Cognitive Shortcuts and Public Support for Intervention

Jason Brownlee

Abstract
Scholars of public opinion on military intervention agree that survey respondents make judgments from limited information. Yet researchers still question whether ordinary Americans reflect elite attitudes or instead reach their own “pretty prudent” conclusions from the stated principal policy objective (PPO). This article adjudicates the debate while incorporating lessons from the study of bounded rationality. Evidence comes from an original data set of aggregate US public opinion, covering 1,080 nationally representative survey items about launching operations, across thirty-five countries, during 1981 to 2016. Tests show that PPO matters: pursuing “internal policy change” is less popular than restraining international aggression. However, language reflecting White House cues and one prominent cognitive shortcut (the “availability heuristic”) statistically and substantively out-performs PPO at predicting intervention support. The results indicate that when ordinary Americans are polled about using force against salient foes (Saddam Hussein, al-Qaeda, Islamic State in Iraq and Syria), elements of bounded rationality can overtake the prudence expressed toward less vivid problems.

Keywords
foreign policy, humanitarian intervention, public opinion, Middle East, bounded rationality, al-Qaeda, Islamic State, Saddam Hussein

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US public support for military interventions has reached historic levels in the early twenty-first century. Over 80 percent of Americans approved of Operation Enduring Freedom when US forces entered Afghanistan on October 7, 2001. Some 70 percent of Americans favored the invasion of Iraq in March 2003 (Gershkoff and Kushner 2005; Jacobson 2010). In isolation, these attitudes could be dismissed as a post-9/11 spike. But twelve years later, majorities again supported military action against a foreign adversary. After Islamic State in Iraq and Syria [ISIS] fighters killed 130 people in Paris in November 2015, 68 percent of respondents thought President Barack Obama—who had been bombing ISIS targets for over a year—was not being aggressive enough. Fifty-three percent favored “sending [US] ground troops into combat operations against ISIS,” even though Obama had slammed the idea as reckless and ineffective (CNN/ORC 2015; Goldberg 2016; White House 2015). These examples suggest intervention support has varied in unexpected ways.

Scholars have previously concluded the public is reticent to intervene abroad (Jentleson 1992; Page and Bouton 2006; Walt 2018) unless prompted by national leaders (Berinsky 2009; Gelpi, Feaver, and Reifler 2009; Lippmann [1922] 1998). Broad backing for the use of force in Afghanistan and in Iraq, and then against ISIS, raises the question: What other variables are operating to increase the American public’s approval of military intervention?

I answer this question by (1) generating hypotheses from early and recent theory, including lessons from the study of cognitive heuristics, (2) introducing a new data set for assessing predictors of aggregate intervention approval, and (3) reporting the results of hypothesis tests from a range of models.

The article follows this structure. First, I integrate existing theory in a common framework of “intervention support as risk reduction” and derive five hypotheses. (For all hypotheses, the dependent variable is the aggregate public level of support for initiating military action.¹) Two hypotheses address Bruce Jentleson’s (1992) “pretty prudent public” thesis, and one hypothesis gauges the influence of elite signals (the “rally ‘round the flag” effect). The final two hypotheses assess the impact of a cognitive shortcut known as the “availability heuristic.” In the context of foreign policy surveys among ordinary (i.e., politically inattentive) respondents, the availability heuristic disproportionately weights actors known for vivid acts of violence.

Second, I introduce a data set and research design for testing the hypotheses. Using the iPoll Databank of the Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, I compiled 1,080 items, from survey questions on initiating US military action, across thirty-five countries, during 1981 to 2016. I then individually coded each of the observations, across a series of independent variables, based on the language of the specific question. The data enable one of the most comprehensive and rigorous examinations of prior theory explaining intervention support.²

Third, I report results of OLS regressions, with robust standard errors (clustered by intervention site), that tested the hypotheses.³ The results support the argument that the American public is “pretty prudent” and that the public’s support varies based on the principal policy objective (PPO) of the intervention. Specifically,
respondents prefer restraining foreign aggressors to pursuing regime change (Jentleson 1992; Jentleson and Britton 1998). At the same time, White House signals and the target identity of salient foes (availability heuristic) prove to be powerful predictors of intervention support.

The implications enrich Jentleson’s original findings and engage ongoing debates about the extent of a “disconnect” between elite and popular attitudes on foreign policy (Page and Bouton 2006). When Americans perceive disproportionate risk from highly stigmatized actors, they will tend to make rapid (low-information) judgments based on salient examples and will tend to reason less judiciously than the “foreign policy disconnect” predicts. Under those circumstances, polls about intervening against an evocative foe will likely garner greater approval for military action than otherwise expected. In effect, the prospect of striking a salient aggressor will narrow the normal gap in attitudes among elites and masses. Although this conclusion emerges from evidence about past targets, it would be reasonable to suppose that alarming future events concerning other countries could also activate the availability heuristic and raise intervention support.

**Integrating Prior Findings: Intervention as Risk Reduction**

Scholars of public opinion toward war and military intervention have extensively debated whether low-information voters make their own judgments about foreign policy issues (based on simple calculations about likely risks and potential gains) or whether they get their views from political elites (Holsti 1992; Page and Shapiro 1992; Holsti 1992, cf. Almond 1960; Lippmann [1922] 1998).

On one side of this literature, scholars have posited that elites strongly, if not totally, influence mass opinion on policy matters. This view was formulated by Walter Lippmann ([1922] 1998) and developed by Gabriel Almond (1960), who argued that ordinary citizens’ grasp of policy matters would be particularly weak in the area of international politics, “where the issues are especially complex and remote” (pp. 5-6, see also Converse 1964). The “Almond–Lippmann consensus” runs through research reporting that typical Americans follow their leaders (Bersinsky 2007, 975; Zaller 1992), especially presidents who appear to be leading the country toward victory (Gelpi, Feaver, and Reifler 2009, 2).  

An opposing set of researchers has contended that ordinary citizens do not just parrot elites; they also reason through issues for themselves. These scholars accede that average citizens seldom command extensive information about world events. All the same, foreign policy survey responses do not just echo the messages of elites (Benson 1982; Drezner 2008; Eckles and Schaffner 2011; Holsti 1996, 2004; Jacobson 2010; Russett and Deluca 1981; Russett and Nincic 1976; Holsti 1992, 217-18, 1994). The strongest version of this counterclaim is that the public makes intelligible judgments on issues (including matters of war and peace) and consistently supports policies that are less hawkish than the policies promoted by national leaders (Page and Shapiro 1982, 1992). This “foreign policy disconnect” has not narrowed over
time as theories of a pliable public would predict (Jacobs and Shapiro 1999; Page and Bouton 2006; Shapiro and Page 1988).

