Factors that Shape U.S. Public Opinion on Foreign Policy

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Factors that Shape U.S. Public Opinion on Foreign Policy
Julianne O’Connor
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Introduction to Research
• This study explores the factors that influence an individual’s perception of the war in Afghanistan as an effective means to decrease the threat of terrorism.
• Ideology, gender, and worldview (measured through religion and ideology) are predictors of an individual’s opinion on war.
• A pro-war (hawkish) perspective is associated with conservative ideology.
• Public opinion has been found to be centrist in cases such as the Iran hostage crisis where the majority of the U.S. public favored moderate reactions.
• Men are more likely than women to have a hawkish attitude.
• Evangelical Christians have been found to be more supportive of the war in Iraq while the opposite holds for Muslims.
• Evangelicals more likely to support the war in Iraq and President Bush’s policies than the other eight largest religions in the U.S.
• Countries with a higher percent of Muslims (excluding the Middle East) have had a lower opinion of the war in Afghanistan.

Centrist Foreign Policy Opinions
• Public opinion on security issues is centrist.
  • The public refused to take extreme views during the nuclear weapons crisis.
  • 60% of respondents to a 1940 survey believed atom bomb “a good thing”, a third of respondents believed it to be “bad”, small portion of population had strong views.
  • Views easily influenced by President in power.
  • 50% of the population reported they would change their views on bombing in Vietnam if President Carter did.

Hypotheses:
H 1: Men are more likely than women to believe the war in Afghanistan has been effective in decreasing the threat of terrorism.
H 2: Individuals with conservative (liberal) worldviews are more (less) likely believe the war in Afghanistan has been effective.
H 3: Individuals who have a higher level of trust in government are more likely to believe the war in Afghanistan has been effective.

Data
H 1: Gender

Table 1: worldview in terms of religion

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Bible Should Be Taken Literally</th>
<th>Bible Should not Be Taken Literally</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>War Ineffective (percent)</td>
<td>74.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>War Effective (percent)</td>
<td>25.6%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: worldview in terms of ideology

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Liberal</th>
<th>Moderate</th>
<th>Conservative</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>War Ineffective (percent)</td>
<td>75.5%</td>
<td>77.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>War Effective (percent)</td>
<td>24.5%</td>
<td>22.3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

H 2: Worldview

Table 3: Relationship between perceived efficacy of the war in Afghanistan and perceived level of corruption in the government.

Table 3 Interpretation
• Correlation coefficient of .101 indicates a weak relationship.
• Significance of .000 indicates a highly significant relationship.

Table 4: How often trust government in Washington?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Always</th>
<th>Most of the Time</th>
<th>About Half the Time</th>
<th>Some of the Time</th>
<th>Never</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>War Ineffective (percent)</td>
<td>50.0%</td>
<td>68.6%</td>
<td>75.4%</td>
<td>74.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>War Effective (percent)</td>
<td>50.0%</td>
<td>30.4%</td>
<td>24.6%</td>
<td>25.2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Findings
H 1: “Gender”
The bar chart shows a 6% difference in responses to the efficacy of the war between genders. Males are 6% more likely to believe the war is an effective means of fighting terrorism than females.

H 2: ‘Worldview’
The table shows a 1.3% difference in responses to the efficacy of the war between those who take the Bible literally and those who do not. Those who do take the Bible literally are 1.3% more likely to believe the war is an effective means of fighting terrorism than those who do not take the Bible literally.

H 3: Trust in Government
While the relationship between perceived corruption and perceived efficacy of the war is weak according to the correlation coefficient (.101), it is highly significant (p = .000) which makes it worth noting. The second question under this independent variable also shows a relationship: as level of trust in government falls so does the perceived efficacy of the war in Afghanistan.

Conclusions
• Attitudes toward whether or not the war in Afghanistan has been effective in reducing the threat of terrorism are mainly consistent across variables.
• Gender and worldview have tendencies to predict an individual’s perception of the war, but are not reliable due to high p-values and low correlation coefficients.
• Trust in government is the variable with the most influence over an individual’s perception of the war in Afghanistan.
• More research could be done to explore how an individual’s understanding of terrorism and the threat it poses to self and/or country influences their opinion on the efficacy of a war-based approach.

References
Lippmann Consensus Mershon