

CHAPTER ONE

News, Opinion, and Foreign Policy

ON AUGUST 21, 2005, Senators Chuck Hagel (R-NE) and George Allen (R-VA) appeared together on the ABC Sunday morning political roundtable program *This Week* to discuss American involvement in Iraq. The senators were of comparable stature; both were considered credible aspirants for the 2008 Republican presidential nomination, both were forceful and articulate for their respective positions, and both spoke for similar lengths of time. Yet they differed in one key respect: Hagel criticized U.S. policy in Iraq, while Allen defended it. Commenting on the Bush administration's just released proposal to "possibly" keep over 100,000 troops in Iraq "for at least four more years," Hagel scoffed: "I think that it's just complete folly. . . . The fact is I don't know where he's going to get these troops . . . there won't be any National Guard left. . . . No Army Reserve left. . . . There's no way America is going to have 100,000 troops in Iraq, nor should it, in four years. It would bog us down, it would further destabilize the Middle East . . . we need to be out." Allen responded by defending the proposal: "This was a worst case scenario. And I think that . . . if they can constitute a free and just society with this constitution that they're working on right now, I think that that will be something, a real measurement, a real benchmark that Chuck [Hagel] talks about."

We have recounted this anecdote on numerous occasions to audiences of students, scholars, and journalists. In each instance, we asked the audience to guess which senator's comments were broadcast on the network news that evening. Without exception, most of our audience members—and frequently all of them—anticipated that post-interview media coverage would heavily emphasize Hagel and largely ignore Allen. In this respect, our audiences were prescient: in the two weeks following the interview, journalists broadcast over 30 times more television stories about Hagel's criticism of the war than about Allen's defense of it.¹ What accounts for the vast difference in media attention devoted to these prominent Republicans' comments? Clearly, many people—indeed, nearly everyone to whom we have ever posed the question—intuitively assume that the news media prefer to cover criticism of the president's Iraq War policy

¹Specifically, a search of Lexis-Nexis online transcripts produced 277 hits for stories that mentioned only Hagel, compared to just nine that mentioned only Allen. An additional 61 stories mentioned both.

over support for it, at least when the critique is offered by a senator from the president's own party. However, as intuitive as this assumption may be, the prevailing views of the causes and consequences of public support for foreign policy, both in Washington and in the academy, have failed to consider this common assumption and its implications. In this respect, the coverage of Hagel and Allen illustrates an important limitation to our understanding of the dynamics of public support for American foreign policy. That is, the information on which the public depends in determining whether or not to support a foreign policy initiative may be systematically distorted for reasons having more to do with the professional incentives of journalists than with the merits of the policy. This limitation has important consequences both for understanding whether and when the public is likely to support the president in times of foreign conflicts and for assessing the likely implications of public opinion for the political viability and sustainability of military actions under different circumstances.

The goals of this book are first, to identify the conditions under which the American public will or will not support their president when he or she leads the nation to war; second, to determine precisely when those conditions will tend to prevail (and for how long); and third, to assess their implications for the future of American foreign policy.

To accomplish these goals, we focus on the primary source of public information about politics and foreign policy, the mass media. The mass media are the key intermediaries between citizens and their leaders, particularly with respect to policies and events being implemented far from American shores. Citizens learn virtually everything they know about foreign policy from the mass media, whether through direct personal exposure or indirectly, via conversations with friends or family members who gained *their* information from the media. This makes understanding how the media select stories concerning foreign policy (the *supply* of information) central to any effort to account for public attitudes toward those policies (the *demand* for policy).

This focus in turn leads us to three central questions that guide this book. First, to what extent do the media's representations of foreign policy rhetoric and events account for variations in public support for presidential foreign policy initiatives, and do these effects vary over the course of such initiatives? Second, does media coverage of foreign policy rhetoric and events faithfully reflect their intensity, substance, or variance? Finally, do the incentives and interactions of citizens and media differ substantially in the so-called new media, and if so, how? To address these questions and their implications for the conduct of U.S. foreign policy, we develop a "strategic-bias" theory of elite–press–public interaction. Our theory, which we present in detail in the next chapter, explains the foreign policy communication process as the outcome of a three-way strategic

interaction between and among the press, the public, and the political elite, each of which has distinct preferences, interests, and capabilities.