Students of public support for military intervention have joined this debate, many of them circling around Jentleson’s work on the “pretty prudent” public. Americans, Jentleson (1992) observed, were not just marching to the White House’s tune; they were articulating their own views, often in sensible ways. “[I]n its basic disposition as to when to use force and when not to, the American public has been showing ‘good judgment’” (p. 71). With aggregate evidence from 146 questions on eight targets/sites during 1982 to 1991 (Panama, Libya, Grenada, the Persian Gulf, Lebanon, Afghanistan, El Salvador, and Nicaragua), Jentleson reported that Americans supported “the use of force to restrain rather than remake governments” (p. 49). Specifically, survey respondents favored missions when the PPO was “foreign policy restraint (FPR),” for example, pushing Saddam Hussein’s army out of Kuwait. By contrast, they eschewed operations that sought to influence intrastate politics (“internal policy change” [IPC]), including regime change, for example, toppling Hussein’s government in Baghdad (1992, 68). In a follow-up article on intervention support in the 1990s, Jentleson and coauthor Rebecca Britton (1998) called PPO “the most powerful and parsimonious explanation for the variations in public support in the post-cold war era” (p. 396).

Subsequent scholarship has raised questions about how much PPO explains compared to other variables, including elite messages, the core of the Almond–Lippmann consensus. Experimental research has shown that when PPO is held constant, risk aversion and presidential cues remain potent predictors of attitudes about the use of force (Boettcher III 2004; Eckles and Schaffner 2011). Even Jentleson and Britton (1998) noted that pro-intervention cues from the White House increased popular support for military action by fifteen points (p. 412). In sum, after scholars account for the public’s relative prudence, a substantial amount of variation remains to be explained.

Fortunately, the very terms of debate in the literature offer a path toward assessing the power of PPO and other variables. Researchers on both sides have agreed that ordinary respondents pay limited attention to politics in general and to foreign policy in particular. This shared assumption raised the question of how such inattentive and ill-formed respondents could deliver apparently sensible answers (Meernik and Ault 2001, 353). Proponents of the “rational” or “pretty prudent” public contend that wording about intervention goals and methods informs these assessments, while contributors to the Almond–Lippmann consensus aver that respondents express the preferences disseminated by national elites. Of course, it is reasonable to expect that approval levels for military action will express some amalgam of these processes. Further, it is relatively straightforward to incorporate both elements in a shared framework.

I contend that the core mechanism behind intervention support is the effort by respondents to reduce perceived risk. Heeding the seminal work on prospect theory by Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky (1979), I treat intervention as a kind of
insurance policy). When ordinary Americans are asked whether they approve of the use of force overseas, they are being asked to judge whether the proposed policy will, on balance, diminish a physical threat, that is, “the risk of death or impairment from violence intentionally employed by others” (Lake 1999, 21). If the intervention policy appears to increase such risk—by antagonizing otherwise friendly countries or sending large numbers of troops on a nonessential but highly dangerous mission—respondents are likely to disapprove. By contrast, if the intervention looks set to lower the physical risk posed to Americans, then a larger share of respondents will support the proposed policy.

Interpreting intervention support as the pursuit of reduced risk can help resolve seemingly conflicting findings in this literature’s central debate. Elite cues often stress the risk of inaction, while operational details (about policy objectives, potential casualties, insertion of ground forces) concretize the risks of taking action. These variables may pull low-information Americans in opposite directions, but they share a common causal mechanism: the preference for supporting military action when, on balance, it reduces risk.

This framework is well suited to mass attitudes on foreign intervention. Historically, public support for the use of force has risen and fallen depending on the expected utility of the mission for national security and the implied hazards for American service members and civilians (Kohut and Toth 1994). My approach moves debate toward adjudicating the relative explanatory power of rival variables, recognizing that elite signals, policy objectives, and other factors likely operate in tandem and in measurable ways.

In summary, this framework accords roles to both elite cues and (low-information) individual reasoning variables in explaining aggregate public opinion on military intervention. I contend, however, that it may be theoretically inadequate for explaining the dramatic variations in intervention support observed in the early twenty-first century. To strengthen the framework’s explanatory power, I incorporate lessons from the study of bounded rationality and how cognitive shortcuts may affect how Americans assess the risks of intervention.

The Availability Heuristic and Intervention Support

Theories like the “pretty prudent public” (and related claims about the type of mission, ground, air, etc.; see Eichenberg 2005) fit straightforward calculations about utility maximization. Information about a high-risk, low-benefit mission (e.g., sending thousands of ground troops to pursue regime change) will be less popular than a low-risk, high-benefit operation (e.g., launching air strikes to deter a foreign army from invading a US ally). These generic scenarios, however, do not consider how typically inattentive respondents may use certain pieces of information more than others. Here, the field of bounded rationality provides useful tools.
Pioneered by Herbert Simon (1957) and Tversky and Kahneman (1974), bounded rationality means that actors not only make decisions with imperfect information, they also simplify and skew the information at their disposal. Seeking to save effort and time, human beings reach judgments via cognitive shortcuts or “heuristics.” Several such heuristics have been identified.\(^{11}\)

Heuristics tend to operate subconsciously and introduce bias into human judgment. They may, for example, inflate or reduce risk assessments. Further, they often operate in ways distinct from a more measured or holistic consideration of evidence. Heuristics do not, however, produce “wrong” choices, for the simple reason that when it comes to forecasting a unique event, there is no such thing as perfect knowledge (Sunstein 2007, 549-50; Tversky and Kahneman 1973, 231).

The bias that heuristics introduce can be understood as the variance from what the same decision makers would otherwise have decided, if they had not employed the shortcut and instead embarked on a more laborious reasoning process. In this respect, heuristics are not inherently beneficial or harmful. Rather, their desirability depends on what one considers the preferred or “correct” assessment. Cass Sunstein describes how heuristics have made Americans less concerned about climate change than terrorism. He argues that those same heuristics—if activated in certain ways—could eventually motivate the American public to spend more resources addressing climate change (2007). Heuristics enable typical Americans to make expeditious judgments on office seekers and thereby engage in politics without making costly investments in researching the candidates (Mondak 1993). Conversely, similar heuristics have prompted would-be revolutionaries in Europe and the Arab World to overestimate their chances of success and mobilize precipitously against well-fortified regimes (Weyland 2009, 2012).

A central element in these examples is the “availability heuristic.”\(^{12}\) During decision-making, people conserve time and cognitive energy by drawing upon the information that is most readily available. In this process, pieces of evidence that are especially vivid or salient come to mind more easily. The availability heuristic is defined as “the tendency for people to estimate the likelihood of an event [e.g., an automobile accident, a nuclear meltdown, a foreign state threatening Americans] based upon the ease with which they can recall a specific instance” of a prior such event (Monahan and Valeri 2018, 215).

When this heuristic operates, available datapoints play a disproportionate role in judgment. Seeing two wrecked cars by the side of the road may induce someone to suddenly drive more cautiously than before, even though that single accident did not change the likelihood of a collision (Tversky and Kahneman 1973, 230). Availability can also prompt (unintentionally) riskier behavior. After the September 11, 2001 attacks, many Americans opted to drive rather than fly, even though the likelihood of a serious automobile crash had not changed—in fact, road travel remained much riskier than air travel (Monahan and Valeri 2018, 219).

