POLITICAL POLARIZATION AND THE RATIONAL PUBLIC

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May 2, 2006 DRAFT

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Abstract

The characteristics of American public opinion have been central to debates about democracy in American and the extent to which public opinion should play an important part in government policymaking. The Rational Public: Fifty Years of Trends in Americans Policy Preferences (Page and Shapiro, 1992) published nearly fifteen years ago and honored in AAPOR’s fiftieth anniversary list of the Fifty “Great Books” in the Field of Public Opinion Research, offered the provocative statement that the opinions of the American public exhibited qualities that substantially warranted their positive consideration and even influence in the policymaking process. The book contributed to the longstanding if not heated debate that still continues about the shortcomings of the mass public. This paper observes that recent changes in American politics provide additional grounds for this questioning, and attempts to sharpen how we should think further about the qualities of public opinion and also about political leadership in the United States. The partisan and ideological polarization of American politics in recent years may appears to have affected public opinion in ways different from what The Rational Public found in survey data from the 1930s to the 1980s. Public opinion in the United States has become increasingly partisan and ideological along liberal-conservative lines in ways that we can even see in the normally more bipartisan area of foreign policy. While this is not troublesome in and of itself, what is disturbing is that there is evidence that political polarization can affect how the public learns from new information that should affect its opinions. While not negating The Rational Public’s findings but, rather, confirming its warnings about the potential manipulation of public opinion, this new development raises further the questions we should ask about the behavior political leaders and other elites and the conditions under which large segments of mass public opinion may be led astray.

Introduction

The characteristics of American public opinion have been central to debates about democracy in American and the extent to which public opinion should play an important part in government policymaking. The Rational Public: Fifty Years of Trends in Americans Policy Preferences (Page and Shapiro, 1992), published nearly fifteen years ago and honored in AAPOR’s fiftieth anniversary list of the Fifty “Great Books” in the Field of Public Opinion Research, offered the provocative statement that the opinions of the American public exhibited qualities that substantially warranted their positive consideration and even influence in the policymaking process. The book contributed to a longstanding if not heated debate that continues today about the shortcomings of the mass public. Recent changes in American politics provide further grounds for this questioning, and this paper attempts to sharpen how we should think further about qualities of public opinion. The partisan and ideological polarization of American politics in recent years appears to have affected public opinion in ways different from what The Rational Public found in survey data from the 1930s to the 1980s. Public opinion in the United States has become increasingly partisan and ideological along liberal-conservative lines in ways that we can even see in the normally more bipartisan and non-ideological area of foreign policy. While this is not troublesome in and of itself, what is disturbing is that there is evidence that political polarization can affect how the public learns from new information that should affect its opinions. While not negating The Rational Public’s findings and confirming its warnings about the potential manipulation of public opinion, this new development requires that we sharpen the questions that we ask about the behavior of political leaders and elites, and the conditions under which large segments of mass public opinion may move astray.

The Rational Public

The question, “Is the public rational?”, connoting one use of the term “rational,” was raised loudly worldwide by those who strongly opposed the re-election of President George W. Bush in 2004. Case in point, the cover page of the Daily Mirror on November 4, 2004: “How can 59,054,087 people be so DUMB?” (see copy of the magazine cover that is included before Figure 1). We do not hesitate to answer this: The voters had reasons for this that deserved some respect or at least further analysis (e.g., see Langer and Cohen, 2005; Hilligus and Shields, 2005). That the public has reasons for its opinions—ostensibly good reasons—is the theme of The Rational Public (Page and Shapiro, 1992), and it echoes other notable books: Reasoning and Choice (Sniderman, Brody, and Tetlock, 1991), The Reasoning Voter (Popkin, 1991); The Democratic Dilemma (Lupia and McCubbins, 1998); The Macro Polity (Erikson, MacKuen, and Stimson, 2002); Polling Matters (Newport, 2004); In Defense of Public Opinion Polling (Warren, 2001), and the article, “The Pretty Prudent Public” (Jentleson, 1992). Those who oppose these opinions or voting decisions may disagree with the reasons, but public opinion and the behavior of voters are understandable, explicable, defensible, given the information that is available to the public—and thus “rational” in this sense. This is the central claim of The Rational Public. Specifically, Page and Shapiro argue and show that
the public opinion, in the aggregate, contrary to early claims by past critics about the public’s volatility and inexplicability, makes distinctions among issues, is not wildly changing or fluctuating, exhibits substantial stability, and changes in response to identifiable stimuli -- changes in real world conditions and new information that become available to it.

More fully, in a follow-up article in which Page and Shapiro respond to their critics, including some discussed further below, they review their main propositions: (1) the public’s policy preferences, taken collectively, are real, not meaningless or “nonattitudes”; (2) they are measurable, often well, through sample surveys; (3) they tend to be stable – large changes do not occur often and wild fluctuations are rare; (4) these preferences are generally not conflicting or contradictory; (5) they tend to form coherent patterns that make sense in terms of underlying values and beliefs; (6) they often reveal clear and meaningful distinctions between alternative policies; (7) when collective changes in policy preferences occur, they mostly do so in understandable ways in response to social or economic changes or events as reported and interpreted in the mass media; (8) changes in these opinions are often predictable; and (9) these changes in collective preferences generally constitute sensible adjustments to new conditions and new information as communicated to the public (Page and Shapiro, 1999). One of their main points, and we think their most important one, as they reassert it, is:

“that surveys—if carefully conducted and interpreted—can shed a great deal of light on the state of collective policy preferences at any given moment and, especially, on how preferences change over time. Some of the most compelling evidence for the existence of real opinion and real changes comes from the large (usually gradual) shifts that can be tracked for the public as a whole, with parallel shifts among most population subgroups. These are hardly explicable in terms of ‘nonattitudes’ (cf. Converse, 1964; Zaller, 1992)” (Page and Shapiro, 1999, p.98).

In critiques of The Rational Public’s arguments, the above reference to opinion data from “carefully conducted and interpreted” surveys is a qualification that has been largely ignored by those who have questioned the book’s premises and propositions. What is also overlooked -- and here Page and Shapiro (1992) may not have been as clear as they should have -- is that the policy issues they analyze are those that are salient enough to have been included in national surveys. Last, and most important with regard to the question posed above about the 2004 election, The Rational Public does not claim that public opinion is always right or wise. Rather, the public is only as wise as the information available to it enables it to be – information largely from leaders and elite circles communicated through the mass media. How much of a problem, then, has the lack of high quality information been for public opinion and American democracy (cf. Key, 1961)? Some readers may conclude that Page and Shapiro (1992, 1999) and especially Johns Zaller’s (1992, especially Chapter 12) subsequent AAPOR award-winning book (which disagrees with The Rational Public regarding how “real” the public’s attitudes are) leaves readers sanguine about elite leadership and the overall quality of the information the public receives over the long-term. It is possible that the 2004 election was an exception and -- perhaps more to the liking of the poser of the
question about the 59 million voters --the American electorate was duped by its political leaders.

As we see it, however, something deeper is happening in American politics that may challenge – or at least complicate – The Rational Public. We examine this using the existing critiques of the book as our take-off point.

The Rational Public’s Critics

The Rational Public’s critics can be divided into three groups. To distinguish them, we will refer to them as the (1) “illusion of public opinion,” “phantom public,” or “nonattitudes” critics, (2) “the political knowledge matters” critics, and (3) the “cognitive heuristic bias” or “perceptual bias” critics. All three have provided important analyses and insights about public opinion.

The names of the first group corresponds to the titles of George Bishop’s recent book (Bishop, 2005), Walter Lippman earlier famous one (Lippman, 1925), and one of the phrases associate with Philip Converse’s seminal work (1964) and related analyses. This group has elaborated upon the early critics of George Gallup’s announcement that polling was a breakthrough for democracy – for engaging government leaders and the nation with “public opinion” as a direct participant on the national scene (Gallup and Rae, 1940). Lindsay Rogers’ The Pollsters (1949) was a book-length treatment of this that summarized a litany of shortcoming of polls and the public, ranging from the public responding to questions on issues they had not thought about, their not being attentive to politics, the polls failing to account for the intensity of opinions that people do have, and objections to anything that seems to approximate governing by referendum or direct democracy. These are the critics whom The Rational Public addressed by presenting large-scale evidence regarding how public opinion measured in polls nonetheless revealed much of value and importance about public opinion on policy issues that are salient enough to be asked about in national surveys. Rogers and others objected to the idea of government responding to the autonomous groundswell of public opinion that emerged in polls without allowing for deliberative and institutional processes to intervene. While this might have been what George Gallup suggested, The Rational Public was less influenced by George Gallup than by V.O. Key (1961, 1964) who emphasized the importance, most of all, of political leadership, foremost among other influences on public opinion.

