

GOING TO WAR IN IRAQ: WHEN CITIZENS AND THE PRESS MATTER. By Stanley Feldman, Leonie Huddy, and George E. Marcus. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2014, 238 pp.

Robert J. Klotz
University of Southern Maine

Going to War in Iraq by Stanley Feldman, Leonie Huddy, and George Marcus examines media coverage and public opinion in the run-up to the Iraq War. Its findings are based primarily on a three-wave original survey by Stony Brook University's Center for Survey Research conducted in the aftermath of September 11, 2001, in the wake of the October 2002 Congressional approval of the Iraq War Resolution, and in Spring 2003 after the Iraq War began.

The book has three major goals. First, it offers a descriptive presentation of public opinion surrounding the Iraq War with a focus on partisan differences. Second, it analyzes the content of media coverage of the run-up to the Iraq War. Third, the book transitions from description to inference as it tries to explain variation in public support for the Iraq War.

The authors make good use of their Threat and National Security Survey (TNSS), funded in part by multiple NSF grants. Their survey instrument includes a variety of measures that did not regularly appear elsewhere. Rather than the typical support or oppose Iraq intervention question, they create an index of four separate questions on support for the Iraq War. They also have a measure of the extent to which the respondent perceived Saddam Hussein as a threat. Their survey has a sophisticated measure of knowledge that uses five questions related to Iraq (i.e. perfect score by answering Al Jazeera, Ba'ath Party, Baghdad, Iran, and Kurds). Methodologically, this section could have better acknowledged its margin of error, but deserves praise for providing exact question wording to facilitate reader evaluation.

The content analysis of media coverage uses Lexis-Nexis to compile a pool of stories about the Iraq War from September-October 2002. Stories were identified based on references to either a link between Iraq and al Qaeda (226 stories) or to the importation of aluminum tubes (72 stories). The unit of analysis was a sentence expressing either a pro or anti-war perspective. They find the strongest visibility for pro-war Administration sources, especially on television. The authors characterize anti-war perspectives as coming from diverse sources more likely to be quoted in local papers than elite papers.

The book then moves to its major purpose of trying to explain levels of public support for the Iraq War. As framed, the book is focused on change in public opinion. The authors state their fundamental research question: "Why did Democrats and independents increasingly oppose the war at the same time the administration intensified its pro-war campaign?" (p. 115). The authors argue that one must look for an answer somewhere other than Democratic elites whose messages were "confusingly mixed" (p. 17). Explaining the change that did occur is a very challenging task, but an oversimplification of the explanation is that during the two month period in question, ending with congressional approval of the war resolution in October 2002, the aggregate opinion of Republicans held steady around 80 percent support for war, independents may have declined

slightly, and Democrats dropped from perhaps 60 to 50 percent. There is a limited amount of variation to explain.

Given that the book has access to some panel data and its main puzzle relates to segments of declining support, I was hoping for more of an explanation of change in the main model. The dependent variable, however, is not change in opinion, but support for the war in the snapshot Fall 2002 survey.

Thus, the main model is a multiple regression predicting support or opposition to military intervention in Iraq. The model includes familiar demographic characteristics and variables related to party ID, Iraq knowledge, and news consumption. The authors articulate their major empirical finding: “At equal levels of political knowledge, Democrats and independents who regularly read a newspaper were substantially more opposed to war than those who regularly got their news from television” (p. 135).

In reaching this conclusion, the authors do not demonstrate a direct link between a specific media outlet and view on the war. To their credit, they acknowledge this. Based on their content analysis, they believe that local newspapers, especially those owned by Knight Ridder, were responsible for the reporting that provided a forum for anti-war perspectives to enter the public debate. Unfortunately, they are unable to test an alternative source of information. The Internet is dismissed in one sentence as “few people obtained their news from the Internet” (p. 115) even though Pew Research Center’s April 2002 Biennial Media Consumption Survey showed that 35 percent of Americans used the Internet for news at least weekly, which put the Internet clearly behind TV and newspapers but near or above other media.

In making the case for newspapers, the authors articulate the importance of resource-dependent investigative journalism to the overall information environment. Thus, ultimately, the authors rebut an elite influence model of public opinion with a more conditional model of the press facilitating independent public judgment. They write, “If democracy is to mean more than citizens as a passive audience subject to elite persuasion, then a free and fulsome press is required” (p. 187).

As readers assess the findings, they will benefit from the book’s methodological transparency and clear writing. The authors do an excellent job of writing about statistics, including the conversion of coefficients into probabilities. Graphs are used effectively to highlight differences throughout the book. The book strikes a good balance of keeping the text readable while providing methodological documentation in appendices and footnotes. The authors are less effective in explaining why a more parsimonious model might not be preferable to their 20 independent-variable model with many interactive terms and transformations of the same variable (e.g., party, newspaper use \times party squared, party \times Iraq knowledge squared, newspaper use \times party \times Iraq knowledge). Although the complexity makes the underlying theoretical model less intuitive, the authors skillfully keep the focus on their key concerns of Iraq knowledge, party ID, media use, and war support.

Overall, the book will give readers much to think about. The book is consistently national in scope and does not pay any particular attention to New England politics. The authors offer a creative, data-driven approach to a very challenging subject. I would recommend the book for those interested in public opinion on the Iraq War and media coverage in the run-up to the Iraq War.