MEDIA COVERAGE OF ELITE RHETORIC, AND PUBLIC ATTITUDES ABOUT FOREIGN POLICY

For reasons we describe below, in foreign policy matters, citizens are highly responsive to what they see and hear from political elites—more so than in most aspects of domestic policy. Hence, the degree of public support for a presidential foreign policy initiative depends on the mix of elite rhetoric about the president’s policy to which citizens are exposed. (This statement is consistent with the prevailing view in the literature [e.g., Brody and Shapiro 1989; Brody 1991], and hence is relatively uncontroversial.) When citizens observe elites expressing bipartisan support for a policy, they typically respond favorably (Larson 1996, 2000). This tendency accounts for much of the so-called rally-’round-the-flag phenomenon, in which citizens reward the president with an upward spike, if often short-lasting, in his approval ratings when the president engages the national honor abroad, typically by using military force (Mueller 1973; Russett 1990; Brody 1991; Baum 2002).

In contrast, when citizens observe elites engaging in partisan bickering about the merits of a policy, they tend to choose sides, largely though not perfectly along partisan lines. In this respect, citizens employ the opinions of trusted elites as an information shortcut or heuristic cue, allowing them to reach a judgment that most of the time reflects their perceived self-interest, without expending a lot of time and energy to become perfectly informed (Popkin 1994; Lau and Redlawsk 1997; Lupia and McCubbins 1998). We refer to this pattern as the Opinion Indexing hypothesis, reflecting the tendency of the public to index their opinions to the tenor of elite debate to which they are exposed. This hypothesis is most closely associated with the work of Richard Brody (1991).²

Our theory highlights the central role of credibility in mediating the persuasiveness of information to consumers (Lupia and McCubbins 1998; Druckman 2001, “Using Credible Advice”). The credibility of media *messages*, their *sources*, and the *messengers* communicating those messages, as well as the *context* within which the messages are delivered, all mediate the influence of news on consumers. The reason is that citizens depend on credibility assessments in determining which information shortcuts to rely on in rendering political judgments.

²For additional arguments and evidence substantiating the Opinion Indexing hypothesis, see Brody and Shapiro (1989), Oneal, Lian, and Joyner (1996), Baker and Oneal (2001), Hetherington and Nelson (2003), and Eichenberg, Stoll, and Lebo (2006).

The Accuracy of Media Representations of Foreign Policy Rhetoric and Events

Our second key question addresses the accuracy of media coverage of foreign policy rhetoric and events. An additional scholarly prevailing view, closely related to the Opinion Indexing hypothesis, holds that owing to journalists' dependence on official government sources, media coverage is itself indexed to elite rhetoric in Washington (e.g., Hallin 1986; Bennett 1990; Page and Entman 1994; Zaller and Chiu 2000). We refer to this argument as the Media Indexing hypothesis. The implication is that the media are, at least most of the time, largely passive and nonstrategic, like a conveyor belt faithfully transmitting what elites, especially the most powerful elites (Zaller and Chiu 2000; Bennett, Lawrence, and Livingston 2006), are saying.³ However, contrary to this sometimes implicit and at other times explicit prevailing wisdom, we argue that news coverage typically does not faithfully reflect the mix of elite rhetoric in Washington. Consequently, to the extent the Opinion Indexing hypothesis is valid, citizens frequently base their decisions regarding whether or not to support a president's foreign policy initiatives on an inaccurate representation of what elites are actually saying about the policies.⁴ Prior research into the Media Indexing hypothesis tended to focus on the *reporting* function of journalists. In particular, this view holds that journalists tend to overrepresent authoritative political elites, or those in the strongest positions to influence policy outcomes. A fair amount of evi-

³Bennett, Lawrence, and Livingston (2007) update the traditional Media Indexing hypothesis, arguing that certain "notable conditions" may lead to some degree of press independence from official government sources, including a willingness to challenge those sources, and hence a reduced predominance of indexing. As they observe, "It goes without saying that press dependence on government is not absolute" (60). Examples of such notable conditions the authors cite include the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina and the second Iraq War (Operation Iraqi Freedom and its aftermath). However, while Bennett and colleagues suggest several sets of circumstances likely to give rise to such notable conditions (for instance, major breakthroughs by investigative journalists), it is difficult to precisely define and measure them, and even more difficult to determine *ex ante* which events are likely to give rise to them. After all, they are presumably "notable" in part because of their exceptional infrequency. (Otherwise, of course, indexing itself would be the notable departure.) Consequently, the core of the Media Indexing hypothesis, namely, that *most* of the time the press is *mostly* dependent on and responsive to official government sources, and especially so in foreign policy, remains intact.

