

Changes in Presidential Public Approval Ratings at the Start of U.S. Military Conflicts Abroad, 1950–1999

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Abstract

It is commonly said among pollsters that wars are always popular in the beginning. However, is this to suggest that the American public responds positively to all military conflicts or only to wars? This research design was meant to investigate to what extent the beginnings of U.S. conflicts abroad altered public opinion. The methodology began with a government-created list of instances U.S. troops were used in foreign nations, which was filtered to create a definition of foreign conflict. By cross referencing those cases with a comprehensive list of presidential public approval ratings, adjusted for both approval and disapproval, a correlation could be derived to infer which foreign conflicts were the most popular and unpopular. As expected, wars generated the rally-around-the-flag

effect, but, unexpectedly, other comparatively small skirmishes seemed to generate a proportional response. It is suspected that this is the result of a “post-crisis” event (building on Brody’s theory) that reflects a positive change in the face of a small military victory. The results also support the notion that in overseas conflicts, themes are important for shaping American public opinion.

Article II of the U.S. Constitution grants the president very limited and narrow powers, including the ability to act as commander in chief of the armed forces. In the modern presidency, this power may possibly be used as a foreign policy tool to strengthen domestic approval ratings. Given the growing importance and publicity of the executive branch since World War II, it is necessary to examine if military conflicts abroad consistently shape public opinion. Although Vietnam showed that military conflicts can eventually contribute to a decline in favorability ratings, it must be seen whether or not the declaration of battle directly affects the president’s approval rating. The underlying assumption is that wars and battles are directly tied to the public’s mood. However, this may not always be true. Presidents have the ability to organize a potentially limitless number of battles, especially when the conflicts are smaller and shorter in length. This research design will examine the prevailing literature to understand which foreign policy factors have had the most influence on the public according to political scientists. Then it will attempt to find any trends that incur immediately when a president orders any type of military action related to a conflict abroad.

Predictions and Expectations

It is likely that the public, regardless of how low its sophistication or attentiveness at any given moment, will still react to the cues of peers, elites, partisan lines, and unknown miscellaneous references.¹ It is not completely certain whether the direction of cause and effect of public opinion is from the masses toward the policy makers or vice versa, but there should be some correlates between the two, which will be used to measure how the public reacts to foreign policy decisions. Even when

people aren’t well-informed, they will form lay opinions about the president, as Witkoff and Shapiro found. They argue that for whatever reason public opinion shifts on foreign policy, it is still rational to the informational and circumstantial changes that develop (Witkoff 1986, Shapiro 1988).

Although Toth, Kohut, and Jentleson argue that certain themes of foreign conflict will resonate with the public (Kohut and Toth 1994, Jentleson 1992), this is probably untrue at least in terms of an immediate reaction. Instead, the prevalent argument will be taken from Brody that foreign conflict carries a momentum that lasts from beginning to end, stemming largely from the pre-crisis buildup of a long-term event such as a war. Any changes that occur will be small and gradual (Brody 1994). This seems like the most plausible prediction considering that the public is generally large and uninformed. If a small group of people repeatedly changed their opinions, they could make quick shifts with little resistance. But for a group as massive as the American population to make quick and repeated shifts takes time. For millions of people to change their minds all at once, or even in subgroups, there has to be some kind of delay so that information can disseminate and they can respond to the cues of others. It seems logical to think that they have to respond to cues if they are generally uninformed. Therefore, as Brody has stated, changes during the course of a foreign conflict will be small and gradual (Brody 1994).

