PUBLIC OPINION AND FOREIGN POLICY:

A CONSTRUCTIVIST ANALYSIS OF BRITAIN’S INVASION OF IRAQ

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Introduction

Democracies are not supposed to fight unpopular wars. But Britain did just that, in Iraq. Democratic leaders are not supposed to court career disaster by leading their countrymen into unwanted conflicts. But when British Prime Minister Tony Blair launched military action against Saddam Hussein he both sacrificed long-term political capital (Hill 2007, 276, Dunne 2008, 340), and directly risked his job by submitting to a House of Commons vote. This paper analyzes the interaction between British public opinion and the Blair government’s decision to join the 2003 invasion of Iraq, aiming both to understand the particular case and consider what insights it might offer for Foreign Policy Analysis (FPA) more generally. It does three things. First, the paper asks how it was possible for policymakers to decide on war in the face of negative opinion polls, hostile press commentary and both the largest parliamentary rebellion and the largest street protests against any British government policy, ever. Second, the paper considers what this specific case reveals about the relationship between public opinion and foreign policy in general. In particular, it asks whether what happened was really as surprising from an FPA perspective as it may at first appear (Schuster and Maier 2006, Chan and Safran 2006). Finally, the paper makes the case for a constructivist approach to studying public opinion as a potential influence on foreign policy decision-making. There are clear ontological and epistemological tensions within the specialist public opinion literature that constructivist insights can help us resolve. Adopting a constructivist mindest also keeps this paper focused where an FPA study properly should be. FPA is less interested in what public opinion is. Public opinion specialists can handle that question. FPA is much more interested in what public opinion does.
The paper comprises three main sections. The first section makes the case for treating public opinion as a social fact, linking celebrated critiques of opinion polling (Blumer 1948, Bourdieu 1979) with constructivist approaches to understanding foreign policy (Doty 1993, Weldes 1996, Althaus 2004, Houghton 2007) and proposing a novel ‘holistic’ analytical approach. The second section presents quantitative data derived from a detailed content analysis of press and parliamentary debate during the fifteen months before the invasion, alongside opinion poll results. It identifies moments of particular intensity in the debate, and maps trends in support for and opposition to war. The third section takes a more qualitative approach, investigating in detail three major ‘spikes’ in issue salience and focusing on how particular patterns of public and policymaker behaviour made certain policy outcomes possible. A short conclusion ties the empirical findings together, highlighting their implications for understanding Britain’s war in Iraq and for how FPA conceptualizes public influence.

The case for a constructivist approach

For much of the twentieth century, most scholars interested in the relationship between public opinion and democratic foreign policy accepted what Ole Holsti termed the “Almond-Lippmann consensus” (Holsti 1992). Ordinary people, they concluded, were too uninterested in and ignorant about international affairs to exercise real influence over a decision-making process dominated by elites (Lippmann 1922, 241, Almond 1950, 53, Rosenau 1961, 36). Public opinion was both “permissive” and driven by irrational “mood” rather than calculation. It largely let leaders behave as they saw fit (Caspary 1970). Later studies revised this position somewhat. They revealed that though the mass public may know little about foreign policy (Converse 1964, 245, Holsti 1996, 215), it can still generate foreign policy opinions (Holsti 1992, 450, Sobel 2001, 21, Isernia, Juhasz and Rattinger 2002, Klarevas 2002, Jacobsen 2008, 351) and its opinions can still have concrete policy effects. Ordinary citizens asked to judge foreign policy consider whether it looks successful, the benefits it promises or the costs it seeks to avoid in order to reach an impressionistic view (Gelpi, Feaver and Reifler 2005, Eichenberg 2005, 163, Klarevas 2006, 193, Gelpi, Reifler and Feaver 2007, 158). Individuals’ personal ties to affected regions (Hill 2007, Ross 2013, Koinova 2013), cultural and religious beliefs (Lacina and Lee 2013), patriotism (Nincic and Ramos 2012) and elite leadership (Mueller 1973, Eshbaugh-Soha and Linebarger 2014) matter too. Collective public attitudes show greater consistency and coherence than do the

Many of these studies follow the ontological and epistemological assumptions that underpin the specialist public opinion literature. At an ontological level, most specialists conceptualize ‘public opinion’ as the opinion of the public, and assume it exists ‘out there’, awaiting observation. At an epistemological level, they employ survey methods, or ‘opinion polls’ to measure public attitudes. Thanks to considerable methodological progress made since George Gallup first demonstrated the power of polls prior to the 1936 US presidential election, survey methods do offer highly reliable insights into ordinary people’s attitudes. But their use still raises serious questions about validity. This is because public opinion specialists generally do not distinguish adequately between survey methods and their object of analysis. They insist that ‘public opinion’ is best defined as whatever opinion polls reveal, and that opinion polls observe public opinion (Converse 1987, 14). This claim is tautological (Splichal 1999, 90). If public opinion is whatever polls show, and polls measure public opinion, there is no way of knowing if public opinion exists independently of the survey process. Specialists argue that an public opinion must exist objectively. If it did not, “the activity of all those who claim to explore, measure and interpret it would be a little odd” (Osborne and Rose 1999). This claim does not follow logically. The fact that there is an opinion polling industry does not necessarily prove that public opinion exists, nor that polling is the best way to measure it. As Pierre Bourdieu’s celebrated argument that “public opinion does not exist” makes clear, these shortcomings raise significant conceptual difficulties.
Bourdieu highlighted three “implied postulates” that underpin polling methods despite not holding up empirically (Bourdieu 1979, 124). To begin with, Bourdieu complained that polls operate on the assumption that every individual in a society has an opinion on every major political issue of the day. This assumption looks unrealistic from an FPA perspective. It is simply not rational for most ordinary people to pay attention to foreign affairs most of the time (Page and Shapiro 1992, 14, Nincic 1992, 31). As Walter Lippmann put it, “so long as nobody has to fight and nobody has to pay” governments can largely do what they want (Lippmann 1922, 241). By assuming that every individual has foreign policy opinions, polling methods wind up focusing attention on the majority of citizens who actually do not have a position on the major foreign policy issues of the day (Cohen 1973, 4, Althaus 2004, 292). Polls do not ask whether attitudes exist, they only measure the distribution of attitudes that are assumed to exist (Peer 1992, 231). This is a hangover from the original invention of polls, as a mechanism for predicting voting behavior. Voting behavior exists independently of polling. Foreign policy attitudes may not (Splichal 1999, 242). Indeed, there is good evidence that individuals largely respond ‘on the fly’ to polls, answering questions they have never previously considered (Mueller 1973, Zaller 1992). They draw on their own existing beliefs to give an answer, beliefs that in the foreign policy arena in particular may not be internally consistent (Gaubatz 1995). And they respond to the specific structure of the question placed before them (Achen 1975). This helps explain why similar questions asked to the same people at different times can produce radically different results (Zaller and Feldman 1992, 579-580).