⁴Even early formulations of the Media Indexing hypothesis (e.g., Bennett 1990) do allow for the possibility that in the presence of significant elite discord, journalists might be relatively more inclined to look beyond official government sources. This would appear at least partially inconsistent with the implicit passive media assumption. However, to the extent that it is the presence or absence of elite consensus that drives such behavior, and given that such proactive reporting by journalists is limited to cases of elite discord, news coverage of controversial policy debates is likely to be observationally equivalent, whether or not they include nonofficial government sources. After all, such nonofficial sources are most likely of

dence supports this assertion (see, e.g., Zaller and Chiu 2000; Cook 1994). Yet this emphasis tends to overlook the fact that journalists are not solely *reporters*; they are also *interpreters*. Their interpretations regarding the newsworthiness of different pieces of information in turn color the representation of politics to which citizens are ultimately exposed. To the extent this representation is distorted, so too most likely will be the conclusions citizens draw from it by indexing their opinions to media coverage of elite debate. The implications of such inconsistency between elite rhetoric and media representations of that rhetoric are potentially quite troubling for democratic representation.

Senator Arthur Vandenberg famously opined that when it comes to foreign policy, “politics stops at the water’s edge.” Our research reveals little evidence supporting this view. Rather, we find strong evidence that partisan politics has long crossed the water’s edge, even during the cold war, and has extended even to the “high politics” of foreign policy. Moreover, as the Hagel-Allen anecdote illustrates, the qualities that journalists prefer in news stories result in a strong tendency to overrepresent negative, critical coverage of the president, particularly when it originates within his own party. We argue that this overrepresentation stems not from any partisan preferences of the news media but rather from pervasive institutional and professional incentives that shape journalists’ standards of newsworthiness.

From these first two elements of our argument, we conclude that journalists’ preferences shape the representation of elite discourse available to citizens in times of foreign crises. Indeed, they suggest that the media may systematically distort public perceptions of policy debates in Washington by presenting to the public an unrepresentative sample of elite rhetoric. This in turn seems likely to influence the public’s propensity to support presidents’ foreign policies. Indeed, for presidents to build support for their foreign policy initiatives via the mass media, they must overcome a significant institutional bias toward overrepresenting criticism of their policies.

Nevertheless, as we explain below in our discussion of the “elasticity of reality,” policymakers’ information advantage vis-à-vis the public in the realm of foreign affairs nearly always affords them at least some leeway in framing foreign policy events to their own advantage. This leeway arises to some extent independent of the true nature of such events. Yet the extent of this elite discretion varies over time and with circumstances, typically contracting as the public and the media gather more information.

interest to journalists only to the extent they are critical of the government. Given that such sources are sought out only when elites themselves are critical of the government’s policy, the public would presumably become aware of the policy controversy, with or without a broader search by journalists.

Effects of the New Media

The third question guiding our research concerns the new media, by which we mean cable news channels and the Internet.⁵ Do the new media affect the relationships predicted in our investigations into the first two research questions, and if so, how? The answer, we argue, is that they increasingly allow citizens to self-select into ideologically friendly environments while discounting information they may encounter in environments perceived as ideologically hostile.

From a strictly economic standpoint, the availability of more news choices is a positive development. After all, individuals are, to a greater extent than in prior decades, able to consume news products suited to their specific tastes. Liberals can consume “liberal” news while conservatives can consume “conservative” news, thereby presumably making everyone happier. From the standpoint of democratic theory, however, this trend may have unfortunate consequences. Most notably, if individuals attend to news sources that present only one side of a story, they may be less willing to believe sources or information at odds with their prior views, and ultimately their willingness to moderate their positions or fashion compromises may diminish.

For much of the past century, the mass media, especially television, have served as an important common civic space, providing citizens with a shared understanding of their culture and of the major issues and events of the day. In the age of new media, this common space is eroding. The end result may be a hardening and polarization of partisan attitudes in general, and with respect to foreign policy in particular. Conversely, partisan media might impart even greater credibility to messages viewed as running counter to their institutional biases. If a prior generation believed “only Nixon can go to China,” some in the next may believe “only Fox can legitimize Obama ‘going to’ Iran.”⁶

THEORIES OF PUBLIC OPINION AND FOREIGN POLICY

The causes and consequences of public support for the overseas application of military force are subjects of longstanding scholarly debate (e.g., Lippmann 1934; Almond 1950; Rosenau 1961; Baum 2003; Holsti 2004;

⁵Some scholars (e.g., Davis and Owen 1998) include political talk radio within the category of new media. However, politically oriented talk radio, which dates back to the 1920s in the United States, is not, strictly speaking, a new phenomenon. More important, we have no theoretical reason to anticipate that the hypothesized relationships will differ materially for talk radio. Hence, we focus on cable TV and the Internet.