However, this is not to say that lack of sophistication and attentiveness will never give rise to a measurement error regarding foreign conflicts that gain little media attention. The public cannot be expected to look for these incidents when the media will pay little attention to them. Scenarios that didn’t incur major shifts should be the ones where public attentiveness was lower, the president’s cues were not as solidly established despite being the commander in chief of the armed forces, the life-span of campaigns will have been much smaller, and when there were missions where the UN or NATO had larger roles in planning, which will have diluted American patriotism towards the rallying effect. As this applies from Truman to the Clinton presidencies, it is

suspected that the “rally-around-the-flag” effect (Mueller, 1973) will be seen in the conflicts with the longest lifespan and the highest media coverage. Namely, they’ll have rallied behind the Korean War, the Vietnam War, and first war against Iraq. Also, it will be proposed that American presidential approval was not influenced in any other situations of overseas conflict. In a small number of cases, quite simply, missions will have been just too easy to accomplish. That is, there will have been no need for presidential cues, significant military buildup, and the mission’s lifespan will have been extremely short. All of these effects will also contribute to the lower media coverage that would have otherwise primed the public for a shift due to international conflict. If major news organizations couldn’t have spent more than a day covering a conflict, and they only had enough time to report the results, the public won’t have paid a remarkable amount of attention to it.

Given these predictions, any change in public approval in instances other than Korea, Vietnam, and the Iraqi war should be coincidental and have incomparable magnitude to the other major scenarios. If there were any other large shifts, they will probably be the result of other factors such as the state of the American economy. Certainly, though, there should not be any other shifts of comparable size to the three major wars that will be included with the other cases of foreign conflict. If this expectation is inaccurate and there are such anomalies, though, they should be carefully examined for a pattern.

Methodology and Data Collection

In this research design, there is a strong need to find a set of instances in which foreign conflict abroad occurred and there also must be corresponding data to infer what the presidential approval was at or around that time. It is assumed that there is no existing list of foreign conflicts abroad that already matches the herein ideal definition of “military conflict abroad.” Therefore, before any resources are collected, the definitional parameters should be set so that any non-qualifying, potential instances of conflict abroad are filtered out. This will maintain consistency and eliminate any bias that might stem from interpreting a dramatic change in

presidential approval rating for an instance that only partially qualifies or doesn’t qualify at all. Then, the method of calculating shifts in presidential approval rating should be clearly spelled out and applied against the available resources to determine the most effective, unbiased, and consistent way to show changes in values.

Broadly speaking, “military conflict abroad” shall be assumed to be any instance not on American soil where US troops, naval craft, or aircraft set out to deliberately and intentionally engage or attack foreign persons or facilities. The most comprehensive list of these instances, before they have been filtered by the definition herein, comes from Richard Grimmett. He is the author of Congressional Research Services report number RL30172, titled “Instances of Use of United States Forces Abroad, 1798-1999” (Grimmett 1999). This research will cover only instances after WWII, which will be set to start on September 3rd, 1945, the day after Japan formally surrendered to the United States. All of the instances before this date will be excluded.

Since the potential cases that will be used for this design have already been laid out, the qualifiers of this section shall act as filtering mechanisms to remove events that do not fall under the necessary definition. Only instances that have been made available to the public will be used. There will be no distinction for undeclared wars, UN or NATO missions, battles, and any other operations, regardless if Congressional approval was available or not. Despite the outcome of a mission, battle, or war, the U.S. must have engaged or attacked foreign persons or facilities. Failure on this criterion will not qualify as foreign conflict, even if the underlying circumstances are coincidental. For example, the case in which President Carter attempted a rescue mission for hostages in Iran in 1980 will not be included in this analysis because the helicopters that were used suffered mechanical failures before reaching their objective and thus the mission was cancelled. Failure of this criterion also applies to instances in which U.S. troops or craft were attacked, but the U.S. declined to immediately respond with military force. All missions that were intended solely for evacuation, security, surveillance, seizing property, or preventive reasons shall be excluded if it did not

escalate into fighting. Any instance in which foreign troops were sent solely for the purpose of build-up before an attack will also be excluded. Neither operational size nor significance of a mission will be weighted. As the author of the available list of foreign conflict cases has already filtered out some instances of his own that do not contradict the laid-out definition, covert actions, disaster relief, and routine alliance stationing and training exercises are not included. Any operations in which troops were sent as “forces” will be assumed to have fought and therefore contributed to the overall definition of conflict that is sought.

