

## RESEARCH NOTES

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### *Who Rallies? The Anatomy of a Rally Event*

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On June 26, 1993, President Clinton ordered a missile attack on Iraq's intelligence headquarters in Baghdad. The president's approval level surged—a textbook example of a “rally.” But who rallied? Previous studies of rallies have relied on aggregate data, preventing analysts from determining who switched from nonapproval to approval of the president in response to a rally event. The CBS News/*New York Times* Poll interviewed a national sample of adults right before the attack and reinterviewed 622 of the same respondents immediately following. Employing this panel study, we find that those who rallied were those most disposed to support the president in the first place. Exposure to the news media also plays a role in reinforcing the impact of positive views of the president's handling of foreign policy. Thus, more than patriotic fervor is involved in rallies. Rather than being a distinctive phenomenon, a rally event seems to be simply an additional force that pushes potential supporters over the threshold of approval.

On June 26, 1993, President Bill Clinton ordered the U.S. navy to launch 23 Tomahawk cruise missiles at Iraq's intelligence headquarters in downtown Baghdad. The U.S. attack was in response to Iraq's role in a conspiracy to assassinate former President George Bush during a visit to Kuwait. Two hours later the president went on national television and condemned Saddam Hussein as ruling “by atrocity” and declared that the Iraqi conspiracy against President Bush “was an attack against our country and against all Americans.”

On June 21 to 24, the CBS News/*New York Times* Poll interviewed a random sample of 1,363 adults around the U.S., excluding Alaska and Hawaii. On June 27, 622 of the same respondents were re-interviewed to gauge their reactions to the attack on Iraq. (A comparison of the composition of the two samples appears in appendix A.)

Among those interviewed both before and immediately following the missile attack, general approval of the way President Clinton was handling his job as

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president surged from 35% to 47%. Disapproval fell from 50% before the attack to 45% following it. In all, 24% of nonapprovers on June 21–24 rallied to approval of Clinton on June 27. Only 11% of the approvers on June 21–24 shifted to disapproval following the attack.

The missile attack on Iraq is a textbook example of what John Mueller termed a “rally event.” He defined such an event as an incident that relates to international relations, directly involves the U.S. and particularly the president, and is specific, dramatic, and sharply focused. Such events confront the nation as a whole, are salient to the public, and gain public attention and interest (1973, 208–13).<sup>1</sup> The missile attack meets all these conditions, and it precipitated a surge in public approval of the president. Clearly, a rally occurred.

But who rallied? Although rallies have been the subject of analysis by scholars for decades (see, for example, Kernell 1978; Lee 1977; MacKuen 1983; Ostrom and Simon 1985; Sigelman and Conover 1981), most such studies rely on aggregate data, which restricts authors to examining national totals. They cannot determine who switches from nonapproval of the president to approval in response to a rally event. Does every group rally to the same degree? If not, *why* do some rally more than others?

In this paper we investigate the anatomy of the rally following President Clinton’s order to attack Iraq’s intelligence headquarters. We want to determine who is rallying and then explain why some are more likely than others to rally.

#### FRAMEWORK OF INVESTIGATION

The theoretical basis for attributing significance to rally events is that the public will increase its support of the president in times of crisis or during major international events, at least in the short run, because he is the symbol of the country and the primary focus of attention at such times. Moreover, people do not want to hurt the country’s chances of success by opposing the president, and the president has an opportunity to look masterful and evoke patriotic reactions among the people.

This theory does not differentiate among groups with different characteristics or attitudes toward the president and public policy. To answer the question of who rallies and why they do so, we examine respondents’ general predispositions toward the president, their attitudes in specific policy arenas, and their exposure to media coverage of the news in a multivariate analysis.

To understand why some people rallied and others did not, we must know who rallied. Our sample of 622 respondents interviewed both before and after the U.S. missile attack on Baghdad allows us to identify the specific *individuals*

<sup>1</sup>Mueller (1973, 208–13) also included the inaugural period of a president’s term as a rally event. The missile attack also meets the definitions of rally events of Brody (1991, ch. 3) and Kernell (1978, 513). Kernell added the stipulation that the situation must make the front page for at least five consecutive days.

who rallied. If we had to rely on two independent cross-sectional polls, we would not be able to identify the individuals who changed their opinions of the president. We would be limited to aggregate analysis, greatly restricting our opportunity to explore theoretically important individual-level explanations for opinion change.