Nevertheless, the more recent among the first group of critics – especially Bishop (2005; cf. Weissberg, 2002) and Converse (1964) and others have been more empirically based than the early critics. Bishop offers a very rich and detailed treatise that illustrates the shortcomings of survey measures of public opinion found in polls which he argues cannot provide any direct guidance to political leaders, policymakers, or anyone else. Bishop’s work makes, we think, a definitive case against the “referendum” model or use of responses it single questions in public opinion polls (see Schuman, 1986). It also emphasizes the need for carefully done surveys and cautious interpretations. This does
not much undermine Page and Shapiro’s (1992, 1999) arguments, since they do not rely on single questions but rather on opinion trend data and comparisons across questions and issues. They also do not implicitly or explicitly assume that political leaders in making use of information about public opinion would naively take responses in individual survey questions or polls at face value (see Jacobs and Shapiro (2000) and note the recent appointment of Peter Feaver, a political scientist and public opinion expert, to the Bush administration). Moreover, the illusion of public opinion critics have not challenged the full sweep of evidence in The Rational Public. In the end, public opinion on some issues fit the “illusion of public opinion” critique but a great deal of survey data do not, which is consistent with the existence of a wide range of “issue publics” (Converse, 1964) and with the observation that the salience of issues is endogenous, that is, the size of issue publics can increase over time as issue become more publicly visible and can cover close to the entire public (Shapiro, 1998).

The second group of critics offers a more compelling challenge to The Rational Public’s evidence since it takes on the survey measures of public opinion on a wide range of major issues as well as trend data of the sort examined by Page and Shapiro. The political knowledge critics disagree with Page and Shapiro that the public does well with the information available to it. However, neither Page and Shapiro (1992), Popkin (1991), or others or would deny that it would be better to have a more well informed and more fully engaged citizenry, but they do not try to find out what better informed public preferences would be. In contrast, several important works by Delli Carpini and Keeter (1996), Bartels (1996a, 1996b), Althaus (1998, 2003), Gilens (2001), and Fishkin (1995, 1999) examined this in various ways. Collectively they have compared the opinion of segments of the public with different levels and types of knowledge, simulated “informed” or “enlightened” public preferences or vote choices, and done the equivalent of experiments comparing publics before and after receiving and using new information. By using survey data that enable them to compare the opinion of less informed versus highly informed individuals, they have been able to provide estimates of what the opinions of a highly informed public would look like. These informed or “enlightened” opinions could be compared with the opinions of the original survey sample to get a sense of the shortcomings of public opinion as typically measured in surveys.

There evidence showed that knowledge does make important differences in surveyed measure of public opinion. These differences were usually not very large or frequent, but in the case of candidate choices or, presumably, referendum issues, these small percentage can be politically decisive in particular circumstances. But, compared do the data marshaled by Page and Shapiro (1992), Erikson et al. (2002), Mayer (1993), and many other studies, taking into account the gaps in knowledge does not alter The Rational Public’s and related arguments. In particular, while knowledge effects responses to survey questions – e.g., the level of support for a policy or proposal – the changes over time in well informed versus well informed opinions rarely differ by much, falling short of the standard set in The Rational Public for significant divergences over time in subgroup opinion trends (we will examine such trends further below).
To the extent that knowledge matters, as odd as it might seem, it is not a certainty, that opinions of the well informed or ostensibly “enlightened” are the wisest ones. If the quality of the information they have is questionable – leaving their opinions worse than it would be if they did not have such information—this would certainly not be a good outcome. The Rational Public reports some cases in which there were educational differences in opinion on issues like legalizing marijuana and expectations regarding the Soviet Union, for which the opinion of the most well educated, arguably better informed than those with less education, ultimately moved toward the opinions of those having less education (Page and Shapiro, 1992, p.203-4, 316). We would hesitate to draw any broad conclusion from this, except that in looking toward an informed public makes us mindful of the quality of the information that is available to the public, how different subgroups of the public respond to it, and how public opinion might be adversely affected or manipulated by political leaders or other providing the information. We will return to this below as well.

The “cognitive heuristic bias” or “perceptual bias” critique is a fundamental and compelling one. The Rational Public counts heavily on the public using information from anywhere it can get it and using whatever heuristics or information shortcut where it can (see Sniderman et al., 1991; Downs, 1957). The problem here is that this depends on the quality of the information provided by the sources used as short-cuts and how cognitive and perceptual processes affect what individuals – and the public as whole – learn. Somewhat akin to how problems are “framed” trigger psychological distortions that have posed problems for rational choice theories in economics (see Glynn et al., 2004, Ch.7, comparing economic with psychological and sociological influences on public opinion), distorting or misleading heuristics pose a problem for individuals’ evaluations and judgments. Such problems would occur if trusted sources offer false or incomplete information serving the interests of the source but not individual citizens or the public at large, so that public opinion in the aggregate or the opinions of subgroups changes in the “wrong” direction or if opinion fails to change when it should.

The most important critics and relevant works include Kuklinski and Quirk (2000), Kuklinski and Hurley (1994), Lau and Redlawsk (2001), Bartels (2002), Gerber and Green (1999) and Mondak (1994 and the works reviewed by him). While their theoretical arguments and specific empirical findings are illuminating and persuasive, we do not know how widespread a problem these biases have been, are, or can be. None of these critics have taken on the full range of evidence suggesting the possibilities they cite have not been widespread in The Rational Public (1992) The Macro Policy (2002), and many other studies public opinion studies of selected issues (e.g., Mueller, 1973; 1994) suggesting the possibilities that they cite are widespread. Moreover, Kuklinski and Quirk (2000) offer grounds for optimism with regard to some widely used heuristics, though they caution concerning others:

“The risk of distortion in mass opinion, we believe, will depend on where people focus their attention and on what kinds of judgment they attempt to make. In general, people should do better when they make inferences from broader and long-standing features of politics: political parties, social groups, ideologies, and established leaders. Heuristics
based on these features should work, when people actually use them. People should have
more difficulty when they make inferences from or directly assess narrower or short-term
features; singular events, aspiring leaders, changing social or economic conditions, and,
in particular, specific policies. Thus, for example, using party labels to evaluate
candidates will work fairly well for most citizens in most races. But using campaign
appeals about issue to evaluate candidates or parties will work much less well—and will
often create perverse incentives for policy makers” (Kuklinski and Quirk, 2000, p.182).

It is interesting to note that political parties, ideology, and established leaders are
regarded positively in this respect since these would seem to be likely to have the most
widespread and systematic effects. It is with respect to these as heuristics, however,
where we think current political developments pose the greatest challenge for The
Rational Public.

New Questions: Political Polarization

In The Rational Public the mechanisms that lead aggregate public opinion to have
its positive qualities include a division of labor among the public, the increasing salience
of issues at different time in political debate, and how the public acquires information
using whatever information heuristics are available. It is possible that the heuristics
people use may be deficient and biased in terms of providing the public with the
information it needs to form opinions that are in its best interest. While the literature we
have reviewed and The Rational Public itself cites examples of manipulation by political
leaders or other trusted sources, we do not have evidence that this is a widespread
problem. The studies cited above concerning political knowledge suggest – explicitly or
implicitly -- that different heuristics might be used by the better informed which lead to
the effects of information on public opinion. The “parallel publics” finding, however,
suggests that we do not generally see perceptual biases—as would be suggested
especially by diverging opinion among different subgroups what might be affected
differently by different heuristics, though it is possible that the public opinion as a whole
might be distorted or misled by through the use of the same cue givers. Thus, it would
appear to be the case that the long-standing features of politics: political parties, social
groups, ideologies, and established leaders,” as noted above, have largely served the
public well. Or have they not?

Our own recent research on partisan and ideological polarization poses a
challenge in this regard to the rational public thesis. It stems from a dramatic change in
the political context in the United States since the 1970s. Much as The American Voter
(Campbell, Converse, Miller, and Stokes, 1960) and Converse (1964) were challenged on
the basis that their findings and conclusions were time bound (cf. Nie, Verba, Petrocik,
1976), the same question may well apply to The Rational Public. The change in context
that we raise is the increase in partisan and ideological polarization in politics. In and of
itself this does not pose an obvious challenge in the sense that increasing political conflict
means that the public may be getting information from different partisan/ideological
camps given conflict at the elite level. Thus, Zaller’s “two-message model” may apply
and different partisan or ideological segments of the public may just be persuaded by political arguments and interpretation from their camps. Still, we would find a kind of rationality, logic, or explicability at work.