⁶For a theoretical argument along these lines, see Schultz (2005).

Eichenberg 2005; Howell and Pevehouse 2007). Research in this area has focused on the characteristics of the conflicts themselves (hereafter “event-based” explanations), the domestic political circumstances surrounding them (“domestic political” explanations), or the internal characteristics of individual citizens (“individual-level” explanations).

Event-based explanations focus primarily on *longer-term* public support, or more precisely everything beyond the immediate effect of the initiation of a crisis event. Such explanations hold that a president’s ability to sustain public support for a U.S. military engagement depends primarily on its degree of success (Kull and Ramsay 2001; Feaver and Gelpi 2004; Eichenberg 2005; Gelpi, Feaver, and Reifler 2005–2006), or alternatively on the *number* (Milstein and Mitchell 1968; Milstein 1969, 1973, 1974; Mueller 1973, 1994; Gartner and Segura 2000), *rate* (Slantchev 2004), *trend* (Gartner 2008), and *framing* (Boettcher and Cobb 2006) with respect to U.S. casualties. While such explanations could potentially account for longer-term trends in public responses to a U.S. military engagement (but see Cobb 2008), in many instances they seem less well-suited to account for the presence or absence of a public opinion rally at the *outset* of a military conflict, before the public observes either the ultimate costs or the outcome (for critiques of these literatures, see Berinsky 2007; Berinsky and Druckman 2007).

Jentleson (1992), however, advances an event-based theory that can potentially account for both initial and longer-term public support for U.S. conflicts. He argues that the American public is more likely to support military actions perceived as defensive (aimed at imposing “foreign policy restraint” on an adversary) than it is to support those perceived as offensive (aimed at imposing “internal political change”) in nature (see also Oneal, Lian, and Joyner 1996; Jentleson and Britton 1998; Eichenberg 2005). Yet research into both the rally-’round-the-flag phenomenon (e.g., Brody 1991; Baum 2002) and, more generally, the framing of foreign policy (e.g., Entman 2004; Patrick and Thrall 2007) calls this argument into question. Such scholarship has shown that public perceptions concerning the offensive or defensive nature of U.S. military engagements are often endogenous to the domestic political circumstances surrounding them, including the efforts of elites to frame events to their own advantage (Entman 2004; Baum and Potter 2008).

Presidents routinely seek to frame their military actions in terms of national self-defense (e.g., Baum 2003; Perla 2005). At the same time, most Americans know relatively little about foreign affairs (Almond 1950; Lippmann 1955; Erskine 1963; Converse 1964; Edwards 1983; Sobel 1993; Holsti 2004; Canes-Wrone 2006; Page and Bouton 2006; Berinsky 2007). Consequently, in determining whether to support or oppose a conflict, typical Americans are ill-equipped to independently

assess the president's "true" motivations, especially in the short term. Instead, as noted above, they rely on information shortcuts, or heuristic cues (Sniderman, Brody, and Tetlock 1991; Popkin 1994), most notably the opinions of trusted political elites, and primarily as reflected in the mass media (Iyengar and Kinder 1987; Krosnick and Kinder 1990; Zaller 1992; Rahn 1993; Larson 1996, 2000). Trust in turn frequently hinges on one particularly accessible heuristic: party identification (Rahn 1993; Popkin 1994; Nelson and Garst 2005).⁷ Individuals' interpretations of heuristic cues depend in significant measure on their preexisting belief systems (Hurwitz and Peffley 1987; Herrmann et al. 1997), for which party identification is typically an important (Rahn 1993; Popkin 1994; Lupia and McCubbins 1998; Groeling 2001; Nelson and Garst 2005) if incomplete (Herrmann, Tetlock, and Visser 1999; Holsti 2004) element. The party affiliations of information sources (e.g., elites) and receivers (e.g., citizens) in interaction thus serve as a cognitive filter, mediating the selection and implications of the information shortcuts typical individuals rely on in making political judgments.⁸

In contrast to scholarship focused on longer-term public support for U.S. overseas conflicts, research on the public's *immediate* reactions to such events—the so-called rally-'round-the-flag phenomenon—focuses far more on domestic politics in general, and on the influence of public statements by political elites in particular. In fact, the most widely accepted domestic political explanation for the rally phenomenon, which we earlier termed the Opinion Indexing hypothesis, argues that the extent of elite, and particularly congressional (Hallin 1986; Bennett 1990; Zaller and Chiu 2000), criticism of the president determines the magnitude of a post-use-of-force rally (Brody 1991; see also Brody and Shapiro 1989; Oneal, Lian, and Joyner 1996).⁹ Brody's theory implicitly assumes that the Media Indexing hypothesis is