Secondly, Bourdieu complained that polls treat every individual citizen as if their opinions mattered equally. The public opinion specialist Herbert Blumer raised exactly this point in an early critique of polling. Adopting a sociological perspective in slight contrast to Bourdieu’s critical stance, Blumer argued that societies actually operated through social structures; political parties, interest groups, epistemic communities and the like (Blumer 1948, 544). Treating the public as an undifferentiated mass of individuals meant failing to appreciate the actual mechanisms through which individuals developed, refined and articulated their views, and how in turn those views both came to the attention of and influenced policymakers (Berinsky 1999, 1209). Within the FPA literature, this attitude is commonly reflected in the division of ‘the’ public into distinct classes, either hierarchically into ‘mass’, ‘attentive’ and ‘elite’ strata on the basis of knowledge, interest and influence (Almond 1950, 138, Rosenau 1961, 33-34, Hilsman 1987, 284, Risse-Kappen 1991, 482, Sobel 2001, 12) or functionally on the basis of behavior (Mueller 1973, 71, 116, 140,
Splichal 1999, 16). Distinguishing between types of public actors seems logical (Hurwitz and Peffley 1987). We know that different individuals have different levels of interest in and knowledge about foreign policy. It follows that they should hold different levels of influence, too. It makes less sense then to continue to use methods designed on the assumption that every possible respondent is equal. It is theoretically straightforward but empirically very difficult to identify distinct ‘elite’ and ‘attentive’ actors from the wider ‘mass’ (Key 1961, 536, Mueller 1973, 164). It is generally not possible to say which particular views within a survey sample belong to individuals in a position to exert real policy influence (Verba, Brody, et al. 1967, 331-332). Mass opinion polls, in other words, offer surprisingly little insight into what ‘the’ public actually looks and acts like.

Finally, Bourdieu pointed out that the act of conducting a survey imposed elite beliefs onto the mass. On one level, polls serve a democratic purpose by bringing the views of ordinary people into play and helping to ensure that “the wind of opinion” does not always blow “from the better parts of town” (Verba 1996, 6, Converse 1987, 14). But their ability to fulfil this function is bounded. Conducting opinion polls costs money. Polls only happen when actors with the capacity to pay for them choose to do so, making polling an elite activity by definition (Bourdieu 1979, 124). In practice, most polls are paid for by politicians interested in winning elections and journalists interested in writing headlines (Beniger 1992, 216, Herbst 1992, 223). Neither are primarily concerned with advancing the public interest. Both have interests of their own to promote. That raises two distinct issues. First, it raises the prospect that elites will manipulate the design of polls themselves to produce results that legitimize positions they intend to take regardless (Mueller 1973, 121). Second, it highlights the considerable power elites hold to set the agenda for public opinion. Given how little attention most ordinary people give to foreign policy, the very act of conducting a poll inevitably imposes elite views onto a mass that may not previously have held any views on an issue at all (Gamson and Modigliani 1989, Page and Shapiro 1992, 4-5, Cohen 1995, 53-54, Powlick and Katz 1998, 33). This is the case even for well-designed polls that successfully minimize question bias. For example, the Guardian newspaper published an editorial on 11 October 2001 arguing against extending the nascent ‘war on terrorism’ to Baghdad, and presenting an opinion poll it paid for that showed respondents largely agreed (The Guardian 2001). In the process it began what became the Iraq debate, long before British policymakers thought seriously about using force against Saddam Hussein, and before rival publications even considered seeking out public views. Indeed, the piece appeared just two days after US-led coalition forces began operations in Afghanistan. Ordinary people did
not push for a stand against war with Iraq in October 2001. The *Guardian* did that itself, recruiting ordinary people via a poll to support its stance. In a similar vein, the *Mirror*, which also opposed the invasion, found 71% of respondents rejected the use of force against Iraq by specifically asking about a war without any UN support, an option explicitly ruled out by the government at the time (Seymour and Blackman 2002). As Blair himself pointed out, no-one asked about military action in Afghanistan before 9/11, therefore there were no polls showing how unpopular such a proposal would have been (Blair 2002f). He made the reasonable point that decisions about national security could not always wait for the public to appreciate a threat, given the damage an attack might do. Poll results accordingly often tell us at least as much about elite views than they do about mass attitudes (Jervis 1976, Hill 1981, 59). These two issues are collectively problematic because a feedback loop exists between what public actors think and what polls tell us. Polls influence public opinion (Herbst 1993, 41). Elites commission and publish favorable opinion polls to legitimate their own established views, and to strengthen their positions with regard to other participants in elite debate (Brookes, Lewis and Wahl-Jorgensen 2004, 63, Solomon 2009, 269).