There is, however, another possibility involving perceptual biases that might occur with the increasing role and influence of partisanship and ideology in politics. It is possible that this influence leads to distortions in perceptions of reality and produces biases in the information that the public uses to form or alter its opinions in ways that would not serve its best interests compared to the opinions it would hold if it possessed the best available information. Partisanship and ideology as heuristics or as determining the credibility and trust that the public associates with leaders or other particular information sources, could produce pervasive and systematic biases of the sort that would be of the greatest concern to the “cognitive heuristic bias” critics. In this case, consistent with The Rational Public’s warnings, divided political leaders who have no compunction about attempting to manipulate or even deceive the public would deserve our scorn, but their may serious limitations of the public itself that could also be of concern, given its failure to acknowledge, comprehend, and apply new factual information as it becomes available. Here we merge both the political knowledge and the perceptual bias concerns in the case of the potentially sweeping and disconcerting effects of partisanship and ideology. If psychological processes interfere with the public’s judgment in this way, we need to ask further question related to the capability of the public versus the responsibility and influence of political leaders and the public’s other sources of information during the changes in partisan politics that have occurred in recent years.

The Changing Context: Political Polarization

Since the 1970s American politics has become increasingly polarized along partisan and ideological lines. This polarization has been widely observed and debated in the area of domestic economic and social policy making, and in the last few years since the September 11th terrorist attacks followed by the war and U.S. occupation of Iraq, there have also been signs of this in the conflict among political leaders concerning American foreign policy. If partisan and, especially, ideological conflict were to be a persistent characteristic of foreign policy debates, in addition to domestic ones, this would be major change in the nature of American politics, in which such conflict thus far has not extended beyond domestic politics.

The question we have posed here in one sense reflects the reality of the widely recognized political conflict between Republican and Democratic leadership in the United States today, which has visibly spilled over to U.S. involvement in Iraq. President George W. Bush has sharply criticized “Democrats who have accused him of misleading the nation about the threat from Iraq’s weapons programs, calling their criticism ‘deeply irresponsible’ and suggesting that they are undermining the war effort” (Stevenson, 2005, p.A1). However, it is a new development to talk about “polarized” politics with regard not only to perceptions of presidential performance but also to opinions on a wide range economic, social, and foreign policy issues. Ideology in American party politics – as
normally described by the press, pundits, or mainstream political scientists – is associated with how Democrats and Republicans differ along liberal-conservative lines on domestic economic and social issues as this is understood in public discourse and in the press (Converse, 1964; Stimson, 1998, 2005; Erikson, MacKuen, and Stimson, 2002). In contrast, positions on foreign policy and defense issues, with the possible exception of defense spending as this is related to the “guns-butter” tradeoff, are not easy to define as liberal or conservative, and political leaders have thought about them differently at different times (cf. Shapiro and Jacobs, 2002; Menton, 2005; Hughes, 1978, Chapters 3 and 5; and especially the apt review by Hurwitz and Peffley, 1987). While it is easy to think of conservatives and Republicans as being tougher when it comes to defense and foreign policy, liberals and Democrats have led the country aggressively through two world wars, Vietnam and Korea, the Cold War, and other international conflicts and foreign policy initiatives with support from Republicans. And Democrats have supported not only the first Republican-led war in Iraq but also the second invasion, as well as the foreign policies of Republican presidents. This history of foreign policymaking is beyond the scope of this paper, but it is a history that reflects either bipartisanship or non-ideological partisanship that has occurred on national security issues. As we saw in the 2004 election, the Iraq war and the ability to deal with terrorism were issues that divided Democratic and Republican voters (See Abramson, Aldrich, and Rohde, 2005; Campbell, 2005; Hillygus and Shields, 2005; Langer and Cohen, 2005). But these were specific issues during a single election and did not reflect persistent and current partisan divisions associated with domestic issues such as social security, medical care, abortion, civil rights, gay rights, and others.

Thus, it is a new development to raise questions about ideological polarization on both a wide range of domestic issues and attitudes toward American foreign and national security policy. The evidence for this is striking.

Partisan and Ideological Polarization

Politics by definition involves conflict but the level of visible conflict during the 2004 American presidential election was great for reasons that were both election-specific and related to divisive and ideology-based party politics. The election-specific issues involved the personal attacks on each presidential candidate’s activities during the Vietnam war, in addition to the immediate issues regarding how the Bush administration’s was dealing with the Iraq war and the threat of terrorist attacks. Ideologically, the candidates’ parties were divided on the longstanding issues of the role of government in the economy, race and civil rights (though civil rights issues per se were not debated much during the campaign, beyond the implicit racial aspects immigration and questions that arose related to barriers to voting), and social issues, including abortion rights and sexual orientation and other matters related to personal morality. These issues have come to sharply divide the parties, which are now essentially evenly matched as they compete for control of both the presidency and Congress. The 2000 election controversy and how politics determined the election
outcome in the courts revealed starkly the level of partisan conflict that has risen in the United States.

This divisiveness began to emerge in the 1970s as the parties underwent a transformation as the Democratic Party, with the departure of conservative southerners from its ranks over civil rights issues, became an increasingly more consistent liberal party. At the same time, with the moderates from its ranks dwindling, the Republican Party leadership became more consistently conservative (see Carmines and Stimson, 1989). The most widely cited data showing this are Keith Poole and Howard Rosenthal’s (1997, 2001; McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal, 1997) “Nominate” roll call voting scores that estimate the varying-degree of conservative-liberal ideological voting across Congresses. Figure 1 and Figure 2 show the ideological trends in roll call voting by Democrats and Republicans in the House and Senate, respectively, from 1971 to 2002, reported by Gary Jacobson (2005a). The key finding in these graphs is the increase in ideological divergence in the behavior of the legislators in each party. Figure 3 shows this increase in partisan disagreement in terms of the long-term trend in bipartisanship in Congress from 1989 to 2002. Peter Trubowitz and Nicole Mellow (2005) estimated the bipartisan votes in the House of Representatives as the percentage of votes in which a majority of legislators of both parties voted together or if the difference in support levels of opposing majorities was 20 percentage points or less. The decline in bipartisanship after 1970 reveals a sustained increase in partisan divergence and this is the most sustained decline in bipartisan cooperation since 1889. Moreover, while bipartisanship, as might be expected, has historically occurred more frequently on foreign policy than domestic issues (the adage that “bipartisanship stops at the water’s edge” also reflects how foreign policy positions are not normally readily associated with a liberal-conservative ideology), we see the same close parallel decline for both types of issues. Trubowitz and Mellow (2005) find that both domestic and foreign policy bipartisanship is affected by economic growth, party competition, and divided government.

(FIGURES 1, 2 AND 3 ABOUT HERE)

The above trends summarize what has happened at the elite leadership level in government. What, then, has happened at the level of the electorate—at the level of mass public opinion? While it is possible that elites have been responding to or reflecting voters’ wishes -- and there is evidence for this (e.g., Trubowitz and Mellow, 2005, found in their multivariate analysis that regional polarization is negatively related to bipartisanship, and the findings in King, 1997, show that there are strong partisans in the electorate that parties must appeal to), the reverse influence is more persuasive theoretically and substantial empirical analysis substantially bears this out (see especially Heatherington, 2001; Carmines and Stimson, 1989). The public relies heavily on leaders for information communicated through the mass media (see Key, 1961; Bennett, 1990, on “indexing”; Zaller, 1992; Page and Shapiro, 1992; Mermin, 1999; Zaller and Chiu, 2000), and there is evidence that the increase in partisan polarization among elites preceded and penetrated the public’s psyche (Layman and Carsey, 2002; Heatherington, 2001; Carmines and Stimson, 1989). Other evidence has been growing and cumulating that shows the increasing importance and centrality of partisanship and also a liberal-
conservative ideology closely bound to partisanship. A number of studies have shown that partisanship has made a comeback in its influences on presidential voting (see Bartels, 2000, and Bafumi, 2005), and there is evidence in the aggregate for increasing ideological voting in House and Senate elections (Jacobson, 2005b, see especially his Figure 10 and Figure 11). At the same time the relationship between self-reported ideology and partisanship among the public has increased (see especially Abramowitz and Saunders, 1998, 2005; Erikson, Wright, and McGiver, 2005; Knight and Erikson, 1997; Bafumi, 2005, indirectly suggests this and increasing effect of ideology on presidential voting; see also Green, Palmquist, and Schickler. 2002, Table 2.3, p.31).