Functionally speaking, each instance of foreign conflict will be associated with a change in presidential public approval based on the date in which it either occurred or was reported. Presidential approval ratings shall be taken from available Gallup polls of The Roper Center’s online database known as iPoll (“Presidential...” 2003). This being the most comprehensive source available, public approval ratings will be dependent upon the dates in which that information was recorded, though it is not expected that Gallup attained this information on a day-by-day basis to maintain the highest accuracy of this project. Because of this limitation, comparisons will be made using polls before and after a given international conflict. The poll that occurred either before or on the date in which an incident began or was announced will be compared with the following available poll. However, if in the rare circumstance an approval poll was taken on the same day of a military conflict, it will be used as the preliminary Gallup poll to be compared with the following one. It shall be assumed that the public needs a “reaction period” to assess how it feels about each event. Fortunately, in most of these limited cases, the following poll was merely taken within a week of the event.

After the two polling dates have been compared, the following formula will then be used to extract an average percentage point change:

$$[(A_2 - A_1) - (D_2 - D_1)] / 2$$

where A_1 and D_1 stand for the approval and disapproval

ratings (respectively) on the date in which an incident began or was reported, and A_2 and D_2 stand for the approval and disapproval ratings for the following available poll. Within the mathematical calculations, negative values will never be inverted to reflect positive values. The reason that both approval and disapproval ratings are being used is because there are instances in which the population that previously had no opinion of the president could switch their opinion in the following survey to either approve or disapprove. Hence, a president could have an increase in both approval and disapproval ratings. In those cases, to say that a president had an increase in approval rating would be misleading. Therefore, the above-stated formula adjusts the approval rating to reflect the overall change. If the formula results in a positive number, this will indicate increased adjusted approval, and inversely for negative values, it will indicate increased adjusted disapproval. This will be interpreted as an overall immediate shift either in the public’s approval or disapproval of a foreign conflict (see Appendix A or Appendix B for results).

It is important to note that only mobilization and demobilization of “approve” and “disapprove” responses will be examined. Any cases in which respondents answered “I don’t know” will not be compared with the other responses because it cannot to any degree measure presidential approval or disapproval. Even if there are instances in which there is a significantly higher mobilization of “I don’t know” responses, this will not be taken into account. This methodology is only interested in measuring the bipolarity of the two given responses.

Results & Conclusion

Overall, the general expectations seemed well-founded. Certainly, the starts of the Korean, Vietnamese, and Iraqi wars had their rallying effects. However, there appears to be instances of rallying effects that were not accounted for ahead of time for missions that were easier and quicker to carry out than an average war. This would imply that the lifespan of a conflict does not affect public opinion, but rather that the context is the key variable as offered in the literature (Kohut and

Toth 1994). For President Reagan, there were two massive boosts in approval ratings that occurred at the same time as the unaccounted conflicts, both of them having to do with Libya. In 1981, he received an adjusted eight-point increase around the same time that two Libyan planes were shot down. In 1986, he received an adjusted six-point increase around the same time he had authorized the bombings of terrorist facilities and military installations in Libya. George H.W. Bush received a nine-point increase after he sent military troops to Panama to arrest General Noriega. President Clinton received two sizeable boosts from attacking Iraq: once when the incident occurred the day after he had been inaugurated and a second time about six months later. The former is more likely attributable to a successful election and inauguration considering that the attack was relatively minor and occurred against Iraqi planes. However, the latter situation was a retaliatory response to a learned assassination attempt of former President Bush. The significance of this attack might have had a patriotic rallying effect for Americans. Lastly, Clinton had received one more increase late in his career after he had bombed Iraqi industrial facilities shortly after UN weapons inspectors had been deported from the country.

To account for these oversights, it seems that Brody had a very logical point in that there is a pre-crisis event that sets the tone throughout the conflict (Brody 1994). However, when the conflicts' life spans are extremely short, this theory should be expanded to say there this also an immediate post-crisis event that takes place shortly after media outlets report an American military win. The tone immediately after this win will typically shape a presidential approval change that will reflect a positive change among the public.