⁷Individuals also employ other heuristics in evaluating foreign policy, such as accessible "images" of potential adversaries (e.g., enemy vs. friend) and core values, such as isolationism versus internationalism (Herrmann et al. 1997; Holsti 2004). Still, elite communication plays an important role in priming such images and values, and thereby in framing events for individuals. While some research (Herrmann, Tetlock, and Visser 1999; Campbell et al. 1960) has found that party identification is not a good predictor of public support for military conflict, in chapter 9 we discuss the findings of Holsti and Rosenau (1990, 1996), who report, based on research supporting the so-called Militant Internationalism (MI)/Cooperative Internationalism (CI) Index (Maggiotto and Wittkopf 1981), that a majority of liberals are accommodationists (opposing MI and supporting CI), while conservatives are about equally divided between hard-liners (supporting MI and opposing CI) and internationalists (supporting both MI and CI). In addition, party *does* mediate elites' capacity to successfully frame events for different individuals (Druckman 2004).

⁸For an investigation into the effects of partisan cues on post-9/11 public opinion on U.S. foreign policy, see Hindman (2004).

⁹For a systematic investigation of the nature and extent of congressional influence on public opinion regarding foreign policy and war, see Howell and Pevehouse (2007). For

valid. That is, it assumes that media coverage accurately reflects elite debate. As noted earlier, this implies that the media are largely nonstrategic.¹⁰

In contrast, we argue that the true nature and extent of elite debate may matter less than *media coverage* of any such debate and the partisan makeup of the debaters, and that this is the case well beyond the short-term or “rally period” of a foreign policy crisis or conflict. These differences do not stem from partisan bias in the news or from journalists being cowed by political elites but rather from commonly held professional incentives and norms that lead journalists to strongly prefer certain stories over others. For example, highlighting discord within the president’s party, particularly when such internecine clashes occur in unified government, is an especially attractive story element, as Republican Senator Hagel found when he characterized the Iraq War as similar to Vietnam. Conversely, there is relatively little reward for covering boosterism of the president by his own party, as George Allen discovered after his appearance on that same program. Across the aisle, for reasons we discuss at length, journalists cover statements from the opposition party with somewhat less regard to whether they are supporting or criticizing the president or whether they take place during unified or divided government (Groeling 2001).

Like event-based theories, the Opinion Indexing hypothesis also discounts differences in the characteristics of individual consumers. In contrast, consistent with substantial prior research, we argue that not all elite statements are equally persuasive to the public. For example, opposition party endorsements of, or presidential party attacks on, the president should be extremely credible to viewers because they are atypical and represent costly (that is, potentially self-damaging) signals (Dutton 1973; Eagly, Wood, and Chaiken 1978; Lupia and McCubbins 1998; Groeling 2001). Similarly, typical individuals will likely view statements by their fellow partisan elites as more credible than statements by opposition elites (Rahn 1993; Popkin 1994; Lupia and McCubbins 1998; Groeling 2001; Nelson and Garst 2005).

In the new media (e.g., cable news, Internet blogs), in turn, consumers frequently attribute partisan preferences—that is, ideological orientations—to media outlets (Baum and Gussin 2008). As a consequence, partisan and costly credibility increasingly apply not only to messengers but also to the context, or media outlet, within which those messages are embedded.

more in-depth reviews of the vast literatures on the interrelationships of the mass media, public opinion, and foreign policy, see Powlick and Katz (1998), Entman (2004), and Baum and Potter (2008).

¹⁰Others go a step further, arguing that elite debate actually bounds the range of arguments considered sufficiently “acceptable” to receive any news coverage (Bennett 1990), or that support and consensus among elites will short-circuit broader debate by constraining journalists’ willingness to challenge an administration (Hallin 1986).

Finally, we seek to bridge the divide between the aforementioned theories emphasizing rational public responses to empirical indicators of a war's success or failure, such as U.S. casualties (e.g., Mueller 1973, 1994; Gartner and Segura 2000; Feaver and Gelpi 2004; Eichenberg 2005), and those emphasizing the centrality of elite rhetoric in mediating public support (e.g., Brody 1991; Zaller 1992, 1994; Perla 2005; Berinsky 2007). In the latter case, while prior research (e.g., Zaller 1994; Berinsky 2007) has shown that elite cues influence public opinion regarding war beyond rally periods, such studies do not directly measure or compare the evolving relative effects of rhetoric and reality over the course of an extended conflict. Nor do they consider the intervening effects of the mass media in shaping the representation of elite rhetoric to which the public is exposed.