Figure 4 summarizes Alan Abramowitz’s and Kyle Saunders’ (2005) results showing the increase in the correlation between party identification and self-reported liberal-conservative identification, both measured on seven point scales. If we square these correlation coefficients to get an estimate of the proportion or percentage of the variance (by multiplying times 100) in party identification that is explained by ideology, we find that this percentage has increase from approximately 10 percent in 1972 to more than 30 percent in 2004.

(FIGURE 4 ABOUT HERE)

The strong connection between partisanship and liberal-conservative ideology that we now see puts the influence of partisanship on public opinion and political behavior in a new light. To the extent that a liberal-conservative ideology has substantive meaning to the public, the influence of partisanship on public opinion and politics is a more meaningful heuristic than it has been in the past, and its use by the public may reflect well on the public’s competence when it comes to politics (cf. the different perspectives on party identification and what might be called “democratic competence” beginning with Campbell, Converse, Miller, and Stokes, 1976 [orig. 1960], in The American Voter, along with Converse, 1964; Downs, 1957; Fiorina, 1981; Popkin, 1991; Green, Palmquist, and Schickler, 2002; Erikson, MacKuen, and Stimson, 2002; Shapiro, 1998; and the review provided in Glynn, et al., 2004, Chapter 8). Moreover, this apparent ideological distinctiveness of the major political parties may now mean that the United States is approaching, if it has not already become, the kind of “responsible two-party system” that many political scientists have long proposed would best serve the country (see American Political Science Association, 1950.) Whether this is in fact the case and what the implication of this are overall and whether this extends to many domestic and foreign policy issues are open questions.

When it comes to foreign policy, in particular, the president is the key policy actor, so that the extent to which partisanship affects public evaluations of the president is an important question in that context as well as in general. As both the visible head of government and party leader, a president expects to get – and normally gets – deferential treatment by fellow partisans in Congress and among the public. However, in the case of foreign policy there has been “The Two Presidencies” thesis that Aaron Wildavsky (1966) first wrote about that posited that Congress would defer to the president on foreign policy in contrast to domestic issues, because presidents had advantages in information and expertise, and because members of Congress were more concerned with domestic
matters. Since the time Wildavsky wrote about this, however, research has shown that this deference may have occurred in the increasingly distant past -- pre-Vietnam -- and may have only continued among members of the president’s party (e.g., see Shull, 1991; Rohde, 1994; and Fleisher and Bond, 2000). Any deference that existed was replaced by partisan disagreements on defense and foreign policy that became clear with divided party control of government beginning with the Reagan administration.

Among the public, the way partisanship has long affected support for the president is shown in the different graphs assembled in Figure 5, which are taken from Green, Palmquist, and Schickler (2002). Here we see that presidents have had noticeably greater standing among individuals who see themselves as members of the president’s party. According to Bartels (2002), the impact of partisanship on these and other perceptions (of the sort we will discuss further below) attests to how party identification has remained, much as the authors of The American Voter (Campbell et al., 1976 [1960]) emphasized, “a pervasive dynamic force shaping citizens’ perceptions of, and reactions to, the political world” (Bartels, 2002, p.117). Evaluations of presidential performance in particular are important to the extent that the public’s perceptions of the president’s performance might affect the president’s ability to obtain public support for his proposed policies and actions (e.g., see Kernell, 1997; Page and Shapiro, 1984, 1992, Chapter 8)—which is often difficult to do (cf. Edwards, 2003). In addition to the consistently wide partisan differences in presidential approval, there are two additional patterns to note. One is that in the graph for the last presidency shown, the Reagan administration, the party differences are the greatest, which is consistent with the increase in partisan polarization that began in the 1970s (data for George H.W. Bush administration, data not shown, indicate a smaller difference at the outset that later grew, and data for the Clinton administration suggest an even larger partisan difference than for Reagan by the end of Clinton’s second term in office). Second, we see that while there are clear partisan differences, we also see that these differences remain constant for each president, so that when presidential approval changes over time, the trends are parallel for self-identified Republicans, Democrats, and Independents. This finding accords with the “parallel public’s” thesis that new information is affecting these partisan subgroups in the same way, that is, there is a “parallel learning process” at work in which partisanship does not cloud or otherwise bias individuals’ perceptions (see Page and Shapiro, 1992, Chapter 7; Gerber and Green, 1998, Green, Palmquist, and Schickler, 2002, p.130-139).

(FIGURE 5 ABOUT HERE)

Figure 6 and Figure 7, however, shows that this pattern has been different for President Bush since he took office. These approval data are aggregated by year and broken down by both party identification and ideology from ABC News/Washington Post surveys. We present both since while it is the case that the correlation between party identification and self-reported ideology in the categories shown increased significantly over the five years shown (the Pearson r’s increased from about .3 to nearly .4, and the Gammas increase from about .4 to .5), the correlation is far from perfect and the patterns reported in the figures could have differed substantially. But they did not.
The wordings for the ABC/WP and other survey questions described later are reported in Appendix 1. Since the data are aggregated by year, the relatively brief sharp convergence of all the trends lines in both figures after the September 11th attacks, following the first eight months of a large but constant partisan gap, are not shown (see Jacobson, 2005b Figure 4, p.205). The effect of the September 11 terrorist attacks led to a convergence of public opinion reflecting the nation’s unity, at both the elite and mass level, in response to the events and threat to the nation (on such “rally effects” and the conditions under which they occur, see Mueller, 1973, and Brody, 1991). Thereafter, from 2002 onward, however, we see a striking divergence that deviates sharply from the parallel public pattern. This is apparently not just Independents and Democrats, and moderates and liberals, returning to their pre-September 11th levels, but rather they drop to lower levels, especially in the case of Democratic partisans who diverged from Republicans by about 70 percentage points! The decline that occurred in public support among non-Republicans and non-conservatives reflected, at least in part, disappointment with the Bush administration’s lack of further progress in Iraq conflicts, whereas Republicans and conservatives either perceived the situation differently or were less willing to hold this against the administration. We will return to these questions later.

(Figure 6 and Figure 7 about here)

The most important question with regard to public opinion, however, is to what extent the increasing partisan polarization that has occurred has affected the policy preferences of different segments of the public. There is an ongoing and lively debate regarding how greatly partisans among the public are divided on domestic economic and social issues. One widely cited study of this, Morris Fiorina’s Culture War (2006), argues and presents evidence that although, among the electorate, the “red” Republican and “blue” Democratic divide exists most notably on social issues -- especially abortion and issues related to sexual orientation -- these differences are not enormous. Fiorina also presents data showing that among different subgroups defined in terms of party identification, age, sex, and other characteristics, the trend data tend to show “parallel publics” (Fiorina, 2006; see also Dimaggio, Evans, and Bryson, 1996).

Further analyses of the data from the NORC General Social Surveys (GSS) and from the National Election Studies (NES) data through 2004, however, suggest that while the Fiorina and others are correct in emphasizing that the partisan differences were still on average small during the 1972-2000 period, there is also further evidence for diverging opinions on social and economic issues along partisan and ideological lines. This was first noticed by Evans (2003) in the data through 2000, and most recently by Abramowitz and Saunders (2005) looking at the NES data through 2004. It remains to be seen to what extent this polarization on domestic issues has in fact continued and expanded, based on additional analysis of the latest GSS and NES and other new survey data. The data analyses reported in recent papers by Ansolabehere, Rodden, and Snyder (2005) and Bartels (2006) suggest that to the extent that any polarization has occurred, it has occurred to a greater extent for economic than social issues (cf. Shapiro and Bloch-Elkon, 2006). Given the level of political conflict, it is also important to examine how partisanship and ideology has affected public opinion concerning additional issues—
possibly all aspects of politics, including foreign policy and national security issues which are currently highly contentious matters as the result of the currently uncertain circumstances in Iraq war and in the struggle against terrorism.

Political scientists in general have not emphasized foreign policy and international security as long-term issues that have divided the parties over the last sixty years. When such issues have appeared to divide partisans, as in the case of the Vietnam war, this partisan disagreement has lasted only as long as a particular conflict. Since the time of the Carter administration’s difficulties during the Iran hostage crisis and the Soviet Union’s invasion of Afghanistan, which led to Ronald Reagan’s election as president, national defense and the country’s aggressiveness in the Cold War did seem to divide the parties, with the public perceiving the Democrats to be softer on these issues. These issues, however, did not become a quintessential part of liberal-conservative ideology (see Stimson, 1998, 2005; Erikson, MacKuen, and Stimson, 2002; Shapiro and Jacobs, 2002; cf. Converse, 1964; Hughes, 1978; Peffley and Hurwitz, 1987). In the wake of the end of the Cold War, both Democrats as well as Republicans supported the first Iraq war and the war in Afghanistan. But in the current short term, since George W. Bush was first elected president in 2000, we have seen the emergence of a conservative – more commonly referred to as “neoconservative” – ideology in the Bush administration’s foreign policy especially after the September 11, 2001, attacks. This ideology continues a past tradition in which the United States’ security interests have been defined “in terms of the expansion of U.S.-style liberalism” in international affairs (as opposed to “realism,” where “liberalism” takes on a different meaning from the one used in public discourse and in this paper) and a “nationalist vision of the United States as a redeeming force in international politics” (Monten, p.140-141). Where the ‘Bush Doctrine’ differs from this tradition “is in the particular vehemence with which it adheres to a vindicationist framework for democracy promotion in which the aggressive use of U.S. power is employed as the primary instrument of liberal change” (Monten, 2005, p.141), for purposes that include ending authoritarianism and promoting freedom and democracy.