Obviously, those who approved of the president before a rally event cannot "rally." Only those who were nonapprovers may do so. Although some nonapprovers may become more positive toward the president but remain in the nonapprover category, what counts for political scientists who study rallies, journalists who report on them, and presidents who benefit from them is the people who move from nonapproval to approval. Thus, our analysis focuses primarily on those who were originally nonapprovers and seeks to explain why some of them rallied. In addition, we take into account the smaller number of respondents who moved from approval to nonapproval following the rally event.

#### GENERAL PREDISPOSITIONS TOWARD THE PRESIDENT

The public's predispositions toward the president provide the foundations of presidential approval and mediate the impact of more volatile influences (Edwards 1990). Since predispositions have such a strong influence on evaluating the president, we would expect that respondents' evaluations of the president *prior* to the rally event would influence the likelihood of their rallying.

##### *Leadership*

One means of determining the impact of general predispositions toward the president on rallying is to examine the responses to questions focusing on broad aspects of the public's views of President Clinton. The Leadership Index includes responses to three questions: evaluations of the president's qualities of leadership, whether he is up to the job of the presidency, and the degree of trust in his ability to deal with a wide range of problems. Respondents who rated the president poorly on each question received a  $-3$ , while those who rated him favorably on each question were coded as  $+3$ . The Cronbach's Alpha for the Leadership Index is .77.<sup>2</sup>

##### *Party Identification*

Evaluations of the president's performance reflect the underlying partisan loyalties of the public (Callaghan and Virtanen 1993; Edwards 1990, 117–23). Party not only directly affects opinions of the president but also mediates the impact

<sup>2</sup> All the indexes employed in this research that contain three or more variables have been evaluated by Cronbach's Alpha. Alpha is a measure of the internal consistency of a set of items and ranges from zero (no internal consistency) to unity (perfect internal consistency). An alpha of .65 or higher indicates an index has an acceptable level of internal consistency (see Bohrnstedt and Knoke 1988).

of other influences. Members of the president's party are predisposed to approve of his performance and members of the opposition party are predisposed to be less approving. Independents, those without explicit partisan attachments, fall between the Democrats and Republicans in their levels of approval of the president.

The average difference in support between Democrats and Republicans over the past four decades has been nearly 40 percentage points, a very substantial figure. Independents fall in between, averaging a difference of about 20 percentage points from both Democrats and Republicans. Thus, it is reasonable to hypothesize that, in the case of President Clinton, Democrats would be more likely to rally than Republicans, with Independents falling in between.

### *Gender*

Gender does not represent a general predisposition toward a president, but there is substantial evidence of attitudes associated with gender that provide a general predisposition toward the use of force. The results of most studies comparing opinion differences of men and women would lead us to expect women to be considerably less responsive than men to a missile attack. In comparison with men, women have a greater concern about international conflict (Conover 1988; Conover and Sapiro 1993; Fite, Genesi, and Wilcox 1990; Gilens 1988; "Women and the Use of Force" 1994). As Page and Shapiro (1992, 295) put it in their survey of fifty years of public opinion, "in practically all realms of foreign and domestic policy, women are less belligerent than men. They are . . . more likely to oppose the use of force" (see also Mueller 1973, 146-147; 1994, 42-43).

## POLICY ATTITUDES

Policy attitudes are more specific than the general predispositions we have been discussing, but they may also create a propensity toward rallying. In this section we examine two broad and one more focused set of policy attitudes *prior* to the rally event and hypothesize on their relation to the probability of rallying.

Four questions compose the Economic Policy Support Index. These include evaluations of President Clinton's handling of the economy, the fairness of his economic plan, its probable effects, and the direction of the economy. The potential range of scores for respondents is -4 to +4. The Cronbach's Alpha for the Economic Policy Support Index is .76.

Five questions compose the Foreign Policy Support Index. These questions include evaluations of Clinton's handling of foreign policy in general, particularly that of Yugoslavia and Somalia, and the levels of confidence and trust in his handling of international crises. The potential range of scores for respondents is -5 to +5, depending on their level of approval of the president in the policy area. The Cronbach's Alpha for the Foreign Policy Support Index is .72.