A constructivist mindset

Adopting a constructivist mindset allows us to compensate for the ontological and epistemological issues raised by opinion polling, by bringing in a wider set of sources and adopting a more discursive definition of ‘public opinion’. Public opinion clearly *does* exist, as even Bourdieu admitted. But it exists as a social rather than a material fact (Adler 1997, 327). It exists to the extent society, and in particular elite actors within a society, *think* it exists. The conduct, publication and use of polls forms just part of a broader series of discursive interactions that collectively constitute ‘public opinion’ (D. Campbell 1992, 4, Hansen 2006, 10, Althaus 2004, 297). The concept of public opinion, after all, predates polling. Before Gallup, however, it was “usually equated with riots, strikes, demonstrations, and boycotts” (Ginsberg 1986, 48). Why should it not be? As Charles Tilly notes,

“If we push back into the strange terrain of western Europe and North America before the middle of the nineteenth century, we soon discover another world. In that world, most people did not vote, petition, or take positions on national affairs in anything like the contemporary meanings of those terms. Yet they did act together on their interests, broadcasting their demands, complaints, and aspirations in no uncertain terms” (Tilly 1983, 462).
In more contemporary times this ‘active’ public opinion, what Lippmann called “Public Opinion with capital letters” (Lippmann 1922, 29), appears in the opinion pages of the press, in speeches by parliamentarians, in the statements and actions of pressure groups and in street protests like the ‘Stop the War’ marches that paralyzed London and other major cities in February 2003. It is constituted by and through public debate whether elites seek to measure it or not. It derives its ‘publicness’ from its “publicity” (Habermas 1962, 247), from the fact it exists *in* public rather than because it reflects the views of the public (Noelle-Neumann 1979, 152, Splichal 1999, 30). Christopher Hill warned against “the tendency to confuse a part with the whole...to see the will of the majority in a stormy parliamentary debate or a persistent pressure-group lobby” (Hill 1981, 57). But Hill missed the point. Noisy minorities may not necessarily represent the population as a whole. But they often are influential nonetheless (Key 1961, 17-18, 92, Risse-Kappen 1991, 510, Everts 2000, 187, Hill 2007). They cause problems for governments, and there is no effective way of knowing whether the silent majority even *has* an opinion on a topic (Verba, Brody, et al. 1967, 328). Polling, as we have seen, imposes elite views onto the mass rather than letting it speak for itself. No-one solicits active public opinion. It may not represent the mass. But it does at least represent itself, and policymakers listen.

There are thus good conceptual grounds for approaching the study of public opinion on constructivist terms, treating polls as one powerful element in a discursive process through which elites constitute ‘public opinion’ as a social fact, along with media commentary, legislative debate, pressure group activities of various sorts and street protests. From an FPA perspective, however, there are practical grounds for adopting such an approach, too. It reflects how policymakers actually behave. Public opinion, as we have seen, cannot influence foreign policy directly. It can influence policymakers to the degree they consider it important (Foyle 1997). As David Patrick Houghton pointed out, there is considerable scope for linking the cognitive school of FPA research to constructivist efforts to understand political phenomena (Houghton 2007).

Policymakers definitely do pay attention to opinion polls. The Blair government employed Philip Gould to provide regular reports on the public mood derived from a combination of quantitative and qualitative approaches (Campbell and Stott 2007, 610). As Zaller pointed out, however, “when a politician believes that he knows better than the public what means will lead to desired ends, he will ignore the polls and follow his own beliefs” (Zaller 2003, 313). Jonathan Powell served as Chief of Staff to Tony Blair throughout Blair’s
ten years in office. He wrote that “a wise leader should use quantitative polling as a tool but not as a substitute for his own political instincts” (Powell 2010, 136-137). Polls, after all, provide only a historical snapshot, not a guide to future trends (Key 1960, 56). Blair himself agreed. He embodied Elizabeth Noelle-Neumann’s argument that decision-makers construct their own individual images of what the “climate of opinion” might be, and act accordingly (Noelle-Neumann 1979, 147-148, 154, Blair 2010, 298). They weigh poll results in the context of exchanges they have with non-governmental actors, including legislators, journalists, academics, business leaders and pressure groups as well as ordinary citizens (Cohen 1973, 78, 107, 125, Herbst 1992, 228, Powlick 1995, 433-435, Entman 2004, 21). In other words, they construct an image of public opinion for themselves in light of exchanges with other actors. For foreign policy decision-makers, public opinion is an intersubjective construct. They are “practical-intuitive” (Vertzberger 1986) constructivists.

**A holistic approach**

The following empirical analysis looks to understand the relationship between British public opinion and the Blair government’s decision to go to war in Iraq in 2003. It does this in two stages. First, the next section presents a quantitative overview of the balance between pro and anti-war arguments expressed in published opinion polls, parliamentary debates and press commentary. Second, a further section presents qualitative accounts reconstructing three key moments in the pre-invasion debate, moments highlighted as potentially significant by the quantitative stage. Both stages rely on three main types of source material, though they adopt complementary epistemologies, one more positivist and the other more in keeping with the interpretive tradition of research into British foreign policy (Beech 2011, Bratberg 2011, Daddow and Gaskarth 2011, Bevir, Daddow and Hall 2013). Published opinion poll results come primarily from ICM surveys conducted on behalf of the *Guardian* newspaper. A handful of additional polls are referenced where different approaches to question wording skewed the results in interesting ways, but focusing on a single company for the most part allows us to exclude this sort of variation. ICM asked respondents “Would you approve or disapprove of Britain backing American military action against Iraq?” at regular intervals from the Summer of 2002 until the start of the war in early 2003. This allows us to track changes over time.