The force of this ideology in foreign affairs may well match that of social and moral conservatism in domestic politics, which raises the question of whether partisan and ideological polarization has started to occur on foreign policy and international security issues. What do we know about this at this point?

On the one hand, a good deal of data show that in the United States there is substantial public and elite support for international cooperation and support for international institutions and multilateral action to deal with world problems. This is a theme that comes out of, for example, the recent Chicago Council on Foreign Relations’ Global Views 2004 studies (Bouton et al., 2004; see also Page with Bouton, 2005). Regarding partisanship, Kull and his colleagues’ have recently reported additional data and provided a persuasive analysis showing that there is overall bipartisan consensus – majority bipartisan agreement -- on a wide range of foreign policy and international security issues among the public and leaders in the United State (Kull, et al., 2005). One important and representative finding in their report regarding the United States role in the world is what they found in responses to the following question asked in the July 2004
Chicago Council on Foreign Relations survey: “What do you think is the most important lesson of September 11th: that the US needs to be more willing to cooperate with other countries to fight terrorism or that the US needs to act more on its own?” The percentage of partisans among the mass public and in the sample of “leaders” who responded that the U.S. needs to work more closely with other countries was 66% for the Republican public, 79% for the Democratic public, 63% for Republican leaders, and 92% for Democratic leaders (Kull et al., 2005, p. 5)

The above example suggests that majorities of both Democrats and Republicans at both the mass and elite level support greater engagement with other countries to fight terrorism. Kull et al. (2005) find a similar pattern in responses to other questions, and these data overall point to the conclusion that to a large extent Republicans and Democrats want the same kind of U.S. foreign policy.

The data also reveal other aspects of public and elite opinion in the United States beyond determining where majorities stand on particular issues. First, there are often large differences between mass and elite opinions that may have implications for how responsive leaders are to public opinion (see Glynn et al, Ch.9; Page with Bouton, 2005, Chapter 7). These mass-elite gaps have been tracked at length over the years in the CCFR studies (see Rielly, 1999; Page with Bouton, 2005). In addition, when it comes to partisan differences, to the extent that the parties are divided – especially in a coherent ideological way – on particular issues, the overwhelming evidence shows that partisan differences among elites are greater than the differences among partisans in the mass public (e.g., see Glynn et al., 380-385). The above example shows this clearly, as do much of the other data that Kull and his colleagues cite.

The evidence for a majority consensus is compelling, since it holds up across many questions and also, especially, for different question wordings, which can affect the distributions of responses (cf. Glynn et al., Chapter 3; Page and Shapiro, 1992). But what are also noticeable are what seem to be persistent partisan divisions in responses both at the elite and mass level that indicate partisan differences that are either peculiar to disagreements over the Bush administration’s specific policies, or that could be part of a broader ideological conflict pitting a potentially enduring Republican neoconservatism against the more moderate views of its Democratic opponents. The opinion data that Kull et al. (2005) emphasize, then, need to be looked at in context, since they focus on partisanship in surveys conducted during one time period. What do the available data over time suggest? Specifically, do we find polarization on foreign policy issues related to the conservative ideology of the current Republican administration? Has this occurred in tandem with a similar pattern and trend for domestic issues? And what are the implications of this for the rational public?
We have examined these questions elsewhere using data from the Chicago Council on Foreign Relations (CCFR) for both mass and elite public opinion from 1998 to 2004 (Shapiro and Bloch-Elkon, 2005). We will review some of our findings here and report on additional data. (We have also described elsewhere related findings from the 2000, 2002, and 2004 National Election Study (NES) surveys; see Shapiro and Bloch-Elkon, 2006). The Chicago Council data are a rich source of opinion data on foreign policy and international security issues. The elite level data are important since they speak to the influences on or sources of public opinion. Elite level differences on issues that divide the parties have historically been larger than mass level differences, and changes in elite opinion are likely to precede changes in public opinion more widely (see Converse, 1964; Zaller, 1992; Carmines and Stimson, 1989; Heatherington, 2001; Layman and Carsey, 2002a, 2006). The process or mechanism by which elite opinions become part of public opinion occurs directly or indirectly through communications conveyed through the mass media. Lance Bennett (1990) theorized that political leaders communicate with the public through a process that involves press reports that cite, or more precisely, “index” these leaders’ opinions. In this way leaders can have a dominant influence on public opinion through the media. There is some disagreement regarding whether indexing has continued to occur on foreign policy issues or whether indexing best described news reporting from World War II until the end of the Cold War -- and only occurred for issues related to the struggle against communism. An alternative to indexing is the media looking for non-elite sources, and reporters and editors offering their own independent analyses (cf. Mermin, 1999; Zaller and Chiu, 2002). It is an open question whether terrorists and insurgents have replaced communism as a foe and indexing continues to occur in the way Bennett (1990) described. But, in any case, segments of the public are regularly exposed to cues and information from elites that are regularly reported in the press (see Page and Shapiro, 1992, Chapter 8; Zaller, 1992; Jacobs and Shapiro, 2000).

For the survey questions asked in the CCFR surveys we focus on the responses broken down by partisanship, comparing the responses of Republicans with those of Democrats. We do the same for self-reported ideology, comparing the responses of "liberals" with the responses of "conservatives." The main questions we ask of our data are: To what extent do we find partisan and ideological differences in mass and elite opinions and perceptions concerning matters related to both U.S. foreign policy and domestic policy. And, most important, to what extent, if any, have these partisan and ideological differences changed most recently over time, and in what direction?

Since the Bush administration took office, covering the period before and after the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, we find increasing partisan and ideological divergences in opinion, consistent with an electorate that is increasingly polarized along partisan and ideological lines on both domestic and foreign policy issues (with “divergence” defined as a gap widening by 10 percentage points or more). We see this in the data showing divergence opinion trends for Republicans versus Democrats and self-identified “liberals” versus “conservatives.” Another way of describing and showing the
same phenomenon is to say and observe that the correlations between measures of partisanship and ideology have increased over time.

(FIGURE 8A THROUGH FIGURE 14B ABOUT HERE)

Some of our finding from the Chicago Council data (Shapiro and Bloch-Elkon, 2005) are presented in Figures 8A through 14B. Figures 8A and 8B show that both among elites and the mass public we see a noticeable divergence from 1998 to 2004 in the opinions of Republicans and Democrats, with Democrats increasingly less likely to say that maintaining U.S. military power is a “very important goal” of American foreign policy. Similarly, with regard to support for toppling unfriendly regimes to combat terrorism, we see a widening gap partisan among elites and an emerging gap in public opinion from 2002 to 2004 (Figure 9A and 9B). And in the cases of public opinion toward expanding defense spending and strengthening the United Nations, we see a widening partisan divergence along the ideological partisan lines of the Bush administration (Figures 10 and 11).

Figures 12A to 14B provide comparisons with what has happened on domestic issues which have been the focus of research on partisan and ideological polarization (see Fiorina, 2006; Layman and Carsey, 2002b). First, on some important domestic issues for which we have data from the CCFR surveys we find noteworthy increases in polarization related to the way individuals self-identify in ideological terms as liberal and conservative. Here, as shown in Figures 12A to 14B, we see how the public has moved further ideologically in the direction of elites—with liberals and conservatives diverging further from elites in their support for more expansive education, Social Security, and health care policies. This bears on two kinds of questions: the causal inference question as to whether elites lead or follow public opinion, and whether polarization has been quite evident in public opinion toward domestic issues. The data support the conclusion that public opinion reacts to elite opinion and elite discourse, rather than the reverse (see Zaller, 1992; Heatherington, 2001; Layman and Carsey, 2002a), and the data also show that ideological polarization occurred from 1998 to 2004 on important economic and social welfare issues. Thus, in the debate about partisan polarization regarding social and moral values-related issues, we should not overlook the continued central importance of economic welfare issues in American partisan politics (see Bartels, 2005 and Ansolabehere et al., 2005; Layman and Carsey, 2002a, 2002b; cf. Fiorina, 2006).