If the availability heuristic affects judgments about driving—an area in which even politically inattentive Americans have ample experience and knowledge—it is
reasonable to expect that this cognitive shortcut may be equally influential in their judgments on foreign policy, a far less familiar subject. When respondents are asked whether they approve of military action overseas, their assessment of how much the intervention will prevent an attack against Americans (and thereby reduce risk) depends on how aggressive the target is thought to be if left alone. Rather than systematically reviewing the information they have heard about the target’s military capability and posture, they are likely to rely on any “dramatic and salient” representations promulgated by political authorities and media sources (Tversky and Kahneman 1973, 228). Strong negative images will make those interventions more compelling for risk reduction than actions against less notorious targets.

There are signs in the literature that respondents have been making judgments in ways consistent with the availability heuristic. The “9/11” attacks provide the most discussed example of a mass casualty event that dominated how Americans thought about national security (Kern, Just, and Norris 2003, 282). According to John Mueller (2006), “terrorism anxiety” has fomented hasty, ill-considered, and overwrought reaction[s], including historic support for the incumbent president and his policies overseas (pp. 1, 29, 60). Such “overwrought” responses are consistent with Jeffrey Mondak’s (1993) finding that available examples may be particularly potent when promulgated by trusted sources (p. 181). As it happened, Americans’ responses extended beyond retaliating against the hijackers’ associates and appeared to escalate even before the White House promoted them. Scott Althaus and Devon Largio found evidence of widespread animus toward Iraqi president Saddam Hussein immediately after September 11, 2001. This sentiment predated the George W. Bush administration’s campaign to portray Hussein as an existential threat (2004).

Although cognitive heuristics may have been atypically strong during 2001 to 2003, there is evidence that they operated during earlier periods. In August 1990, George H. W. Bush condemned Hussein’s “aggression” against Kuwait, marking the Iraqi president as an international menace (Jentleson 1994). During the 1990 to 1991 Gulf War, Saddam Hussein’s name “ranked number seven on the list of the most-used words or phrases in US media coverage and . . . the name of Hitler was connected with Saddam in 25% of cases” (Ottosen 1995, 99). Amid that conflict, “the New York Times and Washington Post together published more than 200 pieces invoking the Saddam-as-Hitler analogy” (Liberman 2006, 698). Several other studies have noted how Hussein was “demonized” and how this portrayal increased intervention support during the 1990s (Eichenberg 2005, 173; Herman 1993, 39; Jentleson 1992, 51; Lakoff 1991, 26-27; Mueller 2006, 126-27). Hussein’s availability as a salient adversary predated “9/11” and helps explain why Americans were quick to connect him to that attack and other terrorist plots (Rauch 2001; Rose and Vulliamy 2001).

In the case of the Afghanistan and Iraq wars, the images of brutal enemies (and their past atrocities) may have amplified elite cues and boosted popular approval for interventions the White House sought to pursue (Aday 2017; Baum 2005). It is also
possible, however, that the availability heuristic foments hawkish sentiments that the sitting president does not want to encourage.

That scenario manifested in 2014 to 2015 as Obama sought to manage public hostility toward ISIS. Around the time ISIS fighters executed American journalists James Foley and Steven Sotloff in summer 2014, Obama began “Operation Inherent Resolve,” ordering air strikes against ISIS positions (Bacevich 2016). In November 2015, however, coordinated ISIS attacks in Paris raised concerns anew. Members of the press corps communicated they felt the president was not doing enough against ISIS. At one testy news conference, journalists from CBS, NBC, and CNN asked: “[W]ill you widen the rules of engagement for U.S. forces to take more aggressive action?” “[D]o you think you really understand this enemy well enough to defeat them and to protect the homeland?” and “[W]hy can’t we take out these bastards?” (White House 2015). In response, Obama abjured a larger operation and cautioned that military escalation would entail “enormous sacrifices” for troops and “their families.” This argument did not prevent nearly two-thirds of survey respondents disapproving of his approach (CNN/ORC 2015). In effect, ISIS had imprinted its grisly tactics on average Americans and was overriding the commander in chief’s injunctions for calm.

These examples provide an initial basis for incorporating the availability heuristic in a model that also accounts for the effects of the “pretty prudent public,” elite cues, and conventional cost-benefit calculations. Within an overarching framework of intervention as risk reduction, I assess the relative power of each of these variables. For reasons of theory building, I give particular attention to PPO and the availability heuristic, areas in which the intellectual terrain is particularly fertile. I also incorporate variables for elite cues and traditional risk aversion. These factors, however, are more firmly established in prior scholarship and, in this article, I attend to them without examining them in great detail. (Naturally, readers may opt to revisit this approach through the publicly available data set.)

I derive five hypotheses. The first two hypotheses address the explanatory power of the “pretty prudent public.” Hypothesis 3 considers the power of elite cues. It predicts that mentioning the president in a survey item or conveying that the president has ordered military action (“rally ‘round the flag” effect, henceforth “rally effect”) will raise support for intervention. The final two hypotheses consider different effects of the availability heuristic. One is a general “post-9/11” boost in support for intervention. The other is target specific; it predicts that intervention proposals against enemies associated with vivid acts of aggression (Saddam Hussein since 1990, Osama bin Laden and al-Qaeda after September 11, ISIS after summer 2014) will garner higher levels of support than other questions about the use of force abroad.

Hypothesis 1 (PPO [internal]): Public approval levels for interventions of “FPR” will be significantly higher than for missions of “IPC.”
Hypothesis 2 (PPO [external]): The variable of PPO will carry more explanatory power than other independent variables and controls.

Hypothesis 3 (presidential cues and “rally effect”): Public approval levels for initiating intervention will be higher when respondents are informed that the president is considering or has ordered an intervention.

Hypothesis 4 (availability heuristic [post-9/11]): Public approval levels for intervention will be higher in questions asked after September 11, 2001.

Hypothesis 5 (availability heuristic [salient adversary]): Public approval levels for intervention will be higher when the proposed intervention targets a foreign actor well known for endangering Americans: Saddam Hussein, Osama bin Laden, al-Qaeda, ISIS.

Research Design

Testing the hypotheses required building a new data set of public support on the initiation of military intervention (the dependent variable) and the hypothesized variables that shaped levels of support. The iPoll Databank of the Roper Center for Public Opinion Research at Cornell University provided thousands of potentially relevant survey results (https://ropercenter.cornell.edu/). From this large set of data on intervention attitudes, I confined the data to observations that met three scope conditions. The survey item addressed (1) the initiation of (2) military intervention by (3) American forces. Future work may revisit these parameters, but, for this article, they establish the population of observations.