Moving to a yet more specific policy, we examine the relationship between predispositions regarding the use of force and rallying. We might expect support for the use of force to be an especially important factor in explaining the proclivity toward rallying, because the typical rally event involves the use of force. Thus, it seems reasonable to predict that those most supportive of the use of force in the abstract would be most responsive to its use in a particular situation.

The Use of Force Index is composed of responses to two questions eliciting support for retaliating if UN troops were fired upon in Bosnia and for providing military assistance in world trouble spots. Respondents were scored from  $-2$  to  $+2$ , depending on their level of support for the use of force. The Pearson's  $r$  for the two variables is .30.

For each of the indexes representing policy attitudes, we hypothesize that those whose attitudes are more positive toward the president, or, in the case of the use of force, more positive toward the actions the president has taken, will be more likely to rally.

#### *Opinion Leadership and Media Priming*

People do not react only according to preexisting attitudes. They may also be affected by their exposure to information regarding a potential rally situation. Brody (1991), for example, has argued that in potential rally events, the public is especially dependent on information from the press and the public figures the press interviews. If the balance of elite commentary on the potential rally event is positive, then the public is more likely to rally behind the president. If it is negative, then there is less likelihood of a surge in support.

Brody's argument focuses on the overall likelihood of a rally occurring, but his theorizing applies equally well at the individual level. In the case of the missile attack on Iraq, media commentary was overwhelmingly positive. Thus, if Brody is correct, those paying the closest attention to the media should be the most likely to rally.

#### *Media Priming*

The theory of media priming presents a somewhat different view of the impact of the media. It is premised on the fact that most of the time the cognitive burdens are too great for people to reach judgments or decisions based on comprehensive, integrated information. Thus, the public takes short cuts or cues, relying heavily on the mass media.

The public's familiarity with political matters is closely related to the amount and duration of attention these affairs receive in the mass media (Page and Shapiro 1992, 12–13). The media also have a strong influence on the issues the public views as important (Cook, Tyler, and Goetz 1983; Graber 1978; Iyengar and Kinder, 1987; Iyengar, Peters, and Kinder 1982; MacKuen and Coombs 1981, ch. 3–4; Portess and McCombs 1991; Winter and Eyal 1981).

In addition, media coverage of issues increases the importance of these issues in the public's evaluation of political figures. According to Iyengar (1991, 10), "The themes and issues that are repeated in television news coverage become the priorities of viewers. Issues and events highlighted by television news become especially influential as criteria for evaluating public officials."

Moreover, there is growing evidence that network news helps to provide a frame of reference for issues, and this affects evaluations of presidents. When the news began covering the Iran-Contra affair, Ronald Reagan's public approval took an immediate and severe dip as the public applied new criteria of evaluation (Iyengar 1991, ch. 8; Krosnick and Kinder 1990). Krosnick and Brannon (1993) found that the role of assessments of George Bush's economic performance in overall evaluations of him decreased substantially after the Gulf War began, and they concluded that media-priming effects caused a shift of attention to his performance on war-related criteria. (See also Iyengar and Simon 1994.)

Experiments found that President Carter's overall reputation and, to a lesser extent, views of his apparent competency, were affected by network news. The standards people used in evaluating the president, what they felt was important in his job performance, seemed to be influenced by the news they watched on television (Iyengar, Peters, and Kinder 1982; see also Bartels 1993).

Thus, there is reason to believe that media coverage may affect the propensity to rally. The theory of media priming predicts that an occurrence such as the attack on Baghdad makes opinion relevant to the event more salient in evaluations of the president. More specifically, it follows that the interaction between exposure to the news and evaluations of the president's handling of foreign policy should have a significant effect on rallying. Similarly, we would expect that the interaction between exposure to the news and support for the use of force should have a significant effect on the propensity to rally.

### *The Media and Rallying*

We lack a question regarding how closely our respondents followed the news regarding the missile attack on Iraq, but we are fortunate to have five questions about how closely each respondent followed the news about five other international arenas or issues: Japan, Russia, Somalia, Yugoslavia, and the four islands captured by the Soviet Union from Japan in World War II. Respondents received a 0, 1, 2, or 3 on each question, depending on how closely they said they followed the news regarding each country or issue. The Cronbach's Alpha for the Attention to the News Index is .73.