It appears, then, that foreign policy and security may be as closely linked to partisan and (liberal-conservative) ideological politics as are domestic issues. Further, and not surprisingly, this is especially the case for public opinion toward the Iraq war. As noted earlier, political scientists in the past have not emphasized foreign policy and international security as long-term issues that have divided the parties. When such issues appeared to have divided the parties, in the case of the Vietnam and Korean wars, this partisan disagreement lasted only as long as the particular conflict. But when we compare partisan trends in support for the Korean, Vietnam, and the current Iraq wars, we see striking differences: The first two were wars of Democratic presidents and were supported by Democrats until, in the case of Vietnam, a Republican President Nixon took
the helm and Republicans became more supportive than Democrats. In contrast, the current Iraq war is not just a Republican war but in comparing Figures 15 and 16 with Figures 17 through Figure 24, we see that partisan divisions became much greater than what we see in the cases of Korea and Vietnam (on these wars and the first Iraq and other wars, see also Jacobson, 2007). Compared to the Korean war where partisan differences ranged within 20 percentage points, the widening gaps in opinion toward different aspects of the Iraq is stunning: by 2006 the differences widened to the 40 to 70 percentage point range! The increasing correlation between partisanship and ideology, in light of the neoconservative ideological rhetoric used to justify the war, and the widening liberal-conservative gaps in Figures 18, 20, 22, and 24 indicate that the polarization regarding the Iraq war has been increasingly ideological as well.

(FIGURE 17 THROUGH 24 ABOUT HERE)

Elite Leadership or Perceptual Bias?

The partisan and ideological polarization that we have found does not itself undercut The Rational Public. It does deviate from the “parallel publics” pattern (Page and Shapiro, Chapter 7), but it is consist with and predictable from Zaller’s (1992) two-message model in which during highly ideological debates, ideological partisans would be expected to diverge and this suggests that there is a free flow of competing positions and explanations by elites and political leaders who are informing and guiding the mass public. What we see is differential persuasion and non-parallel learning occurring. Partisan differences are having their affect on public opinion. These have been called by some partisan “biases” of sorts at the elite level, but “bias” is not a good term in this context since we may not be able to figure out or to agree on what “unbiased partisanship” is. Where we can, however, talk about bias is with respect to biased information – deviations, distortions, or misperception of what we would ideally call the “truth” or facts. What would raises questions about the kind of “rational public” at issue here is the extent to which the public does not make use of and comprehend accurately facts that are conveyed to them. This can happen if the cognitive heuristics that individuals use fail or if psychological balancing or cognitive dissonance processes lead them to misperceive reality – real world conditions and events.

In the wake of increasingly partisan and ideological conflict, the Iraq data poses a challenge for The Rational Public in this regard, especially if this increasing conflict affects public opinion on other important policy issues. The additional data we examine address what has been the somewhat puzzling survey finding that a large segment of the public for a long time misperceived—and some continue to misperceive—that Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) were found in Iraq and that there was an Iraq/Saddam Hussein connection to Al Qaeda and the September 11th attacks. These “facts” were used by the Bush administration—though mainly the WMDs -- as the justification for the U.S. invading and occupying Iraq. These, however, are not facts, since to date there has been no evidence reported that Iraq had WMDs and that there was an Iraq-Al Qaeda connection to September 11, 2001. Indeed, the 9/11 Commission found that the Iraqi
government had not collaborated with Al Qaeda during the attacks. Why did the public misperceive these connections, and why did these misperception continue?

(FIGURES 25 THROUGH 32 ABOUT HERE)

Part of the answer and some of the basic data are shown in Figure 25 through 32. Figures 25 to 27, based on data from Harris surveys, show that there were clear partisan differences in these perceptions from mid-2003 into 2004, as the members of the Bush administration remained ambiguous as they quietly acknowledged that they had no evidence for either reason used to justify the Iraq invasion. In Figure 25 and especially Figure 26 we see the large percentage of Republicans among the public who continued to believe that Iraq had WMDs when the war began, compared to the sharp drop in this percentage among Democrats (and nearly the same percentage among Independents) over a 10 month period. Similarly, in Figure 27, the gap between Democrats and Republican increased regarding the belief that clear evidence had been found that Iraq was supporting al Qaeda, with the percentage of Republicans believing there was such evidence increasing while the percentage of Democrats decreased. The increasing partisan gap that we see in the case of these perceptions as well as in Bush’s approval rating deviates from the kind of unbiased parallel learning processes we have described above. Bartels (2002) describes the persistence of any partisan gap itself as an indication of partisan bias in political perceptions that prevents convergence in opinions that might be expected as everyone obtains the same information and shares the same political experiences (but cf. Kull et al., 2003-2004). In Figures 25 to 27 cases we have further divergence as the result of partisan bias at work.

Further, observing that such large proportions of Independents and Democrats also misperceived the situations is disconcerting. Because large proportion of them as well as moderates and liberals supported the war at the onset and this support was closely related to these misperceptions (data not shown; see also Jacobson, 2007; Kull et al., 2003-2004), processes of cognitive balance and cognitive dissonance appear to have been at work. Or, it may be the case that there are measurement validity problems in these questions, such that the responses involve some speculation and uncertainty. Other questions asked in ABC/WP surveys, for example found that when the question is asked in different ways, allowing people to distinguish their “suspicions” that there were WMDs rather than knowing for a fact that there were WMDs, a large percentage of the public reported their perceptions as “suspicions.”

In addition, there is substantial evidence that it did not take much for all segments of the public to tie Saddam Hussein bad doings, so it is not very surprising that the public might initially latch on to the idea that he was connected to terrorists and that he had WMDs that he posed a threat. As Gary Langer, the director of polling at ABC News aptly noted that long before September 11th, Saddam was considered “a genuine villain” and a large majority of the public supported using military force to overthrow – doing what should have been done in the first war with Iraq in 1991. They also responded, when asked in February 1991, that they thought that Saddam was likely to attempt to engage in terrorism against the United States in retaliation for U.S. air strikes in Iraq.
Steven Kull and his colleagues (Kull et al., 2003-2004) were the first to offer in-depth analysis of the issue of misperception and false beliefs regarding Iraq. Scott Althaus and Devon Largio (2004), subsequently focused on the misperception that had occurred at an earlier stage, arguing that even before the government started to talk about an Iraq-Al Qaeda connection, the public was ready to point its fingers at Saddam Hussein along with Al Qaeda. Their analysis reveals that the American public needed no convincing and was ready and willing to blame Saddam immediately after 9/11, when it was presented with the idea. Americans were already prepared to believe that Saddam was to blame long before the administration started to build further popular support for a war against Iraq. In short, according to Althaus and Largio, the Bush administration just played into a favorable climate of public opinion.

We largely agree that the public was ready to blame Saddam for the 9/11 attacks. We would also emphasize that the initial suspicions about Saddam did not come mainly from the government. Looking at the reporting by three main national networks – ABC, CBS, NBC – immediately after the terrorist attacks on 9/11, we found early reports, using non-Bush administration sources, that raised Saddam's name in relation to 9/11. Just to offer one example, in a CBS News Special Report, on September 11 (2001), the same day of the attack, Dan Rather spoke with Middle East expert Fouad Ajami, about this possibility. Other experts offered similar suspicions (which we describe further in Bloch-Elkon and Shapiro, 2005), setting the stage for the Bush administration to follow up on this. Amy Gershkoff and Shana Kushner’s (2005) systematic analysis of President Bush’s speeches and the The New York Times’ coverage of them show how the Bush administration repeatedly tried to link Iraq with the September 11th attacks. Because there was not much news coverage of challenges to this claim and framing of the issue, the administration’s efforts were successful.

These misperceptions continued despite the fact that to this day, no WMDs have been found in Iraq, the Bush administration has acknowledged their absence, and senior administration officials such as former Secretary of State Colin Powell and Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld have said there is no hard evidence for a connection between Iraq and al-Qaeda predating the current al-Qaeda affiliate insurgency (see Jacobson, 2007, Chapter 6). Even so, as Figures 28 to 32 show, from the Kull et al. (2003-2004) PIPA data and their subsequent surveys, a sizeable percentage of the public misperceived these realities long after the U.S. occupation of Iraq, and we see still see some of this as late as March 2006. These misperceptions, however, have remained substantial among Republicans compared to Independents and especially Democrats, which is evidence for a continued perceptual bias.