The first criterion, the initiation of interventions, followed Jentleson and Britton’s (1998) criterion of studying cases “in which force was used or at least imminently threatened and was thus also debated in public opinion polls” (p. 396). However, it differed from their works and those of others (e.g., Eichenberg 2005) by excluding questions on ongoing interventions from polls deployed beyond the first month of operations. For example, the data set omitted questions on Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan (begun on October 7, 2001) after November 7, 2001. Additionally, even the first month of questions was coded to take note that the survey had been deployed after the president had ordered military action. These items constituted 16 percent of the data.

The second scope condition focused on military intervention as opposed to other government actions overseas. This concept matched Elizabeth Saunders’s (2009) concept of military intervention: large-scale deployments “across international boundaries to influence an outcome in another state or . . . between other states . . . ” (pp. 122-23). In addition to standard ground operations, the data set included questions on Special Missions Units (Army Special Forces, Navy SEALs, etc.), which often involve less than 1,000 personnel. I also included sea- and air-based interventions (Regan 1998, 756-57). Because the leading hypotheses address risks borne by
members of the US armed forces, the data set excluded items that referred to unmanned aerial vehicles ("drones"), actions of nonmilitary personnel (i.e., intelligence professionals), or interventions via foreign proxies.17

The third criterion confined the realm of questions to polling items that explicitly mentioned American forces. For example, surveys that asked whether respondents approved of “United Nations (UN) peacekeepers,” but did not describe US involvement, were omitted.

These parameters produced 1,080 survey questions (across 651 different questionnaires) from 1981 to 2016. In total, the questions addressed possible or recently launched interventions in thirty-three countries. Dual-country missions (e.g., peacekeeping on the Egyptian–Israeli border, fighting militants in Iraq and Syria) were coded separately (and added four more sites).

The dependent variable is the total level of approval among respondents. Following Benjamin Page, Robert Shapiro, and others, the values of the dependent variable were nationally representative aggregates, not individual responses (Page and Shapiro 1992; Wittkopf 1990; Holsti 1992).18 Where applicable, “strong” and “moderate” approval were combined.

Figure 1 graphs the distribution of values of the dependent variable across the 1,080 observations. Table 1 shows the sites with at least five survey questions. (The Online Appendix includes further descriptive statistics and a complete list of survey coverage.)

For measuring the explanatory variables, I coded each survey question individually across the range of independent variables and controls (see the Online Appendix for additional details on coding methods.) Because the dependent variable was total level of support for military intervention, as described in the survey item, coders measured the independent variables based on the information the enumerator...
The main alternative in prior literature entails retrospectively coding all questions about a given intervention based on researchers’ subsequent knowledge of the event. This article’s sensitivity to question wording carries three advantages over that approach.

First, with question-specific coding, a single intervention scenario can assume different values of the independent variables depending on how it is presented. If a survey item on striking targets in Iraq in 1998 mentioned enforcing UNSC Resolution 687 to prevent Hussein from developing WMDs, then variables for “air strikes,” “UN support,” “Saddam Hussein,” and “Iraq” were measured accordingly. By contrast, a separate survey question, on that same mission, that only described generic “military action” against Iraq, was coded to capture that language as well, that is, as “0” for the variables of air strikes, UN support, and Saddam Hussein and as “1” for Iraq.

Second, fidelity to question wording helps ensure statistical coefficients accurately measure a relationship between the independent variables, as expressed in the language of the survey item, and the dependent variable of aggregate intervention.

Table 1. Intervention Polling Items by Site (5+ Observations).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Dates of Survey Coverage</th>
<th>N</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Iraq</td>
<td>1990 to 2014</td>
<td>395</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bosnia</td>
<td>1992 to 1994</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iraq and Syria</td>
<td>2014 to 2016</td>
<td>62</td>
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<tr>
<td>Iran</td>
<td>1987 to 1995</td>
<td>54</td>
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<tr>
<td>Kosovo</td>
<td>1999</td>
<td>49</td>
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<tr>
<td>Afghanistan</td>
<td>2001</td>
<td>48</td>
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<tr>
<td>Syria</td>
<td>1994 to 2014</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Haiti</td>
<td>1993 to 2004</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Democratic People’s Republic of Korea</td>
<td>1993 to 2014</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Libya</td>
<td>1981 to 2011</td>
<td>32</td>
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<tr>
<td>Saudi Arabia</td>
<td>1986 to 1998</td>
<td>32</td>
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<tr>
<td>Kuwait</td>
<td>1990 to 1993</td>
<td>27</td>
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<tr>
<td>Israel</td>
<td>1946 to 2014</td>
<td>26</td>
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<tr>
<td>Russia</td>
<td>1999</td>
<td>22</td>
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<tr>
<td>El Salvador</td>
<td>1981 to 1985</td>
<td>19</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lebanon</td>
<td>1958 to 2007</td>
<td>17</td>
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<tr>
<td>Somalia</td>
<td>1992 to 2002</td>
<td>12</td>
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<tr>
<td>Grenada</td>
<td>1983</td>
<td>11</td>
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<tr>
<td>Liberia</td>
<td>2003</td>
<td>9</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sudan</td>
<td>2002 to 2010</td>
<td>9</td>
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<tr>
<td>Colombia</td>
<td>1989 to 2004</td>
<td>8</td>
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<tr>
<td>Nicaragua</td>
<td>1983 to 1987</td>
<td>8</td>
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<tr>
<td>Panama</td>
<td>1988 to 1990</td>
<td>8</td>
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<tr>
<td>Afghanistan and Sudan</td>
<td>1998</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Honduras</td>
<td>1983 to 1988</td>
<td>5</td>
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approval. Such attention would be less important if the main hypotheses concerned variables other than survey cues. The present hypotheses, though, posit effects based on specific traits and contexts of the intervention, for example, the PPO of “FPR” will elicit more support than “IPC;” intervention proposals that mention US casualties will be less popular than those that do not. Question-specific measurement was essential for valid results.

Third, coding based on item language sticks to the information shared by all the people who answered the item, without imputing contextual knowledge that may vary across the population in unmeasured ways. Such precision matters when observations come from politically inattentive respondents (Converse 1964; Zaller 1992). The prevalence of answers from “low-information” voters in the data makes it important to explain responses based on how the enumerator described the intervention rather than on what the coder knows about the intervention (Drury et al. 2010; cf. Jentleson and Britton 1998, 407).

Consider, for example, the 2011 no-fly zone in Libya, authorized by UN Security Council Resolution 1973. Did the resolution alter survey responses toward the war? For Americans aware of the resolution, perhaps it did. For respondents unaware of the issue, however, it would be inappropriate to assign explanatory weight to UN authorization. This article does not assume respondents had a more detailed grasp of an intervention policy than what the survey question provided them.

Having established how explanatory and control variables were coded, I turn to the main independent variables (PPO, presidential cues, and the availability heuristic) and the control variables, which centered on conventional risk aversion.