A Lexis Nexis search for the period from early 2002 to March 2003 using the keywords “Iraq” and “Blair” (to keep the focus on policy-oriented coverage) produced a
corpus of newspaper stories drawn from the leading UK newspapers of the day, the *Daily Mail*, *Daily Telegraph*, *Guardian*, *Independent*, *Mirror*, *Times*, *Sun* and their respective Sunday sister papers. Not only does this list cover the leading morning daily and Sunday publications in the UK’s crowded newspaper market, it also encompasses the full spectrum of mainstream political views. Two coders independently assessed the resulting corpus. A primary coder manually coded all 4,450 articles, distinguishing between 2,335 news stories and 2,115 commentary pieces, and identifying the particular stance each of the latter type took towards the prospect of military action. A secondary coder coded a randomly-selected sample of texts drawn from the same corpus using a codebook produced by the primary coder, in order to test the reliability of the coding frame. The coders agreed 93% of the time on the type of article an individual text represented, and 92% of the time on whether comment pieces expressed pro-war, anti-war or neutral views. A test of inter-coder reliability using Krippendorff’s alpha (Krippendorff 2004) showed scores of 0.849 for publication type and 0.893 for article stance. A content analysis frame is generally considered very highly reliable at agreement levels of 0.90 and above, highly reliable at levels of 0.80 and above and acceptable at levels of 0.66 and above (Bauer 2000, 144). These results suggest the coding framework used was highly, bordering on very highly, reliable.

Newspaper coverage should serve as a reasonable proxy for media debate more generally. At the time most UK news consumers still gained their information either through print or broadcast media. The mass switch to digital sources had begun but had not yet shifted the focus decisively online. It seems unlikely that any major arguments either for or against the war in Iraq surfaced on television without appearing also in print, especially given the greater space newspapers provide for commentators to express their views in detail. Alongside newspapers, a third set of source material derived from *Hansard*, the formal record of debates in the House of Commons, the UK’s primary legislative chamber. A search of the *Hansard* index identified thirty individual discussions touching upon the prospect of war in Iraq between early 2002 and March 2003, and a total of 333 individual speeches. A similar content analysis process to that discussed above generated data showing the distribution of MPs’ views.

Taken both individually and collectively these source materials offer an imperfect insight into the social construction of public opinion by British elite actors during the pre-invasion period. They also offer little direct insight into decision-makers’ behaviour. The final stage of the analysis reported below used participant accounts, in the form of contemporary diaries and internal government documents as well as later recollections, to
triangulate observations drawn from these different publicly-available sources. This helped validate observations as well as relating the ‘outsider’ view to what Blair government actors actually thought at in 2002 and early 2003.

**Quantitative analysis**

Figure 1 describes the distribution of source materials identified across the time period under analysis. It is immediately apparent that both press and parliamentary interest in Iraq waxed and waned considerably from one month to the next.

![Figure 1: Volume of press and parliamentary sources included in analysis, by month.](image)

Figure 1 reveals three major spikes in public attentiveness to the prospect of British involvement in Iraq. The first, in March and April 2002, surrounded Prime Minister Blair’s visit to President Bush’s ranch at Crawford in Texas. The second, in September 2002, both triggered and reflected the release of the government’s now-notorious ‘dossier’ on Iraq’s Weapons of Mass Destruction. The third and most substantial, in February and March 2003, accompanied the final drive to secure a diplomatic consensus, the mass street protests of 15 February and the climactic parliamentary debate of 18 March. The qualitative discussion below focuses on understanding these periods.

The results of the quantitative stage show that British public actors broadly opposed the invasion of Iraq. The data presented in Table 1 shows net poll, parliamentary and press approval of the prospect of war during the fifteen months immediately preceding the
commencement of hostilities. The poll figures reflect the average results generated by ICM and YouGov polls during the period. The press and parliamentary figures derive from assigning scores of 1 to pieces coded as pro-war, 0 to those coded as neutral and -1 to those coded as anti-war, and then calculating the average stance taken by all of the texts generated in a given month.

TABLE 1: Raw and salience-adjusted net public approval of the prospect of war with Iraq.