We can look more deeply at the extent and seriousness of this bias by looking further at the data reported in Figures 25 through 32, disaggregating by levels of education. These results are graphed in Figures 33A to 40B. Each pair of figures compares the trends in responses for respondent in four categories of education: high school or less, some college, a college degree, and some graduate school or a graduate degree. We consider education to be a rough indicator of political knowledge and the likelihood of being exposed to, acquiring, and using new information. Even though,
arguably, while the Bush administration acknowledged that Iraq did not have WMDs when the U.S. invaded Iraq and that there was no evidence that Iraq was involved with Al Qaeda and the September 11th attacks, it has avoided – and has continued to avoid -- further mention of this and has continued to associate the conflict in Iraq with the struggle against international terrorism. In this way the administration early on began to blur the memory of the situation at the outset of the war. Even so, we would still expect to find that at least the better educated segments of the public would learn over time, and we would expect to find this among the better educated Republicans and Democrats alike. Republicans’ opinions about the war or the Bush administration might not necessarily be expected to change as they learn the facts about the start of the war, but they should at least show noticeable learning.

(FIGURES 33 TO 40 ABOUT HERE)

In this regard the trend data are not encouraging. For the Harris and PIPA data concerning evidence for WMDs in Figures 33A to 36B, we see that there was not much learning among Republicans with the most education. We see just a bit in the Harris data in Figures 33A and 34A from mid-2003 to mid-2004. For the PIPA data from 2004 to March 2006, in Figures 35A and 36A, there is no change among the best educated Republicans and even some indication that there was an increase in the percentage with misconceptions about WMDs in Iraq. There was, it seems, more overall learning among Republicans with less education, though it is college graduates whose perceptions changed the most. In these Harris and PIPA trend data regarding WMDs the percentage of the most well educated Republican misperceiving continued to exceed that of the least well educated Democrats. Because of the small numbers of cases in the many subgroups categories based on partisanship and education, there is some random fluctuation due to sampling errors, but most of the patterns and comparisons in the trends are fairly clear. The perceptions of the best educated Democrats remained basically constant for the survey items graphed in Figure 33B, 35B, and 36B as they early on reported that there was no evidence of WMDs in Iraq, whereas their perceptions about whether Iraq actually had WMDs fell off more markedly from 2003 to 2004 in Figure 34B. In contrast, among Republicans, to the extent that the best educated tend to have greater exposure to new information, this information appeared to distort their perceptions concerning WMDs or there were psychological processes at work among them that left them with biased information.

In the case of perception of an Iraq-Al Qaeda connection, Figures 37A to 40B show a similar or even clearer pattern. Granted, it is possible that the fact that Al Qaeda or Al Qaeda affiliates entered into the Iraq conflict in tandem with the U.S. occupation and long-term presence in Iraq added some confusion to this question. Nonetheless, we would expect over time that the best educated Republicans would have a better sense that there was originally no Al Qaeda connection to Saddam Hussein’s Iraq. This is not, however, what we find. Education appears to have made more of a difference among Democrats--in Figures 38B, 39B, and 40B--in clarifying perceptions on this issue, and over time the level of misperception among the best educated Republicans may, if anything, have increased somewhat. Regarding how the public perceived the agreement
among experts concerning WMDs and the Iraq-Al Qaeda connection, it is only in the latter case in which the most well educated Republicans changed in the same expected direction as their Democratic counterparts (Figure 40B), but overall the partisan differences remained substantial.

Indeed, reviewing all the trends by education shown in the figures, what is most striking is that the partisan differences stand out strongly compared to the variations in perceptions by education. We see in the figures that Education makes more of a difference among Democrats than Republicans. Partisanship is substantially related to the biases in perceptions that we see in the data, and education does not compensate for these distortions, especially among Republicans, in the ways we would expect if education were associated with (or served as an adequate measure or proxy for) exposure and learning from new information. To be clear, however, this is not to say that had a larger segment of the public—especially Republicans and conservatives—recognized the facts at issue in the Bush administration’s justification for the Iraq war, they would have had different opinions toward the war and the administrations policies. In the end they might have continued to think or been persuaded that invading Iraq was the right things to do for other reasons. But from a normative perspective we would argue that it is important that people’s opinions – public opinion -- be based on reasons that are grounded in facts or that are transparent and defensible, and not reasons that based on falsehoods.

Conclusion

So where does this leave *The Rational Public*? The title, to be sure, remains something that American democracy should aspire to. This paper has suggested that the increasing partisan and ideological polarization in American politics over the last 30 years poses a challenge to the book’s premises that the public responds to events and changing real-world conditions and the political information it receives. Specifically, we agree, as noted earlier, that it is important that “long-standing features of politics: political parties, social groups, ideologies, and established leaders,” serve the public well (Kuklinski and Quirk 2000; see also Key, 1961). We think that during the period covered by *The Rational Public* they evidently had. But now we can raise the possibility that potentially sustainable perceptual biases that might occur with the increasing role and influence of partisanship and ideology in politics. It is possible, as in the case of the facts pertaining to the Iraq war, that this can lead to distortions in perceptions of reality producing biases in the information that the public uses to form or alter its opinions in ways that would not serve its best interests compared to the opinions it would hold if it possessed the best available information. Partisanship and ideology that can serve as heuristics or that can define the credibility and trust that the public associates with leaders or other particular information sources, could produce pervasive and systematic biases of the sort that would be of the great normative concern “cognitive heuristic bias” critics. On the one hand this is consistent with *The Rational Public*’s warnings about the possibilities for manipulation or deception by political leaders of the sort that was of concern to V.O. Key (1961) in emphasizing the importance of leadership. With highly
divided and ideological political parties, political leaders may have increasingly less compunction about attempting to manipulate or even deceive. Such leaders surely deserve our scorn.

On the other hand, this may also raise serious questions pointing toward the limitations of the public itself. We think it is of great concern if the public has severe limitations in its ability to acknowledge, comprehend, and use new factual information as it becomes available. Here we would combine the concerns of both the “political knowledge” and the “perceptual bias” camps of critics of The Rational Public. While the Iraq war case that we have focused on may be an unusual example, what we found there would be of great concern if this were a harbinger for potentially more sweeping effects of partisanship and ideology. If the psychological consequences of increase polarization and conflict increasingly distort the public’s judgment, this may well be largely the fault of political leadership. But this raises a cautionary note (see Kuklinski and Hurley, 1994) that we should think further about capabilities and limitations of the public versus the responsibility and influence of political leaders and others who are providing information to the public during the changes in partisan politics that have occurred in recent years.

It is ironic today to be critical of the consequences of having political parties that have become more ideologically distinctive in a way that American Political Science Association’s report, "Toward a More Responsible Government: A Report on the Committee on Political Parties" (1950), wanted to encourage. What has apparently come with this are changes in the sharpness of political conflict that is communicated, magnified, and made ever-louder by the mass media that thrives on conflict, and the public can selectively use mass media that reinforce—and sharpen—their own views. (see Jacobs and Shapiro, 2000, and in the case of news on Iraq, see Kull et al., 2003-2004). In this context, James Q. Wilson has noted, “Here is where the sharper antagonisms among political leaders and their advisers and associates come in. As one journalist has remarked about the change in his profession, ‘We don’t deal in facts [any longer], but in attributed opinions.’ Or, these days, in unattributed opinions. And those opinions are more intensely rivalrous than was once the case” (Wilson, 2006, p.5). Thus, in this process, the facts may get lost.

What lies ahead? It is possible that the current sharp polarization that we have described will be short-lived. On the other hand, the kind of polarization we have described may be more sustainable than in the past. While it may be the case that the partisan and ideological divide on new and old social issues, such as gay rights, abortion, and others may endure, along with the long-standing differences between the two major parties economic welfare and “big government” issues (cf. Evans, 2003). In contrast, the current findings on foreign policy and national security-related issues may be specific to the current situation facing the United States in the post Cold War and post September 11th world. Further, the partisan differences we find may just reflect differences in support for the specific positions and policies of the Bush administration—an administration that has had its own particular style of “leadership.” The polarization in foreign policy, then, could diminish as international tensions subside, and it could change with the election of a Democratic administration that might find a middle ground that
It took time for the current polarization on domestic social issues to show that it could persist, and we will know more as we see how political leaders stake out their positions along partisan lines in the 2006 congressional elections and especially the 2008 presidential election. This may determine to the extent to which the “long-standing features of politics: political parties, social groups, ideologies, and established leaders” will continue to serve the rational public well.

References


APPENDIX 1 - Surveys Questions (CCFR, HARRIS, PIPA, ABC/WP)

1) CCFR - CHICAGO COUNCIL ON FOREIGN RELATIONS SURVEY QUESTIONS (1998-2004)

# Below is a list of present federal government programs. For each, please select whether you feel it should be expanded, cut back or kept about the same? …

Aid to education
Defense spending
Social Security
Health care
….  