With respect to PPO, I categorized each question in one of four mutually exclusive, collectively exhaustive types. The first three types come from Jentleson and Britton (1998): IPC, FPR, and humanitarian intervention. “Peacekeeping” constituted a fourth PPO (see Eichenberg 2005, 162). The distribution in the data set was IPC (471 observations), FPR (462), humanitarian (78), and peacekeeping (69). In the statistical models, IPC was the omitted category. Reported coefficients reflect the relative difference compared to attitudes on IPC.

For elite cues, I measured two variables: “presidential cues” and “rally effect.” Survey items that mentioned the current president or his administration were coded as “1” for presidential cues. The “rally ‘round the flag effect” is the tendency for Americans to fall in line behind the commander in chief’s foreign policy during times of conflict (Jentleson 1992, 52). Whereas “presidential cues” capture whether associating the intervention with the White House altered opinions, the “rally effect” variable assesses whether the president actually ordering intervention shifted public opinion. I coded “rally effect” as “1” if a question was asked after an intervention had begun. Thus, the variable could assess the difference between the portion of respondents who backed a possible air strike the day before any such action was launched and the portion who approved after it had occurred. A
significant effect in either elite cue variable would support the Almond–Lippmann consensus (Almond 1960; Berinsky 2009; Gelpi, Feaver, and Reifler 2009; Lippmann [1922] 1998). The absence of such effects would indicate the public’s reasoning on foreign policy issues was less pliable.  

I coded two measures to test for the observable effects of the availability heuristic: “historical time” and “target cues.” The variable of historical time gauged whether the 9/11 attacks caused a general increase in intervention support. I coded it based on whether the poll occurred during the Cold War, the early post–Cold War period (from the fall of the Berlin Wall to the attacks of September 11, 2001), or after 9/11. Fifty-three percent of the data came from post-9/11 surveys. In the statistical models, Cold War was the omitted period. Reported coefficients reflect the relative difference compared to attitudes during the Cold War.

To test whether salient foreign aggressors attracted higher levels of intervention support, I coded dummy variables for items that mentioned Saddam Hussein, Iraq, Osama bin Laden or al-Qaeda (in the post-9/11 period), Afghanistan (also in the post-9/11 period), and ISIS. Finally, I coded a set of control variables for conventional cost-benefit calculations as shaped by language about burden sharing and mission risk. Prior evidence on the impact of international partners has varied. Jentleson and Britton reported that the presence of allies had no significant statistical effect on public attitudes, while Eichenberg found that multilateralism raised levels of support (Eichenberg 2005, 142; Jentleson and Britton 1998, 412). Other studies have shown that UN Security Council resolutions boost presidential approval, a phenomenon that could also enhance support for intervention policies (Chapman and Reiter 2004; Kohut and Toth 1994, 55). To account for the impact of international allies, I coded dummy variables for whether the question stated the intervention was backed by other countries (“multilateral”) or the UN (“UN support”).

With respect to mission risk, I considered two questions: What specific type of military mission was being proposed (if any was specified)? What language was included (if any) about expected US military or foreign civilian casualties?

Prior literature shows the public has been less likely to support the use of force when polling items describe riskier ground operations (compared to, for example, air missions) or mention deaths of US uniformed personnel (Eichenberg 2005, 141-42; Jentleson and Britton 1998, 415). Thus, cues in these areas ought to complement the calculus on PPO: the lower the hazards the polling item describes, the higher the support. Notably, concern for casualties has generally not extended to non-American civilians (Tirman 2011).

For mission type, I distinguished among language identifying ground missions, air missions, Special Forces missions, and other types: naval, training, and nonspecified. In the statistical models, “ground” was the omitted category. Reported coefficients reflect the difference relative to that category. When questions mentioned deaths of US military personnel or foreign civilian casualties, the relevant variable was coded as “1.”
Empirical Findings

The 1,080 individually coded items enabled appropriate tests of public opinion predictors. The statistical method employed was ordinary least squares (two-tailed tests). Coefficients reflect the average effect on the percentage of respondents supporting the described intervention, that is, a positive 10-point coefficient is associated with a 10 percent increase in total approval, a negative 5-point coefficient means a 5 percent drop, and so on. Because standard errors were correlated within intervention locations, I report robust standard errors clustered by location. Alternate approaches did not substantively shift the results (see Online Appendix). Table 2 presents results from five models.

Model 1 includes the PPO variables and controls for risk (burden sharing, type of force, casualties). Coefficients for FPR and other objectives represent the relative difference in aggregate public intervention support relative to approval rates for IPC. In this model, PPOs for FPR and peacekeeping carry the expected (positive) sign, but they are not statistically significant at the .10 level. Humanitarian intervention is also insignificant.

Although the variable of PPO exhibits the effects postulated in Hypothesis 1, a dominant feature in model 1 (and all the models) is the significance of five of the controls. Survey items that mentioned UN support, US military casualties, and any of the non-ground mission types carried significant coefficients of six points or more. All of these coefficients are in the expected direction. The less risky an intervention sounds, the more popular it gets. With an adjusted \( R^2 \) of .150, model 1 does a reasonable job of accounting for variance across the population. However, the salience of the cost-benefit control variables points to variation that is not captured by PPO (Hypothesis 2).

Model 2 turns to Hypothesis 3 and the question of how much elites influence mass attitudes. This model includes the presidential cue and rally effect variables plus the controls. It reaches a higher adjusted \( R^2 \) (.199) than the prior model. Presidential cues are not significant, but the variable for rally effect carries a highly significant, large coefficient (11.88). In this respect, the data support Hypothesis 3.

Models 3a and 3b incorporate variables for the availability heuristic in two stages. First, I test the historical periods of early post–Cold War and post-9/11 with the controls. Both variables exhibit large positive coefficients. The result provides initial support for the idea that Americans have supported interventions more strongly during the 1990s and in the early twenty-first century, compared to during the Cold War. This effect, however, washes out with the inclusion of additional variables for target-specific triggers of the availability heuristic.