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<tr>
<td>Jan-02</td>
<td>-0.110</td>
<td>-0.103</td>
<td>-0.667</td>
<td>-0.090</td>
<td>-0.613</td>
<td>-0.033</td>
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<tr>
<td>Feb-02</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-0.333</td>
<td>-0.090</td>
<td>0.050</td>
<td>0.013</td>
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<td>Mar-02</td>
<td>-0.160</td>
<td>-0.150</td>
<td>-0.217</td>
<td>-0.225</td>
<td>-0.201</td>
<td>-0.199</td>
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<tr>
<td>Apr-02</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-0.097</td>
<td>-0.135</td>
<td>-0.303</td>
<td>-0.167</td>
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<tr>
<td>May-02</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-0.020</td>
<td>-0.004</td>
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<tr>
<td>Jun-02</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>0.000</td>
<td>0.000</td>
<td>-0.213</td>
<td>-0.017</td>
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<tr>
<td>Jul-02</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>0.000</td>
<td>0.000</td>
<td>0.029</td>
<td>0.017</td>
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<tr>
<td>Aug-02</td>
<td>-0.170</td>
<td>-0.159</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-0.262</td>
<td>-0.232</td>
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<td>Sep-02</td>
<td>-0.080</td>
<td>-0.225</td>
<td>-0.093</td>
<td>-0.225</td>
<td>-0.105</td>
<td>-0.256</td>
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<td>Oct-02</td>
<td>-0.053</td>
<td>-0.150</td>
<td>-0.500</td>
<td>-0.360</td>
<td>-0.079</td>
<td>-0.047</td>
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<tr>
<td>Nov-02</td>
<td>-0.090</td>
<td>-0.084</td>
<td>-0.103</td>
<td>-0.135</td>
<td>0.053</td>
<td>0.020</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dec-02</td>
<td>-0.080</td>
<td>-0.075</td>
<td>0.000</td>
<td>0.000</td>
<td>-0.215</td>
<td>-0.088</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jan-03</td>
<td>-0.170</td>
<td>-0.159</td>
<td>-0.205</td>
<td>-0.405</td>
<td>-0.167</td>
<td>-0.246</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feb-03</td>
<td>-0.230</td>
<td>-0.216</td>
<td>-0.075</td>
<td>-0.135</td>
<td>-0.149</td>
<td>-0.425</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mar-03</td>
<td>0.053</td>
<td>0.150</td>
<td>0.025</td>
<td>0.090</td>
<td>0.129</td>
<td>0.417</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average</td>
<td>-0.073</td>
<td>-0.078</td>
<td>-0.151</td>
<td>-0.114</td>
<td>-0.138</td>
<td>-0.083</td>
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The figures reported in Table 1 have undergone two adjustments in order to meet Blumer’s injunction that scholars of public opinion should be “realistic” (Blumer 1948, 543). The first adjustment recognized substantial differences between the popularity of different UK newspapers. The Independent, for example, sold an average of 224,077 copies of each issue during this period, while the Sun sold 3,529,968, sixteen times as many. Rather than treating such different publications as equal contributors to public debate, it seemed more realistic to weight their contributions according to circulation figures. The effect of this adjustment, interestingly, is to make the results look more pro-war than they otherwise might. The average pro-war comment piece achieved a circulation of 1,808,137 during this period compared to the 1,195,660 achieved by the average anti-war piece. This pattern reflects the

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1 Poll figure for October 2001.
2 To 20 March 2003 only
3 All data from the Audit Bureau of Circulations.
fact that popular papers declared pro-war views rather than suggesting that pro-war views proved more popular (though there is some evidence that the Mirror’s aggressively anti-war line cost it market share).

The second adjustment reflected the extent to which public interest in the Iraq issue varied over the course of this period, as revealed by Figure 1. It involved weighting the ‘raw’ monthly figures reported in Table 1 according to the proportion of the total texts covered by this study produced in each month, in order to produce the adjusted data contained in the same table. The ‘raw’ figures, in other words, report the balance between pro and anti-war views in a given month, while the ‘adj’ figures also reflect the intensity of those views. For example, the ‘raw’ column indicates that a very high proportion of the comment pieces published on Iraq in January 2002 expressed anti-war views. The figure for January 2003 is much closer to zero, suggesting lower levels of opposition. But while the January 2002 figure summarizes views expressed in just 11 comment pieces, the January 2003 figure represents 200 pieces. Although the average view expressed in January 2002 was more anti-war than that expressed in January 2003, there were in absolute terms far more anti-war comment pieces in circulation by then than there had been a year before. The adjusted figures reflect this variation in intensity. The raw figures do not.

![Figure 2: Salience-adjusted net public approval of the prospect of war with Iraq.](image)
Figure 2 presents the adjusted data in graphical form. This allows us to say that the spikes in interest in March 2002 and in September 2002 depicted in Figure 1 largely reflected surges in anti-war opinion, while that in February and (especially) March 2003 reflected a dramatic shift from anti-war to pro-war attitudes. However we look at this data, one overwhelming point appears clear. All three of the indicators of public attitudes discussed by this study showed predominant public opposition to the prospect of war with Iraq throughout the period leading up to the Blair government’s decision to go to war. The majority of poll respondents, press commentators and elected parliamentarians rejected the idea repeatedly and consistently during 2002 and early 2003, though there was a clear “rally effect” in March 2003 as the prospect of war became imminent (Mueller 1970, 1973, Baker and O'Neal 2001, Lai and Reiter 2005).

A simple covariance test shows that the figures for press and poll opinion are strongly related (R=0.86). This is to be expected given the role of the press in commissioning polls, and specifically the polls discussed here, which were mostly commissioned by the Guardian. The link between press and parliamentary opinion is less direct (R=0.51). But it is still substantial. The difference appears to be explained by the fact that shifts in press opinion generally preceded shifts in parliamentary attitudes. This could be a function of MPs relying on press commentary to help shape their views. There is some evidence of this happening, for example during September 2002, when press hysteria about an imminent attack on Iraq drove MPs to demand their own debate. It likely also reflects the different structural constraints the two groups faced. Journalists could write whenever they liked. MPs could speak in parliament only when parliament was sitting. This was particularly important during August and December 2002, when press opposition spiked while MPs were away from Westminster for the summer and Christmas parliamentary breaks. They were unable to respond to press complaints in August, for example, until they forced the government to recall parliament early for a special debate on Iraq in late September.