The evidence at hand suggests a stronger indication that themes are important in regard to overseas conflict. Despite the fact that they can occur in short, one-day stories that media outlets will barely have time to cover, there seems to be enough sentiment behind them to induce a rallying effect.

Acknowledgement

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End Notes

1. The existence of "miscellaneous references" is an assumption. I presume that there are other factors that drive public opinion in regard to foreign policy, even though it is not definitively known. "Miscellaneous references" refers to criteria that categorically are either uncommon or individually specific.

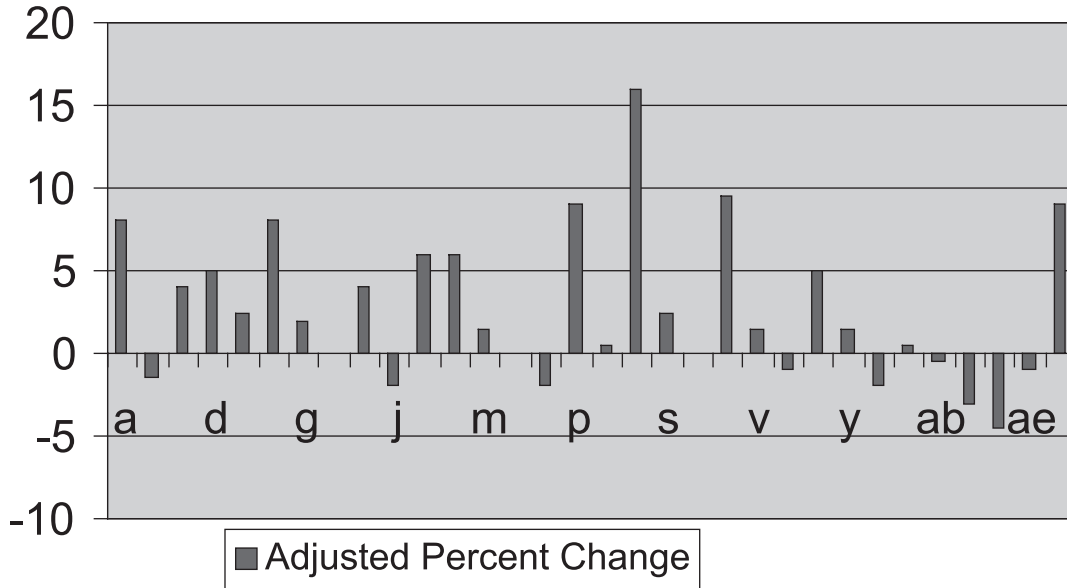
Appendix A

The following is a chart of each date of conflict correlated with the adjusted presidential approval change. There were two instances in which data was unavailable because there was no secondary Gallup poll to use for a measurement due to the fact that the respective presidents in each of these cases were finishing their terms. The date marked “April 1986” should be pointed out because it has no specific date associated with it and therefore has the same adjusted point change as the previous date of conflict.

President in Power	Date of Conflict	Adjusted Presidential Approval Change	
Truman [D]	June 30, 1950	8	
Kennedy [D]	April 1962	-1.5	
Johnson [D]	August 8, 1964	4	
	April 28, 1965	5	
Nixon [R]	April 30, 1970	2.5	
Reagan [R]	August 19, 1981	8	
	August 21, 1982	2	
	September 29, 1982	0	
	October 25, 1983	4	
	March 26, 1986	-2	
	April 16, 1986	6	
	April 1986	6*	
	September 23, 1986	1.5	
	January 4, 1989	Data Unavailable	
	George H.W. Bush [R]	December 2, 1989	-2
		December 21, 1989	9
August 9, 1990		0.5	
January 16, 1991		16	
December 10, 1992		2.5	
Clinton [D]	January 19, 1993	Data Unavailable	
	January 21, 1993	9.5	
	April 13, 1993	1.5	
	June 10, 1993	-1	
	June 28, 1993	5	
	July 22, 1993	1.5	
	March 1, 1994	-2	
	April 12, 1994	0.5	
	August 22, 1994	-0.5	
	November 22, 1994	-3	
	September 1, 1995	-4.5	
	August 21, 1998	-1	
	December 16, 1998	9	