### MULTIVARIATE ANALYSIS

Because our dependent variable, rallying, is a nominal variable, we employ a logit analysis rather than OLS regression analysis in our multivariate test regarding the causes of rallying. The dependent variable is presidential approval

or nonapproval on June 27, after the attack on Baghdad, and is coded "1" for approval and "0" for nonapproval. Because we are interested in the change (in either direction) in presidential approval resulting from the rally event, we control for each respondent's previous evaluation of the president. Thus, our model also includes a dummy variable for previous presidential approval ( $Approval_{i1}$ ).<sup>3</sup>

The independent variables are the Leadership Index, Party Identification (Democrats and Independents are dummy variables with Republicans reflected in the constant term), Gender (coded 1 for female, 0 for male), the Economic and Foreign Policy Support Indexes, the Use of Force Index, and the Attention to the News Index. We also include interaction terms for attention to the news and foreign policy support and attention to the news and use of force. A summary of the indexes and interaction terms is presented in Appendix B.

The inclusion of the two interaction terms in the model introduces the problem of multicollinearity. The component parts are highly correlated with their corresponding interaction terms, which affect the standard errors of the estimates. To correct for this problem, we rescaled the component variables through a procedure called *centering* (see Aiken and West 1991). By subtracting the variable's mean from each observation, the Foreign Policy Support, Use of Force, and Attention to the News indexes were transformed and are no longer highly correlated with their interaction terms.

Our findings are presented in Table 1. The parameter estimates represent the predicted marginal effect on the log-odds ratio that results from a change in one unit of an independent variable while the other independent variables are held at their means or modal categories.

Party identification, evaluations of presidential leadership, and support for the president's economic and foreign policies are statistically significant predictors of the likelihood a respondent would rally. Contrary to our expectations, the impact of gender and support for the use of force do not pass the tests of statistical significance.

Exposure to the news itself also does not affect the likelihood of rallying. There is evidence of the priming effects of the media, however. The interaction of attention to the news and evaluations of the president's handling of foreign policy has a statistically significant influence on rallying. The interaction between attention to the news and general support for the use of force does not have such an effect, reflecting the lack of independent impact of either component of the interaction term on rallying.

An examination of the parameter estimates in Table 1 shows the statistical significance of particular explanatory variables, but to understand the strength of

<sup>3</sup>The inclusion of  $APPROVAL_{i1}$  as an independent variable introduces the potential for bias and inconsistency in the estimators because the errors could become autocorrelated. We tested for bias and inconsistency and found no significant effects. We are confident that our estimators are robust.

TABLE 1  
LOGIT MODEL OF THE CLINTON RALLY

Variable	Parameter Estimates	Std. Error	Sig. Level
Constant	-1.015	.266	.000
Leadership	.378	.080	.000
Democrat	.632	.301	.036
Independent	.609	.304	.045
Gender	.006	.253	.981
Economic Policy	.164	.067	.014
Foreign Policy	.185	.055	.001
Use of Force	-.067	.087	.441
Attention To News	-.009	.046	.838
News*Foreign Policy	.036	.018	.046
News*Use of Force	-.050	.032	.116
Approval <sub>1</sub>	1.404	.304	.000

Log-likelihood ratio: 450.978

Significance level: .001

Cases correctly predicted = 84.7%

Improvement over the modal category = 31.3%

Proportion in modal category = 53.4%

N = 622

the significant variables, we need to use the estimates to derive the probabilities of a person's rallying. The probabilities of rallying are constructed holding the indexes and interaction terms at their means, the approval dummy variable at zero, and the other variables at their modal categories.<sup>4</sup> The high and low probabilities of the indexes are calculated by using the end points of the scales. These probabilities are shown in Table 2.

Democrats are much more likely than Republicans to rally, with Independents falling in between. There is also a direct relationship between holding positive views of the president's leadership qualities and policy stewardship and rallying. Those who gave high marks to Clinton's leadership and handling of economic and foreign policy but who did not approve of his overall performance as president before the missile attack are much more likely to rally than those with low evaluations. Finally, exposure to the media substantially increases the probability that those with positive evaluations of the president's handling of foreign policy will rally. Consistent with the theory of media priming, foreign policy

<sup>4</sup>In order to measure the substantive impact of party identification on the probability of rallying for the average Democrat, Independent, and Republican, the probabilities are calculated using the means of the partisan group rather than the overall sample mean. Employing the overall sample means blurs the differences between party groups.