To bridge this theoretical divide, we develop an alternative conceptual framework, termed the “elasticity of reality” (Baum and Potter 2008). We argue that the information advantage of policymakers vis-à-vis the public in the realm of foreign affairs nearly always affords them at least some leeway in framing foreign policy events to their own advantage, to some extent independent of the true nature of such events. After all, the public rarely observes foreign policy directly. Rather, it observes and responds to a framed representation of such events, in both the short and the longer term.¹¹ However, the extent of elite discretion in framing events—that is, the elasticity of reality—varies over time, typically shrinking as the public and the media gather more information about an event and have the opportunity to retrospectively assess the reliability of prior elite rhetoric.¹² (An exception may arise if a substantial and sustained

¹¹This is not to say that the media are the only route through which such information can flow. For instance, while relatively few Americans personally venture into war zones, many have familial or social ties to combatants who can serve as exceptionally credible sources of information about the true state of a conflict. Those same personal networks are also likely to highlight the costs of the conflict by increasing the knowledge and salience of casualties among linked service members. Moreover, Americans gain at least some independent information about the costs and benefits of a conflict through their daily lives. Increases or decreases in taxes, gas prices, deficits, or even terrorist attacks are examples of data Americans can easily track as by-products of their daily lives (Popkin 1994) and that they might, over time, employ in weighing the wisdom and success of a foreign policy venture.

¹²Brody (1994) offers a complementary argument regarding the 1990–91 Persian Gulf crisis and war. Consistent with our argument, Brody (1994: 210) observes “[T]he public can also respond to directly experienced indications of presidential policy performance. However, he concludes that “[I]t is not clear what switches public attention from mediated to unmediated indications of policy success or failure.” In this book, we directly model the effects of and evolving relationship between elite rhetoric and reality, and do so over a much longer period of time than Brody’s study of the eight-month-long (August 1990–March 1991) Persian Gulf crisis and war.

change emerges in the status of a conflict. If so, the elasticity gap may reopen to some extent.) Consequently, while both rhetoric and reality influence public attitudes, we argue that absent a substantial and sustained change in events, the former will tend to matter more in the early stages of a conflict, whereas given a sufficiently extended conflict, the latter is likely to catch up and eventually surpass the former over time. We thus show how both rhetoric and reality matter, albeit to varying degrees under differing circumstances and at different points in time. We also show that, far from a passive conveyor belt, the media play an active role in shaping the nature and extent of citizens' exposure to rhetoric and reality.

Our theoretical framework draws on widely recognized characteristics of human information processing, elite incentives, and journalistic preferences. Hence, taken individually, our assumptions are not novel. However, combining these relatively common assumptions concerning the distinct choices of the makers, transmitters, and receivers of news yields a variety of nonobvious and consequential predictions. Further, our argument applies not only to foreign policy but also, in varying degrees, to many high-profile domestic political issues, such as energy policy and domestic responses to global climate change. We focus on foreign policy crises, however, as a particularly interesting and we believe useful application of our framework, because prior theories of public opinion and foreign policy have generally ignored the strategic incentives of media actors and their potential effects on the nature of the information on which distinct subgroups of the public base their opinions.

We also view foreign crises (particularly those involving military mobilizations and conflicts) as especially hard cases in which to find an independent effect from media or elite rhetoric, because they involve life-and-death risks and large-scale movements of people and equipment. Such crises thus tend to be unusually visible and salient to the public, relative to the material costs and benefits of most domestic policy initiatives, such as tax or welfare reform, which tend to be observable only gradually and primarily over the long term, if at all (Arnold 1992). Finally, because, as noted, typical Americans tend to know relatively little about foreign affairs, and less about foreign policy than about domestic policy (Edwards 1983; Sobel 1993; Canes-Wrone 2006), they are particularly dependent on elite cues in determining whether to support or oppose a presidential foreign policy initiative such as a military conflict. This makes citizens' credibility assessments especially important in the realm of foreign policy.

In short, we argue that only by studying the information and incentives of, as well as the interactions between, elites, the public, and the press can we account for variations in public responses to presidential foreign policy initiatives over time.