Appendix B

Adjusted Percentage-Point Approval Change



The following are the referenced instances in which the United States used military troops abroad for the purpose of conflict, as determined by the definition used by the author. For further details regarding definitions and criteria, see the “Data and Methodology” section of this paper. The original source for this list is from Richard L. Grimmert, author of Congressional Research Services report number RL30172, titled “Instances of Use of United States Forces Abroad, 1798-1999.” Richard Grimmert is a specialist in national defense in the Foreign Affairs, Defense, and Trade Division. For the sake of brevity, this list has been filtered to include only instances in which there was at least an adjusted 5% change.

a) June 30, 1950—Korean War.

The United States responded to the North Korean invasion of South Korea by going to South Korea’s assistance, pursuant to United Nations Security Council resolutions. U.S. forces deployed in Korea exceeded 300,000 during the last year of the conflict. Over 36,600 U.S. military were killed in action.

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d) April 28, 1965—Dominican Republic.

The United States intervened to protect lives and property during a Dominican revolt and sent more troops as fears grew that the revolutionary forces were coming increasingly under Communist control.

f) August 19, 1981—Libya.

On August 19, 1981, U.S. planes based on the carrier *U.S.S. Nimitz* shot down two Libyan jets over the Gulf of Sidra after one of the Libyan jets had fired a heat-seeking missile. The United States periodically held freedom of navigation exercises in the Gulf of Sidra, claimed by Libya as territorial waters but considered international waters by the United States.

k) April 16, 1986—Libya.

On April 16, 1986, President Reagan reported that U.S. air and naval forces had conducted bombing strikes on terrorist facilities and military installations in Libya.

p) *December 21, 1989—Panama.*

On December 21, 1989, President Bush reported that he had ordered U.S. military forces to Panama to protect the lives of American citizens and bring General Noriega to justice. By February 13, 1990, all the invasion forces had been withdrawn.

r) *January 16, 1991—Iraq.*

On January 18, 1991, President Bush reported that he had directed U.S. armed forces to commence combat operations on January 16 against Iraqi forces and military targets in Iraq and Kuwait, in conjunction with a coalition of allies and U.N. Security Council resolutions. On January 12, Congress had passed the Authorization for Use of Military Force against Iraq Resolution (P.L. 102-1). Combat operations were suspended on February 28, 1991.

u) *January 21, 1993—Iraq.*

On January 21, 1993, shortly after his inauguration, President Clinton said the United States would continue the Bush policy on Iraq, and U.S. aircraft fired at targets in Iraq after pilots sensed Iraqi radar or anti-aircraft fire directed at them.

w) *June 10, 1993—Somalia.*

On June 10, 1993, President Clinton reported that in response to attacks against U.N. forces in Somalia by a factional leader, the U.S. Quick Reaction Force in the area had participated in military action to quell the violence. On July 1, President Clinton reported further air and ground military operations on June 12 and June 17 aimed at neutralizing military capabilities that had impeded U.N. efforts to deliver humanitarian relief and promote national reconstruction, and additional instances occurred in the following months.

x) *June 28, 1993—Iraq.*

On June 28, 1993, President Clinton reported that on June 26 U.S. naval forces had launched missiles against the Iraqi Intelligence Service's headquarters in Baghdad in response to an unsuccessful attempt to assassinate former President Bush in Kuwait in April 1993.

af) *December 16, 1998—Iraq.*

During the period from December 16-23, 1998, the United States, together with the United Kingdom, conducted a bombing campaign, termed Operation Desert Fox, against Iraqi industrial facilities deemed capable of producing weapons of mass destruction, and against other Iraqi military and security targets.

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