Model 3b adds variables for Saddam Hussein (since the invasion of Kuwait), Iraq (before and after 9/11), al-Qaeda and Osama bin Laden in Afghanistan (after 9/11), Afghanistan (without mention of al-Qaeda and bin Laden, but still after 9/11), and ISIS. These variables carry some of the largest significant coefficients yet, and they are all in the expected (positive) direction. Items that mention intervening against
## Table 2. Predictors of Support for Military Intervention.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
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<th>(2)</th>
<th>(3a)</th>
<th>(3b)</th>
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<td>FPR</td>
<td>3.300</td>
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<td>9.328***</td>
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<td>(3.829)</td>
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<td>9.827**</td>
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<td>Peacekeeping</td>
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<td>13.13***</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td>(5.153)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Presidential cues</td>
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<tr>
<td>Rally effect</td>
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<td>13.34***</td>
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<td>(3.536)</td>
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<td>November 10, 1989 to September 11, 2001</td>
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<td>3.363</td>
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<td></td>
<td>(5.909)</td>
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<td>September 12, 2001 to December 31, 2016</td>
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<td>-0.998</td>
<td>-3.119</td>
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<td>Iraq (pre-9/11)</td>
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<td>Iraq (post-9/11)</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>al-Qaeda in Afghanistan (post-9/11)</td>
<td>38.00***</td>
<td>37.39***</td>
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<td>32.86***</td>
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<td>ISIS</td>
<td>12.42**</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>9.488***</td>
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<td></td>
<td>(3.713)</td>
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<td>Multilateral</td>
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<td>-0.189</td>
<td>-0.671</td>
<td>3.533*</td>
<td>2.588</td>
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<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>UN support</td>
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<td>8.057**</td>
<td>6.749**</td>
<td>10.58***</td>
<td>10.27***</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Air missions</td>
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<td>6.522**</td>
<td>6.555**</td>
<td>3.701*</td>
</tr>
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</tr>
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<td>Naval/training/generic missions</td>
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<td>13.41***</td>
<td>12.50***</td>
<td>8.045***</td>
<td>7.277***</td>
</tr>
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<td>(2.051)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(1.903)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special Forces missions</td>
<td>27.69***</td>
<td>28.50***</td>
<td>25.26***</td>
<td>15.52***</td>
<td>15.00***</td>
</tr>
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<td>(5.387)</td>
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<td>(1.325)</td>
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<td>US military casualties</td>
<td>-11.46**</td>
<td>-10.50***</td>
<td>-12.20***</td>
<td>-16.40***</td>
<td>-14.88***</td>
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<td></td>
<td>(3.310)</td>
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<td>(4.274)</td>
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<td>Civilian casualties</td>
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<td>-1.674</td>
<td>-3.722</td>
<td>-10.88***</td>
<td>-7.301***</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td>(7.714)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td>(1.862)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>47.08***</td>
<td>46.60***</td>
<td>39.26***</td>
<td>39.56***</td>
<td>33.35***</td>
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<td>(4.746)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(3.220)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
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<td>1.080</td>
<td>1.080</td>
<td>1.080</td>
<td>1.080</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>adjusted R²</td>
<td>.150</td>
<td>.199</td>
<td>.163</td>
<td>.388</td>
<td>.495</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Dependent variable: aggregate public support for military intervention. Two-tailed tests. Robust standard errors are given in parentheses.

ISIS = Islamic State in Iraq and Syria; FPR = foreign policy restraint.

*p < .10.

**p < .05.

***p < .001.
Saddam Hussein and Iraq subsequent to September 11, 2001 show, in combination, a nearly twenty-point increase in support. Items asking about attacking al-Qaeda or bin Laden in Afghanistan after 9/11 have nearly twice that effect (thirty-eight points). With these predictors, model 3b reaches an adjusted $R^2$ of .388—even though the coefficients for historical periods shrunk and lost significance. (In this model only, “multilateral” carries a significant (positive) coefficient.)

Model 4 reincorporates PPO and elite cues to deliver the most persuasive model of variance in aggregate intervention support (adjusted $R^2$ of .495). Coefficients for PPO (relative to IPC) grew and gained significance (compared to model 1), with the coefficient for FPR reaching 9.3. Nonetheless, the coefficient for the rally effect remained larger (at 13.3) than any of the variables for PPO. Results related to the availability heuristic generally remained the same, although the coefficient for Hussein and Iraq after 9/11 grew (by nearly ten points combined) while the coefficient for ISIS shrank (by three points).

In addition to running the tests reported in Table 2, I conducted supplementary tests of the hypotheses on other subsamples of the data and through non-OLS techniques. These alternative approaches checked whether the observed predictors of public support for intervention were being produced by outliers or idiosyncratic modeling decisions. The Online Appendix reports those results in full. I summarize them here.

To assess whether a particular group of data was skewing the results, I tested the hypotheses across the following subsamples: post-9/11 observations only, countries that had at least five observations, non-Iraq-related observations, and questions posed before intervention began. I also ran models that looked only at non-Iraq and non-Afghanistan interventions before 9/11. Those models contrasted the predictive power of historical era with the availability heuristic and considered attitudes before and after the public introduction of the Internet. Results remained substantively the same.

The full sample also went through several non-OLS model specifications. The normal distribution of observations in the data set made OLS appropriate, but the bounded dependent variable suggested other techniques as well. To evaluate whether the use of OLS was driving the results, I ran the full model through a fractional probit test, a fractional logit test, and a beta regression test. Again, results did not substantively change.

Turning to the broader findings and larger theoretical implications, the results moderately to strongly supported three of the five hypotheses, while reducing confidence in the remaining two propositions. First, with respect to the explanatory power of the “pretty prudent public” thesis as operationalized in PPO (Hypothesis 1), evidence was mixed. Consistent with Jentleson (1992) and Jentleson and Britton (1998), IPC remained the least popular intervention objective. Further, the data showed some differences among the other PPOs, with peacekeeping being the most popular.

Overall, PPO stands as an important component of any explanation of mass attitudes toward the use of force. However, the results complicate the notion
informing Hypothesis 2 that PPO is “the most powerful and parsimonious explanation” for variance in intervention support since the Cold War (Jentleson and Britton 1998, 396). The present data point to the value of combining variables for conventional risk aversion with measures of bounded rationality. Variables for the “pretty prudent public” performed best in model 4, in conjunction with other measures of risk aversion, and with the rally effect and the availability heuristic.

Variables for the rally effect and the availability heuristic emerged as stronger predictors of public opinion than PPO. Rally effects were clearly observable in models 2 and 4, thus supporting Hypothesis 3. Notably, the model reduced confidence in a general post-9/11 boost in support for military action (Hypothesis 4). The other measure of the availability heuristic based on language about salient adversaries (Hypothesis 5) was strongly confirmed.

**Implications**

With respect to implications, the apparent impact of bounded rationality matches the view that respondents support intervention as a means of reducing risk. It also suggests the need for greater precision about claims that Americans are “pretty prudent” about military force or “disconnected” from interventionist policymakers (Friedman and Logan 2016; Jacobs and Page 2005; Mearsheimer 2018; Page and Bouton 2006; Walt 2018).

The models that incorporated language about salient adversaries indicate the value of distinguishing between how Americans view some generic use of force, on the one hand, and how they view military action against entities associated with attacking Americans and US allies, on the other hand. In other words, whom the United States intervenes against may be more pivotal than how it intervenes (to restrain or replace regimes, via ground or air assaults, etc.).

Figures 2 and 3 illustrate the relative predictive power of the two main PPO categories (IPC and FPR) and the availability heuristic with respect to two previous foes: Saddam Hussein and ISIS.

In Figure 2, the variables for PPO, historical period, Saddam Hussein, and Iraq vary, while all other variables are held constant. The plots show predicted levels of public support for a post-9/11 survey item that describes a prospective ground mission and does not mention presidential cues, foreign allies, UN support, or casualties. Support levels for intervention are categorically lower when the target is not Saddam Hussein and Iraq.