Qualitative analysis

The Blair government knew it faced considerable domestic opposition to the prospect of war in Iraq, yet it proceeded regardless. This section looks in more detail at the three moments of particularly intense public attentiveness to the Iraq question identified by the previous section, in March 2002, September 2002 and February-March 2003. It seeks to understand how ministers and other elite actors constructed public opposition to the prospect
of war in Iraq, and how their constructions made proceeding without express public support both thinkable and politically possible.

March 2002

Although the Guardian attempted to fire the starting gun in October 2001, the Iraq debate did not really begin until early 2002. Several journalists speculated, once the Taliban fell, about what ‘phase two’ of the ‘war on terrorism’ might involve. But it was not until the end of January 2002 that President Bush, making his first State of the Union address, offered an answer. Naming Iran, North Korea and Iraq, he warned of an “axis of evil” between rogue states “and their terrorist allies” (Bush 2002a). He planned, several British observers inferred, to turn his attention to Iraq. Robin Cook, the former Foreign Secretary who later resigned from the Cabinet over Iraq, felt the resulting opposition was unrepresentative, having been “generated by the newspapers themselves”. Afraid of missing out on a scoop, too many journalists proved too eager to interpret a rhetorical device as evidence of a shift in US strategy, and a meeting as a firm UK commitment to follow (Cook 2003, 113). As one commentator put it, although the speech had been primarily rhetorical, “rhetoric on occasion does change reality. And the axis of evil is for real” (Cornwell 2002).

Vice-President Cheney’s visit to London on 11 March and the announcement that Tony Blair would visit President Bush at the latter’s ranch in Crawford, Texas at the start of April further fuelled press speculation. Anticipating the arrival in London of a known administration ‘hawk’, several journalists assumed Cheney’s primary purpose was to plot military action. Anti-war commentators launched a pre-emptive strike, warning “it would be lunacy to attack Iraq at the moment, madness for Britain to back an American assault, and complete insanity to make any large-scale commitment of our troops” (Mirror 2002). Their pro-war counterparts retaliated, insisting that Cheney was in London to “listen and not lecture” (The Times 2002a). This was, they claimed, a genuine opportunity for Anglo-American co-operation. A joint press conference between Vice President and Prime Minister passed off well. Both insisted that the proliferation of WMD posed a potential threat, while maintaining that no decisions had been made over what to do about Iraq’s alleged weapons development. Cheney, however, caused some concern by echoing the ‘Axis of Evil’ speech, warning of a “potential marriage” between al-Qaeda and Iraq (Blair and Cheney 2002). Cheney’s words comforted pro-war commentators, themselves convinced that “rogue
groups” were working closely with “rogue states” (The Times 2002b). Critics fulminated that there was no evidence of any such link (Freedland 2002).

Poll figures released in March 2002 showed little change in respondents’ attitudes from those published five months earlier. ICM identified a one percentage point drop in support for further military action, and a four point increase in opposition. Neither was statistically significant. Nothing had changed, in other words. Yet policymakers thought it had. Blair wrote to Jonathan Powell on 17 March, noting his increasing concern that “public opinion is fragile” (Blair 2002a). Cabinet ministers agreed. Foreign Secretary Jack Straw observed that the Labour Party would not necessarily back Blair over a further Middle Eastern war (Straw 2002). Straw could point to clear grounds for concern. Over one hundred Labour MPs signed an Early Day Motion, a non-binding but public statement of parliamentary opinion, condemning the presumed US intention to invade Iraq (House of Commons 2002). While polls showed a definite lack of public enthusiasm for war in Iraq, the real problem lay with parliamentary and journalistic elites. The latter were, after all, the ones commissioning and reporting the polls in the first place.

What is particularly interesting about this first spike in opposition, however, is the way the Blair government responded. It did not in any way change its substantive stance. Blair defined the problem as one of “persuasion” rather than policy (Blair 2002a). He used the Crawford visit to emphasize the link between terrorism, rogue states and WMD. He provided journalists with ample copy to fill their column inches, and offered MPs a House of Commons debate immediately after his return. He and his ministers granted a greater number of media interviews in the following months. Blair personally sat for a three-part special Newsnight feature in mid-May, including an entire section dedicated to Iraq. He held the first of what became a regular series of monthly prime ministerial press conferences on 20 June. On 16 July he appeared before the House of Commons Liaison Committee, comprised of Select Committee chairs, to answer questions across a range of subjects. He was the first Prime Minister to do so in more than fifty years. The strategy worked. Public opposition declined in April and dropped to negligible levels in May. The government’s efforts successfully satiated the appetites of both the media and parliamentarians, while the lack of any concrete policy developments made Iraq look less important. This first wave of public opposition largely stemmed from frustration about the disconnect between what the Bush administration was saying and the Blair government’s initial insistence that “no decisions have been taken” on Iraq (Blair and Cheney 2002, Blair 2002b). Once ministers began to talk more openly about the prospect of further military action, the sense among elites that they
were being shut out of the process receded, and so their levels of frustration fell. A timely communication response proved adequate, at least at first.