IMPLICATIONS FOR U.S. FOREIGN POLICY

Our theory suggests that presidents who lose public support for their foreign policy initiatives will face tremendous difficulty sustaining them. Former President Bill Clinton's 1997 National Security Strategy document described this difficulty as follows: "One . . . consideration regards the central role the American people rightfully play in how the United States wields its power abroad: the United States cannot long sustain a commitment without the support of the public" (National Security Council [NSC] 1997). Similarly, President George W. Bush's "National Strategy for Victory in Iraq" listed "continued support of the American people" as one of six "conditions for victory" in the Iraq conflict (NSC 2005). As we will show, most of the time (with the possible exception of large-scale military invasions), public support is difficult to sustain. Moreover, doing so appears to be growing more difficult over time. We further argue that, seemingly paradoxically, unified control of government can make sustaining public support more rather than less difficult.¹³ President George W. Bush confronted this paradox directly when, after twice successfully campaigning to ensure that the Iraq War would be fought under unified Republican control of government, he arguably achieved his most reliable Republican legislative support once his colleagues were in the minority again after 2006.

As we shall see, new media are partly responsible for these patterns. A consequence of the self-selection they engender is that presidents increasingly find themselves preaching to the choir. In other words, the audiences for presidential appeals tend to be limited to a president's *ex ante* supporters. For instance, one study (Kernell and Jacobson 2006) reports that the president's fellow partisans increasingly dominate the television audiences for presidential State of the Union addresses. This will make it more difficult for future presidents to reach beyond their base in order to achieve or maintain bipartisan support for foreign policy initiatives.

In this book we demonstrate that even after controlling for a wide range of indicators of empirical reality, communication still plays a crucial and independent role in influencing public support for the president during foreign crises. We show further that, rather than simply parroting the opinions of Washington elites, public opinion in these crises varies systematically with the institutional context in which political communication takes place, the media context within which the message is communicated, and the characteristics of the speakers and receivers—that is, depending on who the president is at the time of a crisis, who is

¹³See Groeling (2001) for a parallel discussion of how unified government can undermine the presidential party's ability to favorably define their brand name with the public.

speaking about it, what medium or channel is carrying the speech, and who is listening.

PLAN OF THE BOOK

In chapter 2, we begin by explicating our strategic-bias theory of elite–press–public interaction. From our theory we derive a series of hypotheses, which we test in the remainder of the book. The theory consists of three factors, reflecting the aforementioned corresponding research questions guiding the book. These factors are (1) the effects of media coverage on public opinion regarding foreign policy (in both the short and the longer term), (2) the nature of media coverage of foreign policy, including the accuracy or inaccuracy of its representation of elite rhetoric, and (3) the effects of new media on factors 1 and 2.

In chapter 3, we focus on the first two factors: patterns of elite discourse in the news and the implications of those patterns for public opinion. As a validity check on several of our theoretical assumptions, we first present the results of a survey of a national sample of citizens and journalists regarding their news preferences. We then formally test several of our hypotheses against a new data set consisting of all evaluations of the president or his administration by members of Congress (MCs) that appeared on the evening newscasts of ABC, CBS, or NBC between 1979 and 2003, during 61-day windows surrounding the start dates of major U.S. deployments or employments of military force. In addition to providing a detailed picture of partisan evaluations in the news across nearly a quarter century, these data allow us to examine the impact of coverage of these evaluations on partisans and independents, during both normal times and crisis periods. For this analysis, we merge partially disaggregated data on public approval of the president with the aforementioned content analytic data set.

It is important to note that the data in chapter 3 encompass only congressional evaluations that journalists selected for broadcast, making it difficult to determine whether they selected those statements based on standards of newsworthiness (as we argue) or were simply presenting an accurate representation of elite debate (as the Media Indexing hypothesis implies).

Although surveys can enhance our confidence that journalists apply common standards of newsworthiness in their story selections, rigorously testing this assumption potentially runs afoul of the so-called unobserved population problem (Groeling and Kernell 1998; Groeling 2008). That is, without some means of observing the stories *not* chosen by journalists, we cannot rule out the possibility that the representation of elite rhetoric

in the news may accurately reflect what elites are actually saying in the real world. In chapter 4 we address precisely this issue, thereby continuing our investigation into the second factor in our theory. To separate the media's independent effect from that of the actual tenor of elite discourse itself as presented on the evening news, we investigate a class of stories for which we *can* observe a full population of potential elite evaluations of the president: interviews with MCs on the three major broadcast networks' Sunday morning political interview shows. We therefore analyze the content of all congressional appearances on *Meet the Press* (NBC), *This Week* (ABC), and *Face the Nation* (CBS) during the same 61-day windows surrounding foreign conflicts between 1979 and 2003. Such interviews afford elites a chance to present their views to a politically attentive audience in a relatively unfiltered, "open mic" format. More important, these interviews represent low-hanging fruit for all three broadcast networks' evening news programs, providing readily accessible content from which evening news producers can easily select excerpts for broadcast. To test our hypotheses, we investigate which comments are selected for inclusion on the evening news and compare the characteristics of such comments with those of comments that were not selected during periods immediately following major U.S. uses (deployments or employments) of military force and during normal time periods.