Figure 3 shows the difference made by an ISIS cue compared to information about mission type. By late 2015, the American public appeared to favor escalating the US mission against ISIS. The plots of predicted support in Figure 3 reinforce that impression. The overall effect is less pronounced than with Saddam Hussein and Iraq but still substantial. When respondents address questions about air strikes or
Principal Policy Objective

Predictions

• Post-9/11 ground mission (no mention of Hussein or Iraq)
• Post-9/11 ground mission (against Hussein and Iraq)

Figure 2. Predicted public support for post-9/11 intervention based on principal policy objective and target.

Mission Type

Predictions

• Post-9/11 FPR intervention (no mention of ISIS)
• Post-9/11 FPR intervention (against ISIS)

Figure 3. Predicted public support for post-9/11 intervention based on force type and target.
unspecified military action, mentioning ISIS brings majority support for interventions that would otherwise enjoy less than 50 percent approval.

It is noteworthy that the comparably smaller effect of ISIS (compared to Hussein–Iraq) manifested even though the sitting president, Obama, argued against a ground intervention (Friedman 2014; Goldberg 2016). More research is needed to consider this issue, but the availability heuristic is known to interact with elite cues, typically by amplifying the message emanating from trusted sources (Kuran and Sunstein 1999, 761). Therefore, it is reasonable to expect that, under a president who is more inclined to intervene than Obama was, the effect of mentioning a salient aggressor would be larger.

The data also carry implications for theories of the “rational public.” Studies of reasoning respondents have relied heavily on the quadrennial surveys of opinion makers and ordinary Americans conducted by the Chicago Council on Global Affairs (Page and Bouton 2006; Smeltz et al. 2015). The regularity and consistency of these polls help researchers systematically track attitudes over time. Yet they also carry trade-offs. The Chicago Council surveys do not capture the ways elite cues and salient examples may sway the public during periods of crisis.

When conflicts escalate between the United States and foreign actors, the political climate typically entails substantial elite signaling and negative media coverage of adversaries. These phenomena can suppress judicious assessment and promote cognitive shortcuts, which, in turn, assign the potential targets of intervention a disproportionate role in risk assessments and, consequently, raise aggregate support for military action. To the extent that this process recurs—not only after 9/11, but also after the ISIS attacks and beyond—the findings of the Chicago Council in less agitated periods may be moot in real time.

Given that the public’s relative prudence explains a relatively small portion of overall variance in aggregate intervention attitudes, it would be inappropriate to expect differences in PPO to determine the difference between a majority of the country embracing or rejecting military action against a salient adversary. Instead, the variables that are likely to hold the most influence over public opinion are elite cues and elements of bounded rationality, particularly the availability heuristic. Such a revision carries immediate implications for understanding contemporary public opinion on world politics, for example, with respect to Americans’ attitudes toward the Islamic Republic of Iran.

Ever since the hostage crisis of November 1979, the US government has maintained economic sanctions on Iran. In January 2002, President George W. Bush placed Iran, alongside Iraq and North Korea, in the “Axis of Evil.” The Iraqi regime, of course, was overthrown in 2003, and that same year, North Korea declared it possessed a nuclear deterrent. Against this backdrop, Iran became one of the most-discussed targets of a potential regime change war (see Mearsheimer and Walt 2007, 305; Shuster 2007; Bolton 2015; Landler 2018). Therefore, it is reasonable to consider how the present findings could shed light on American attitudes about an anti-Iran intervention.
Should one expect Americans to be “pretty prudent” about a potential military conflict with Iran? In the narrow sense of PPOs, the answer is “Yes.” If past trends hold, fewer Americans would support the use of force to restructure the internal politics of Iran (IPC) than to check Iran’s external behavior (FPR). But if such options were being actively discussed, the impact of PPO language would likely matter less than whether just mentioning the country of Iran activated available images of a threatening regime that “must” be stopped. From that perspective, the answer to the question of whether Americans would be prudent toward Iran could also be “No.”

Recent empirical evidence supports such skepticism. Average public approval for intervention in Iran grew fourteen points from George W. Bush’s tenure (average of 44 percent) to during the Obama administration, when the mean reached 58 percent. In the Chicago Council’s 2014 poll, Iran stood out as a country against which ordinary Americans were more willing than elites to endorse military action. Sixty-nine percent of the overall public favored “using US troops to stop Iran from obtaining nuclear weapons” (Smeltz et al. 2015, 13, 22). Although such data are only suggestive, they underline the need to chart the boundaries between cognitive shortcuts and conventional judgment.

Extensions

Looking ahead, there are three avenues for building on the present study and integrating the influence of bounded rationality with conventional cost-benefit variables. First, the models reported above (and in the Online Appendix) constitute only an initial cut at analyzing past data. Observationally, these data, which can be expanded as more surveys become available, provide a resource for analyzing opinion trends more systematically than prior works. Using the method of question-specific coding, researchers can drill down into the effects of question cues on survey responses.

Second, the data set and polling questions provide a template for laboratory and survey experiments. Variables for PPO, presidential cues, and the availability heuristic can be converted into experimental treatments, increasing confidence that the observed statistical effects on aggregate public opinion are operating as hypothesized at the individual level. Such work can also assess subjects’ political knowledge and gauge whether political inattentiveness increases reliance on cognitive shortcuts during political judgments.

Third and finally, if the availability heuristic is influential, then explaining when and how that cognitive shortcut becomes activated will be an important question. Prior work has pointed to the phenomenon of “availability entrepreneurs,” people who deliberately promote disturbing images in an effort to sway mass attitudes to support their preferred policy, for example, environmental regulation, war, gun control (Kuran and Sunstein 1999). Under what conditions do such efforts succeed? Discussions of military intervention present a vital area for exploring this question. For example, under what conditions would proponents of regime change in Tehran
be likely to mobilize the kind of public animus toward the Iranian government that characterized opinion toward Hussein, al-Qaeda, and ISIS?

**Conclusion**

Knowledge accumulation on American attitudes toward military intervention depends on integrating rival theories, particularly claims about the power of elite cues and individual reasoning. I have pursued this aim by treating intervention support as a means of risk reduction, reexamining the “pretty prudent thesis,” incorporating claims of bounded rationality, and testing relevant hypotheses using a new data set with over 1,000 observations from thirty-six years of polling. Results showed the power of a theoretical synthesis—comprising conventional cost-benefits calculations, elite influence, and the availability heuristic—for explaining public support for intervention.

The predictive power of the rally effect and the availability heuristic indicated that the relative popularity of the Afghanistan and Iraq wars in 2001 to 2003 carry broader implications. When Americans are asked about confronting salient adversaries, the compulsion to “do something” may subsume the typical reticence to pursue regime change or send troops on high-risk missions. This process manifested dramatically when the United States confronted ISIS after summer 2014 and may accompany future campaigns abroad.