*August – September 2002*

Westminster traditionally empties in August, and it did so in 2002. Parliament was in the midst of its long summer recess. Even the Prime Minister went on holiday. But politics continued as usual in Washington, and in the pages of the British press. That conjunction proved problematic for the Blair government. Once again feeling starved of information as ministers closed up shop in late July, British journalists looked to the increasingly vociferous US public debate over Iraq, aided by a handful of disgruntled government MPs looking to score points at ministers’ expense. The result was a second wave of speculation, this time centred around the belief that an attack would take place before parliament returned. This belief was premature. But the government did conceal the true extent of its war planning. On 23 July 2002 Blair decided that meetings with the US over the summer should proceed “on the assumption that the UK would take part” in any military action (Rycroft 2002a). Important decisions obviously had been made. But Blair never disclosed this. Two days after this meeting he told journalists “we are not at the point of decision yet” (Blair 2002c). The veteran anti-war MP Tam Dalyell tried to get parliament recalled to debate the prospect of war almost immediately after the start of the recess. He failed. But during August the media focused relentlessly and mostly critically on the Iraq question, as the quantitative data makes clear. This stirred up MPs. In early September the Labour MP Graham Allen gained sufficient support from colleagues to propose an ‘unofficial’ House of Commons sitting. He argued that the apparent imminence of an attack demanded an immediate parliamentary response, and his colleagues responded. Allen secured a former House of Commons speaker to chair his debate, the BBC agreed to broadcast it live and several major newspapers declared their support (Guardian 2002, Independent 2002, Daily Mail 2002). Faced with the prospect of losing control over parliament, let alone the Iraq debate, the government caved. Blair promised to release a ‘dossier’ of information on Iraq’s WMD, and to recall MPs to debate it during September. It was an embarrassing reversal.

Again the government responded to pressure from elites as if it reflected wider popular views. Again, poll figures showed no significant changes in mass attitudes from earlier surveys. Blair’s chief communications adviser Alastair Campbell wrote in his diary on 1 September that “it was clear that public opinion had moved against us during August”
(Campbell and Stott 2007, 632-633). Blair told his monthly press conference “it is clear that the debate has moved on” from his previous public statements in July (Blair 2002e). It was not the mass public, represented by poll results, that had moved, however. It was the press, and parliamentary opinion itself influenced by press commentary. On this occasion the government’s response involved both communicative and more substantive elements. On the substantive side, ministers urged the Bush administration to confront Iraq through the United Nations. President Bush did exactly that with an address to the General Assembly on 12 September. On the communicative side, Blair accelerated the release of the government’s WMD ‘dossier’. This was apparently a snap decision during his 3 September press conference. He requested a briefing on Iraq ahead of the session, but did not mention the dossier (Blair 2002d). His speaking notes suggested only that the dossier would emerge “when the time is right” (Rycroft 2002b). Both John Scarlett, then Chairman of the Joint Intelligence Committee, and Alastair Campbell, who between them would drive the production of the dossier, indicated at the Chilcot Inquiry that the process began in earnest after the Prime Minister’s statements on 3 September (Scarlett 2009, 56, A. Campbell 2010a, 66). This point is significant. It underlines the reactive nature of the dossier, and the role media speculation played in forcing the government to publish it ahead of schedule. This proved important in the longer term, given the dossier’s various weaknesses.

Whereas the government’s communications efforts largely succeeded in dampening down speculation and opposition amongst elite public commentators in early 2002, by September attitudes were hardening. Parliament’s disquiet lasted beyond the special debate on 24 September and carried on well into October; indeed, the greater availability of parliamentary time after the end of the regular recess ensured MPs grew more rather than less vocal even as press interest again began to wane.

*February – March 2003*

By early 2003 most observers recognized that the US was going to war in Iraq, probably with Britain in tow. At first, this caused resentment, and public opposition spiked for a third time. On 15 February the largest public protests in British history shook London and several other major cities. Around one million people marched against the prospective invasion in the capital alone. Media coverage emphasized that most of those marching were not the “usual suspects” who protested against any use of force abroad (Daily Mail 2003, Cook 2003, 298). They were “middle-class, middle-aged, politely-mannered and jolly angry”
(Ellam 2003). Journalists and MPs both participated in and responded to the protests, while within Downing Street Alastair Campbell noted most officials had family members who joined the march (A. Campbell 2010b, 54). Blair, in Campbell’s words, “knew he was in a tight spot” (Campbell and Stott 2007, 667). Again the government responded with a communicative salvo. Blair was speaking at the Labour Party’s spring conference in Glasgow on the day of the march (this was no accident, the marchers targeted his speech). Apparently undeterred, he declared that “the moral case against war has a moral answer” (Blair 2003b). Having believed since early in the Iraq debate that removing Saddam Hussein from power was simply the right thing to do (cf. Blair 2002a), he began for the first time to make the point in public. Shortly afterwards he sought to harness the xenophobia of the right-wing tabloid press, by far the largest component of the UK’s fractious media market, by blaming France for the failure of the UN inspection process.

Both strategies worked to some extent. Blaming France for the UN failure rallied right-wing press commentators, attracting widespread favourable coverage (Evans 2003, Rees-Mogg 2003, The Sun 2003, The Times 2003). It influenced a number of anti-war MPs (Grice 2003). And it impacted poll results. An ICM poll published on 16 March jointly by the pro-war News of the World and Sunday Times (both part of the News International stable) showed 51% of respondents thought President Chirac “has poisoned the diplomatic process” while 61% said “France has put its own interests above the rest of the world by opposing war” (News of the World 2003, Smith and Speed 2003). Pro-war elites finally possessed poll results worth talking about. What was particularly interesting about this episode was the shaky foundations for the claim. President Chirac did cause consternation when he announced on 9 March that “whatever the circumstances, France will vote no” (Chirac 2003). Jack Straw told the Chilcot Inquiry that this intervention made securing agreement at the Security Council impossible. Wavering states saw no benefit from speaking out once France promised to veto regardless (Straw 2010, 19). But Jeremy Greenstock, then Britain’s Ambassador to the UN, admitted he never secured the nine votes required to pass a resolution, veto or not (Greenstock 2009, 72). Not for nothing did former Cabinet Minister Clare Short label the effort to blame France “one of the big deceits” of the entire pre-war period (Short 2010, 104). The point, however, is that the tactic worked. Elite participants in the public debate constructed an image of a broader public satisfied with the government’s characterization of its UN failure as a product of French perfidy.