In chapter 5, we take up the third factor in our analysis, the impact of new media on story selection patterns and public opinion, by conducting a series of experiments intended to determine the effects of media outlet brand reputations on consumers' credibility assessments regarding elite rhetoric, and the effects of those assessments on the influence of that rhetoric. To do so, we exposed participants to a series of carefully edited video and text-based news reports on issues related to national security. The eight treatment conditions entailed members of the president's party or the opposition party either praising or criticizing the president's policies (two evaluation types \times two evaluation source treatments). We also modified the treatments so they would appear to have originated on either Fox or CNN (two network treatments). These experiments also allow us to retest our opinion hypotheses from chapter 3 under more tightly controlled conditions.

Next, in chapters 6 and 7, we undertake a systematic case study of elite rhetoric, media coverage, public opinion, and the "situation on the ground" in the U.S. war in Iraq. Chapter 6 addresses all three factors in our theory by comparing the content of new and traditional news media coverage of foreign policy in general, and Iraq in particular (in this instance, contrasting such coverage on cable to that on network television news). We introduce the Iraq case through brief vignettes, or mini-case studies, of six events in the conflict that a panel of foreign policy experts

we polled rated as especially consequential. We then investigate 30 months of daily content analysis of the nightly national newscasts of ABC, CBS, and NBC, as well as of *Fox News Special Report with Brit Hume*, in order to compare story selection patterns and the resulting effects on consumer attitudes across the new and old media, thereby addressing all three factors in our theory. With respect to public opinion, these data make it possible to investigate longer-term public opinion dynamics, which in turn allows us to determine whether and to what extent the hypothesized communication effects described in chapter 4 persist over the longer term. In other words, these data allow us to directly pit the event-based theories that dominate much of the literature on public opinion and foreign policy (e.g., casualty aversion, principal policy objectives, perceptions of success) against our strategic-bias theory. In contrast to these event-based arguments, our theory, derived primarily from the literatures on framing and the rally phenomenon, emphasizes the elite contest to *frame* reality via news media populated by journalists with distinct preferences and goals.

As noted, event-based theories typically focus on longer-term or sustained public opinion. In contrast, the rally literature underpinning our theory largely focuses on the immediate or short-term effect of dramatic events on public attitudes. Comparing the efficacy of these two theoretical perspectives over a 2.5-year period thus represents a particularly difficult test for our theory, as we conduct it largely on the turf of the long-term-focused, event-based theories.

In chapter 7 we continue our case study of news coverage, media consumption patterns, and public opinion regarding the Iraq War between 2003 and 2007. We employ a variety of public opinion surveys, as well as the aforementioned content analysis of network newscasts and the Fox News Channel. For this analysis, which again addresses all three factors in our theory, we extend the media content analysis series through November 2007.¹⁴ This allows us to explore the implications of the elasticity of reality for news coverage of and public opinion regarding the Iraq conflict over an extended period, including the so-called “surge”—the U.S. counterinsurgency campaign initiated in March 2007 that increased the U.S. troop presence in Iraq by over 30,000.

In chapter 8 we turn to the Internet, thereby focusing squarely on the third factor in our theory. Here we present the results of a content analysis of a variety of politically oriented Internet sites. Specifically, we compare daily wire service “political news” summaries to see which stories liberal, conservative, and nonpartisan web sites selected for their respec-

¹⁴It should be noted that our extended data set has large gaps in its coding (at the time of this writing, several intervening months remain uncoded by Media Tenor), limiting our ability to apply these data to our time-series analysis in chapter 6.

tive “top news” summaries. We also investigate differences in partisan polarization over the Iraq conflict between individuals who rely primarily on traditional news sources and those who rely primarily on the Internet for their news. Through these investigations, we explore the processes by which the changing media environment is shaping political discourse, particularly with regard to foreign policy.

Finally, in chapter 9 we consider the ramifications of the answers to our three central research questions for U.S. foreign policy. We draw conclusions from our empirical investigations and consider the present and future implications of our study for politics in general, and for presidential leadership in foreign policy in particular.