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Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online. The article’s Online Appendix discusses a series of robustness checks and additional analyses. Replication data and instructions are posted on the journal website.

Notes

1. This article does not address the important question of why Americans support withdrawing or sustaining their armed forces abroad. Rather, it identifies conditions that incline Americans to approve of intervening at the outset.

2. The complete data set begins from 1946 and includes an additional seventeen observations from 1946 to 1980. The small size of this earlier historical sample limits the ability to draw conclusions on that era with confidence. I therefore omitted these observations from the present analysis. Inclusion of those data does not alter the substance of the results. The Online Appendix includes results from the full sample of 1,097 observations.

3. Using ordinary least squares (OLS) follows the convention of prior studies (Eichenberg 2005; Jentleson 1992; Jentleson and Britton 1998). Additional tests (reported in the Online Appendix) encompassed supplemental techniques that checked to make sure results had not been produced by idiosyncratic modeling decisions.

4. The literature is vast. Other recent contributions include Baum and Potter (2015), Berinsky (2009), Feaver and Gelpi (2011), Gelpi, Feaver, and Reifler (2005–2006), and Western (2005).

5. Jentleson’s thesis has made tremendous waves, as hundreds of Google Scholar citations indicate.

6. Their data covered six sites: Iraq, Rwanda, Somalia, North Korea, Bosnia, and Haiti. Multivariate OLS models tested principal policy objective against five additional independent and control variables (Jentleson and Britton 1998, 410-13).

7. In addition, on questions about historical periodization and the significance of other cost-benefit factors, see Eichenberg (2005, 142) and Oneal et al. (1996, 273).

8. Note that an alternate formulation might be warranted if one were to consider questions about prolonging existing combat missions. In that case, respondents might become more risk acceptant. As explained below, however, the scope conditions of the present data focus on the initiation of combat interventions, at which point no costs have been incurred.

9. Teppo Felin and coauthors have recently critiqued prospect theory and cognitive heuristics more broadly by noting that the human mind is necessarily selective in how it handles information. They question the external validity of experimental work that directs subjects to focus on a certain task and then quizzes them about broader observations. Such concerns bear on the interpretation of any study of public opinion trends (including this one) that deals with focused survey questions. It is reasonable to surmise that attitudes given in answer to specific question on interventions will vary from attitudes expressed if respondents were given more open-ended questions, such as “What are the main problems in the world today? Or “Where and how should the United States be using its military?” (see Felin et al. 2017; Felin 2018). For an introduction to the larger debate
about Kahneman and Tversky’s findings, consult Engber (2016), Schimmack, Heene, and Kesavan (2017), McKelvie and Drumheller (2001), and Schwarz et al. (1991).

10. At the same time, the present approach may not suit other realms of public opinion, particularly when the issues do not revolve around mitigating physical risks (Friedman and Logan 2016; Wlezien 2015).

11. The original three main heuristics were availability, representativeness, and anchoring (Kahneman 2003; Tversky and Kahneman 1974).

12. Among many identified cognitive shorts, availability has been identified as the dominant heuristic. According to Kuran and Sunstein (1999), “the availability heuristic rules the roost” (p. 712).


14. On public relations campaign leading to the Iraq War, see Kaufmann (2004) and Oren and Solomon (2015).

15. The nature of polling opens the possibility that even the full range of data will be biased against less serious situations and cases, for which Americans were not surveyed. Such bias could inflate values of the dependent variable above what might be shown in a more comprehensive canvassing of the public’s attitudes. To the extent that observational data can reckon with this problem, one can reason that the data do a strong if still imperfect job. First, as shown in the distribution of data (Figure 1) and in the Online Appendix (Table A1), the dependent variable has a normal and broad range. Second, over 17 percent of the observations (187 polling questions) pertain to countries where US military intervention did not take place. Third and last, the main results hold under a number of alternate model specifications, including versions of the model that omit the dominant cases of Iraq and Afghanistan. For these reasons, while one does not rule out the possibility that some selection bias is baked into the polling, one can also assess with confidence that such bias has been minimized to the greatest extent possible and that it does not appear to have substantively shaped the results.

16. Researchers seeking to explain fluctuations in support for long-term military actions (a separate dependent variable from the one considered here) can apply the coding methodology to later polls. Results of the sample without these questions are included in the Online Appendix.

17. These coding rules heed Patrick Regan’s argument for separating military interventions from activities that carry lower public and political risks (see Regan 1998, 756-57).

18. On the value of aggregate public opinion as a dependent variable, consult the discussion in Shapiro and Page (1988, 213n1).

19. Peacekeeping is the insertion of US forces between former belligerents to deter a resumption of hostilities (Eichenberg 2005). By comparison, humanitarian interventions are missions in which the military is delivering aid and relief supplies, not engaging in combat or policing.

20. The rally effect is an extension of the “rally ‘round the flag” phenomenon (see Baker and Oneal 2001; Mueller 1970).
21. Because this article explains opinions about the initiation of intervention, long-term presidential cue effects and rally effects (beyond the first month of military actions) lie outside the study’s scope.

22. The distribution of observations was 82 items from the Cold War (January 1, 1946 to November 9, 1989), 426 items from the early post-Cold War (November 10, 1989 to September 11, 2001), 572 items after September 11, 2001 (September 12, 2001 to December 31, 2016).

23. The full data set includes a number of additional variables that did not prove significant across a range of models, including mention of North Atlantic Treaty Organization allies, weapons of mass destruction, oil resources, and Middle Eastern targets.

24. To reiterate, my focus is on anticipatory risk reduction rather than reactions to incurred losses. The bulk of prior literature focuses on the effect of US servicepersons’ deaths on public opinion toward an ongoing military mission (see Berinsky 2009; Gelpi, Feaver, and Reifler 2009; Koch and Sullivan 2010; Mueller 1973). Most famously, Mueller (1971) discovered that support for further fighting drops by fifteen-point increments with each tenfold increase in US fatalities, that is, from 100 to 1,000; from 1,000 to 10,000; and so on. This pattern recurred during the Afghanistan and Iraq wars (Jacobson 2010, 606-07).

25. “Special Forces” here is an umbrella term for missions of any Special Missions Units.

26. The distribution of types of missions across all survey items was ground (478 observations), air (210 observations), other (382 observations), and Special Forces (10).

27. Although the data cover polls across several decades, they are not cross-sectional time series. Some days have multiple observations.

28. The coefficient for “Saddam Hussein” did not vary across historical period (and were combined) while the coefficient for “Iraq” increased after September 11, 2001 (and was disaggregated by period).

29. By definition, aggregate public opinion ranges from a minimum of 0 (0 percent) to a maximum of 1 (100 percent).

30. By comparison, 64 percent of “Republican leaders,” 31 percent of “Democratic leaders,” and 35 percent of “independent leaders” approved (Smeltz et al. 2015, 13, 22).

References