To a significant extent, the moral arguments and the anti-French rhetoric salved consciences rather than changing minds. Blair’s ‘moral turn’ helped those on the political left
resolve the stark choice they faced between backing Blair and saving Saddam. Philip Gould’s focus groups, meanwhile, showed “an instinctive understanding that no Prime Minister would do anything as difficult or unpopular as this for the hell of it” (Campbell and Stott 2007, 669). Media commentators acknowledged that Blair was not simply following President Bush’s orders, undermining the argument that the Prime Minister was acting like a ‘poodle’ (Rawnsley 2003, Orr 2003). Blair had long believed that public opinion would swing behind the prospect of war once people faced the question of whether or not to do something about Saddam Hussein head on (cf. Rycroft 2002a). It appeared he might be right. The same sense of inevitability that triggered opposition in February undermined it in March, as resentment gave way to resignation. Journalists concluded that “the time has passed when war could be averted, so any vote against war cannot be effective or persuasive” (Daily Telegraph 2003). Several MPs acknowledged that “we cannot prevent war. The choice is either to go in alongside the Americans to topple Saddam Hussein, or to let the Americans go in on their own” (Hansard 2003, cc. 867, 869). Although far from solid, as indeed it ultimately proved, this fatalistic attitude helps explain the ‘rally effect’ apparent in the data for March 2003.

Conclusions

British public opinion largely opposed the 2003 invasion of Iraq. Britain’s government, led by Prime Minister Tony Blair, recognized this fact. But Blair, in particular, held his ground. David Patrick Houghton has rightly argued that foreign policy analysts should investigate the relationship between constructed social facts and individual leaders’ cognitive beliefs (Houghton 2007). From this perspective, the broad consensus amongst British media and political elites between early 2002 and March 2003 that ‘public opinion’ opposed the idea of invading Iraq collided with Blair’s underlying faith in his own persuasive capabilities. In Foyle’s terms, Blair believed public support was desirable, but not necessary (Foyle 1997). He further believed strongly in his own power to win opponents over. Though at one stage he said he ‘did not claim to have a monopoly of wisdom in these issues’ (Blair 2003c), he acted quite differently. He told audiences ‘I do what I think is the right thing, whether on foreign or domestic policy’ (Blair 2002c), and ‘polls or no polls, my job in a situation like this is sometimes to say the things that people don’t want to hear’ (Blair 2003a). Jonathan Powell labeled this self-belief Blair’s “Messiah complex” (Powell 2010, 56, Blair 2010, 117). He acknowledged it helped at times, especially during complex negotiations. It both insulated him from opposition and generated admiration. President Bush highlighted
both benefits when he told reporters in Crawford that “the thing I admire about this Prime Minister is that he doesn’t need a poll or a focus group to convince him of the difference between right and wrong” (Bush 2002b). It also bordered on hubris. One anonymous Downing Street aide later remarked that Blair “would think that his own judgement was at least as good as that of the Archbishop of Canterbury, of the Cardinal of Westminster, and of the Pope combined” (Seldon, Snowdon and Collings 2007, 153-154). Archbishop Rowan Williams, Cardinal Cormac Murphy-O’Connor and Pope John Paul II all spoke out against the invasion of Iraq. Blair remained unmoved.

Blair’s self-belief broke the causal link between public opinion as a social fact and British policy towards Iraq. Though he largely accepted the elite consensus that most ordinary people thought the war the wrong thing to do, he justified rejecting it by recalling earlier occasions on which his judgement about foreign affairs apparently proved superior to his critics’ (Daddow 2009), and by insisting the public mood would ultimately shift towards his point of view. Faced with spikes in opposition in March 2002, August 2002 and February 2003, Blair responded with additional arguments rather than substantive policy changes. On the first two occasions, the mere fact the government said something helped neutralize a significant part of the opposition, which often derived from journalists’ (apparently justifiable) fear that they were being kept out of the decision-making loop. The ‘dossier’ of September 2002, for example, changed few minds. But it answered critics’ demands for some sort of concession and gave journalists something to report. Satisfied, they moved on to other topics for a while, even as MPs grumbled for a few weeks more. In February and March 2003, meanwhile, successful government framing efforts around the moral case for action and French conduct at the UN combined with opposition fatigue to stymie critics’ efforts to ‘stop the war’.

Adopting a constructivist definition of ‘public opinion’ and attempting to reconstruct it through a holistic combination of press, parliamentary and poll data apparently works. Though the polls largely held constant throughout the pre-invasion period, at least until its final week, press and parliamentary attention and opposition to the prospect of war waxed and waned. Journalists responded to developments in the United States and to political vacuums created by government communication failures (Strong 2016). Media commentary encouraged a response from MPs, and together they prompted government efforts that met the procedural demand for information if not substantive calls for a change in policy course. Bringing these additional sources into consideration helps us understand both when and how public attitudes shifted, as well as the nature of the government response. From an FPA
perspective the fact policymakers responded to press and parliamentary opinion ‘as if’ it represented the public as a whole underlines the practical benefits of the holistic approach. In more general theoretical terms, triangulating among a range of different data sources helps compensate for the epistemological difficulties raised by opinion polls, as well as reflecting the foreign policy analyst’s greater interest in the political question of what public opinion *does* than in the methodological question of what it *says*. It offers a more empirically valid and nuanced alternative strategy for studying public opinion as an influence over foreign policy when compared to approaches based solely on opinion polls.
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