TABLE 2

## PROBABILITIES OF RALLYING\*

Variable	Probability of Rallying
Party Identification	
Democrats	.650
Independents	.352
Republicans	.126
Leadership Index	
High	.505
Low	.096
Economic Policy Index	
High	.426
Low	.166
Foreign Policy Index	
High	.451
Low	.115
News*Foreign Policy	
High	.536
Low	.075

\*constructed from table 1 and appendix B.

performance becomes more important in overall evaluations of the president following a rally event.

## CONCLUSION

We began by asking "Who rallies"? The answer seems to be straightforward: those most disposed to support the president in the first place. In the case of Bill Clinton, that means Democrats, those who have favorable opinions of his leadership, and those who agree with his policies. In addition, exposure to the news media plays a role in reinforcing the impact of positive views of the president's handling of foreign policy.

Thus, more than patriotic fervor is involved in rallies. Although Americans may increase their approval of the president following a policy success, they show little disposition toward rallying to support the president for its own sake. Instead, those who rally are also those who have the lowest thresholds to overcome to move to approval of the president. Predispositions toward supporting the president are important in mediating the effects of a rally event. Party identification is especially significant, which is not surprising, given the role of party identification in orienting most Americans toward political life. Rather than being a distinctive phenomenon, a rally event seems to be an additional force that pushes potential supporters over the threshold of approval.

Moreover, media priming seems to influence Americans' evaluations of the president's actions in a rally event. People with positive evaluations of President Clinton's handling of foreign policy were more likely to rally if they were more exposed to the media and, by implication, primed by the media's coverage of the U.S. missile attack on Baghdad.

Aside from understanding who rallies, our findings have broader implications for governing. Several authors (James and O'Neal 1991; Morgan and Bickers 1992; Ostrom and Job 1986) have argued that presidents may engage in a cynical ploy for public support, employing the use of force abroad to rally the public and divert its attention from domestic problems.

We have found that the president's strongest critics are not readily distracted by the drama of a rally event. Those who do rally are those *least* critical of the president. Thus, it is not surprising that most potential rally events do not produce rallies at all (Edwards 1990, 143–52). Instead, the polls taken after most of them show a *loss* of support.

On the other hand, our findings do provide some support for Morgan and Bickers' (1992) reformulation of the argument regarding the use of force to rally the public. They found that presidents are more likely to use force in foreign policy when they are low in approval among their *own* partisans. As we have seen, these are exactly those who are most likely to rally.

We have examined only one rally event, of course, and it is possible that it is atypical. Perhaps a president who enjoyed a higher level of trust among the public would attract more ralliers (only 35% of the sample trusted President Clinton's ability to deal wisely with difficult international crises). We cannot say until we study yet other such events. We do believe, however, that we have taken a significant step toward answering the question "Who rallies?"

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## APPENDIX A

## COMPARISON OF BEFORE AND AFTER SURVEY SAMPLES

Category	June 21-24 %	June 27 %
Gender		
Male	46	47
Female	54	53
Race		
White	86	90
Nonwhite	14	10
Age		
18 to 29	19	16
30 to 44	37	36
45 to 64	28	29
Over 64	16	20
Income		
Under \$15,000	12	14
\$15 to 30,000	27	28
\$30 to 50,000	33	31
\$50 to 75,000	15	13
Over \$75,000	9	10
Party identification		
Democrat	35	36
Independent	28	28
Republican	33	32
Education		
Some high-school	10	10
High-school graduate	35	34
Some college	26	27
College graduate	28	29

## APPENDIX B

## INDEX SUMMARY

Index	Sample Mean	Range
Leadership	0.191	-3 to 3
Economic Policy	-0.513	-4 to 4
Centered Foreign Policy	0.000	-5.429 to 4.571
Centered Use of Force	0.000	-2.680 to 1.320
Centered Attention to News	0.000	-7.580 to 7.420
Centered News*Foreign Policy	0.036	-40.283 to 33.913
Centered News*Use of Force	-0.050	-17.205 to 14.956

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