/11 period, and the period following the reversal in public opinion on the Iraq War in March of 2006 (*Public Attitudes Toward the War in Iraq: 2003-2008* 2008) which I termed the 'Iraq Syndrome' period.[3] This variable will investigate whether periods that were characterized by different contexts, different kinds of uses of force, and different power dynamics between the president and Congress over the use of force help to explain this relationship.

Analysis

Exploratory Analysis

In order to analyze the relationship between these variables, several linear regression models were analyzed. The first set of models compared the percentage point changes in public approval for the president to different hostility levels of disputes (using the original MID codings). However, when the cases that were coded as being 4 and 5 were examined, the differentiation between them did not seem to meaningful to this analysis. Because of this, the hostility variable was collapsed from the original ordinal variable to a dichotomous categorical variable indicating whether or not

3. The cutoffs for these periods are (in order): January 1st, 1946; January 30, 1968; December 31, 1991; September 11, 2001; March 1, 2006

Table 1: Hostility Levels Coding and Number of Cases

Coding	Criteria	# Cases
1	A dispute without the threat or use of force (no militarized action)	55
2	Dispute where one side or the other threatened to use force (threat to use force, blockade, occupy territory, join war, etc.)	9
3	Either side made a significant display of force (border fortification, troop mobilization, nuclear alert, show of force)	103
4	Either side uses force against the other (seizure of possessions, attack/clash, occupation of territory)	74
5	The two sides are engaged in a declared war against one another (joining or beginning an interstate war)	4

actual force was used (no dispute and MID codings 1–3: 0, 4–5: 1; total number of cases: 78).[4] This recoded variable was then included in the analysis. Table 2 below presents the results of this analysis.

The variable for wars (coded as 5's) is the only significant term, and its significance was robust to the inclusion of controls for different presidents (suppressed from the output). Contrary to what is expected by the literature, this term was significantly negative in both models. Based on this model, whenever the United States becomes involved in a war, the president's change in public approval is expected to decrease by about 5 percentage points (using both of the models) However, as discussed above, because of the way this variable was coded, it is not the best indicator to be utilized. When the data was further examined, some of the instances of the use of force were following large increases in approval rating. This could represent the fact the the uses of force followed as a response international crises, and the rallies happened before the use of force because of the crisis rather than the use of force itself. When the recoded variable for whether or not force was used was used instead of the ordinal variable for the level of hostilities, the effect of the use of force was slightly positive, but not statistically significant.

4. For example, the Iraq War was coded as a 4 while the Korean, Vietnam, and Gulf Wars were coded as being 5's. In order to not introduce selection bias into the coding of this variable, I did not manually recode this variable based on any personal set of criteria, but rather maintained the original criteria of the MID dataset, a commonly cited and well-regarded conflict dataset.

Table 2: Exploratory Regression Analysis

	Dependent variable:		
	Percentage Change in Approval		
Dispute	0.290	0.284	
	(0.564)	(0.561)	
Threat	−1.595	−1.770	
	(1.316)	(1.309)	
Display	0.068	−0.130	
	(0.419)	(0.417)	
Use of Force	0.636	0.537	
	(0.489)	(0.486)	
War	−5.276**	−4.930**	
	(2.182)	(2.170)	
Recoded: Forced Used			0.193
			(0.315)
Constant	−0.224***	−0.023	−0.224***
	(0.028)	(0.116)	(0.028)
President Controls	*No*	*Yes*	*Yes*
Observations	25,318	25,318	25,318
Adjusted R^2	0.0002	0.012	-0.00002
F Statistic	1.861* (df = 5; 25312)	19.413*** (df = 16; 25301)	0.373 (df = 1; 25316)

Note: *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01
Base for both variables is the that there is no dispute
OLS regression estimates; standard errors in parentheses

In all of these models, the explanatory capacity of each set of variables was approximately 0 as indicated by the small adjusted coefficients of determination for each of the models (adjusted R^2). The percentage of variability in the changes in the president's poll-to-poll changes in public approval explained by uses of force was quite negligible even in the model where the war variable was a significant indicator of changes in public opinion.

Extended Analysis

To further examine the relationship between public opinion and the use of force, the analysis was performed on the the recoded variable with the inclusion of variables coding for the time period in which the conflict occurred. Their effect on the relationship between the use of force and public opinion was analyzed through the inclusion of interaction terms. The results of this analysis is reported in Table 3 below.

The inclusion of these interaction terms had no effect on the significance of the effect of the use of force on the president's public opinion. None of the interaction terms were statistically significant (either with or without the inclusion of president controls)[5]. Additionally, none of the models produced a significant coefficient for the use of force, and none of the models had significant explanatory ability in explaining the changes in public opinion.

5. Although the model with the inclusion of presidents' variables was stronger analytically, the model without them was also included because of the collinearity between the time periods and the president in office, which could have affected the coefficients of the different terms.

Table 3: Extended Regression Analysis

	Dependent variable:		
	Percentage Change in Approval		
Force Used	0.390	0.594	0.416
	(0.513)	(1.043)	(1.036)
Post-Tet		0.365***	2.702***
		(0.069)	(0.508)
Post-Cold War		0.510***	3.798***
		(0.089)	(0.574)
Post-9/11		0.091	1.322**
		(0.120)	(0.650)
Iraq Syndrome		0.477***	1.719***
		(0.117)	(0.655)
Conflict×Post-Tet		0.255	0.572
		(1.358)	(1.349)
Conflict×Post-CW		−0.348	−0.042
		(1.695)	(1.683)
Conflict×Post-9/11		−1.702	−1.524
		(1.748)	(1.736)
Conflict×Iraq		0.189	0.363
		(1.809)	(1.797)
Constant	−0.019	−0.483***	−1.739**
	(0.164)	(0.049)	(0.675)
President Controls	*Yes*	*No*	*Yes*
Observations	23,320	23,320	23,320
Adjusted R^2	0.012	0.002	0.017
F Statistic	24.909*** (df = 12; 23307)	5.922*** (df = 9; 23310)	20.710*** (df = 20; 23299)

Note: *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01
Time periods are compared to Imperial Presidency (pre-Tet Offensive) period
OLS regression estimates; standard errors in parentheses

Conclusion

The results of the analysis show that there is not substantial evidence to suggest that the use of the force abroad by the president yields an automatic and consistent increase in the public's approval of the president. The theory that there is a dependable rally 'round the flag effect is not supported by the evidence. The use of force by the president was not found to be a significant cause of changes in public opinion, and the use of force had almost no ability to explain the variations in the changes of the president's approval. When compared to the broad range of factors that influence public opinion, the use of force by the president is not a significant contributor. While popular among scholars and the media alike, these phenomena are not reflected in the evidence and should not be held as being empirical fact in explaining the use of force by the president or in considering the effect of force abroad on the president's domestic constituency.

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