# Below is a list of possible foreign policy goals that the United States might have. For each one please select whether you think that it should be a very important foreign policy goal of the United States, a somewhat important foreign policy goal, or not an important goal at all? …

Combating international terrorism
Maintaining superior military power worldwide
….  

2) HARRIS INTERACTIVE (2003-2004)

# Do you believe clear evidence of Weapons of Mass Destruction has been found in Iraq or not? Clear evidence found/ No clear evidence found/ Not sure/Refused

# Do you believe clear evidence that Iraq was supporting Al Qaeda has been found in Iraq or not? Clear evidence found/ No clear evidence found/ Not sure/Refused

# Do you believe Iraq actually had weapons of mass destruction when the war began or not? Believe Iraq had them/ Do not believe/ Not sure/Refused

3) PIPA – PROGRAM ON INTERNATIONALS POLITICAL ATTITUDES/KNOWLEDGE NETWORKS POLL (2003-2006)

# Since the war with Iraq ended, is it your impression that the US has or has not found Iraqi weapons of mass destruction? US has/ US has not/ No answer
# Is it your impression that the US has or has not found clear evidence in Iraq that Saddam Hussein was working closely with the al-Qaeda terrorist organization? US has/ US has not/ No answer

# Is it your belief that, just before the war, Iraq: Had actual weapons of mass destruction/ Had no weapons of mass destruction but had a major program for developing them/ Had some limited activities that could be used to help develop weapons of mass destruction, but not an active program/ Did not have any activities related to weapons of mass destruction/ No answer?

# On the question of what Iraq had just before the war, is it your impression experts… Mostly agree Iraq DID have weapons of mass destruction/ Mostly agree Iraq DID NOT have weapons of mass destruction, though it may have had some programs for developing them/ Are evenly divided on the question/ No answer?

# On the question of the relationship between Iraq and al Qaeda is it your impression experts… Mostly agree Iraq WAS providing substantial support to al Qaeda/ Mostly agree Iraq WAS NOT providing substantial support to al Qaeda/ Are evenly divided on the question/ No answer?

4) ABC/WASHINGTON POST (2001-2006)

# Do you approve or disapprove the way George W. Bush is handling his job as president? Approve (strongly, somewhat)/ Disapprove (strongly, somewhat)?

# Do you approve or disapprove the way Bush is handling the situation in Iraq? Approve (strongly, somewhat)/ Disapprove (strongly, somewhat)?

# All in all, considering the costs to the United States versus the benefits to the United States, do you think the war with Iraq was worth fighting, or not? Worth fighting (strongly, somewhat)/ Not worth fighting (strongly, somewhat)?

# Do you think the war with Iraq has or has not contributed to the long-term security of the United States? Contributed (Great deal, somewhat)/ Has not/ No opinion

# Do you think the Bush Administration does or does not have a clear plan for handling the situation in Iraq? Does/ Does not/ No opinion
How can 59,054,087 people be so DUMB?

U.S. ELECTION DISASTER: PAGES 2, 4, 5, 6, 7 & 11
FIGURE 1  IDEOLOGICAL TRENDS IN ROLL CALL VOTING IN THE UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES, 1971-2002
(SOURCE: JACOBSON, 2005a, p.178)
FIGURE 2 IDEOLOGICAL TRENDS IN ROLL CALL VOTING IN THE UNITED STATES SENATE, 1971-2002
(SOURCE: JACOBSON, 2005a, p.179)
Figure 3: Trends in Foreign and Domestic Policy Bipartisanship, 1889-2002, Congresses 51-107
(Source: Trubowitz and Mellow, 2005, Figure 2)
Figure 4 Correlation of Party Identification with Liberal-Conservative Identification, 1972-2004
(Source: Abramowitz and Saunders, 2005)

Note: Correlation coefficient is Pearson’s $r$ based on 7-point party Identification scale and 7-point liberal-conservative identification scale.

Source: American National Election Studies
Figure 5 Presidential Approval (Percent) by Partisanship
(Source: Green, Palmquist, and Schickler, 2002, p.131)
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Bush Approval - General: By Party
(source: ABC/WP surveys)

Figure 7

Bush Approval - General: By Ideology
(source: ABC/WP surveys)
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LEADERS OPINION: Foreign Policy Goals - Maintain Military Power

Figure 8B

PUBLIC OPINION: Foreign Policy Goals – Maintain Military Power
LEADERS OPINION: Combat Terror - Toppling Unfriendly Regimes

PUBLIC OPINION: Combat Terror - Toppling Unfriendly Regimes ('favor')
Figure 10

PUBLIC OPINION: Federal Gov. Programs - Defense ('expand')

Figure 11

PUBLIC OPINION: Foreign Policy Goals - Strengthen the UN
Figure 12A

LEADERS OPINION: Federal Gov. Program - Aid to Education (‘expand’)  

Figure 12B

PUBLIC OPINION: Federal Gov. Program - Aid to Education (‘expand’)
Figure 13A

LEADERS OPINION: Federal Gov. Program
- Social Security ('expand')

Figure 13B

PUBLIC OPINION: Federal Gov. Program
- Social Security ('expand')
Figure 14A

LEADERS OPINION: Federal Gov. Program - Health Care ('expand')

Figure 14B

PUBLIC OPINION: Federal Gov. Program - Health Care ('expand')
FIGURE 15  PARTISAN DIFFERENCES IN SUPPORT FOR THE KOREAN WAR

(Source: Mueller, 1973, p.118)

Figure 5.1  Trends in support for the Korean War, by partisanship. For complete data, see Table A.1, p. 270.
FIGURE 16  PARTISAN DIFFERENCES IN SUPPORT FOR THE VIETNAM WAR

(Source: Mueller, 1973, p.119)

Figure 5.2  Trends in support for the war in Vietnam, by partisanship. For complete data see Table A.1, p. 271.
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Bush Approval - Iraq: By Party
(source: ABC/WP surveys)

Figure 18

Bush Approval - Iraq: By Ideology
(source: ABC/WP surveys)
Figure 19

The War in Iraq - worth fighting: By Party
(source: ABC/WP surveys)

Figure 20

The War in Iraq - worth fighting: By Ideology
(source: ABC/WP surveys)
Figure 21

The War in Iraq - contributed to the U.S long-term security:
By Party
(source: ABC/WP surveys)

Figure 22

The War in Iraq - Contributed to the U.S long-term security: By Ideology
(source: ABC/WP surveys)
Figure 23

Iraq - The Bush Administration have a clear plan:

By Party

(source: ABC/WP surveys)

Figure 24

Iraq - The Bush Administration have a clear plan:

By Ideology

(source: ABC/WP surveys)
FIGURE 25 PARTISANSHIP AND THE BELIEF THAT EVIDENCE WAS FOUND OF IRAQ HAVING WEAPONS OF MASS DESTRUCTION
(SOURCE: BLOCH-ELKON AND SHAPIRO, 2005, Figure 3)
FIGURE 26  PARTISANSHIP AND THE BELIEF THAT IRAQ HAD WEAPONS OF MASS DESTRUCTION
(SOURCE: BLOCH-ELKON AND SHAPIRO, 2005, Figure 2)

Figure 2

Question: Do you believe that Iraq actually had weapons of mass destruction when the war began or not?

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Independent</th>
<th>Democrat</th>
<th>Republican</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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<tr>
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<td>8/2003</td>
<td>69%</td>
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<td>88%</td>
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<td>84.7%</td>
</tr>
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<td>4/2004</td>
<td>55.3%</td>
<td>36.4%</td>
<td>80.1%</td>
</tr>
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</table>

Source: Surveys by Harris Interactive, latest that of April 2004. Data provided by the Odum Institute for Research in Social Science, University of North Carolina, and the IPOLL database of the Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut.
FIGURE 27  PARTISANSHIP AND THE BELIEF THAT EVIDENCE WAS FOUND OF IRAQ SUPPORT FOR AL QAEDA
(SOURCE: BLOCH-ELKON AND SHAPIRO, 2005, Figure 1)

Figure 1

Question: Do you believe clear evidence that Iraq was supporting al-Qaeda has been found in Iraq or not?

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Independent</th>
<th>Democrat</th>
<th>Republican</th>
<th>Date</th>
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</thead>
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<td>4/2004</td>
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</table>

Source: Surveys by Harris Interactive, latest that of April 2004. Data provided by the Odum Institute for Research in Social Science, University of North Carolina, and the IPOLL database of the Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut.
Figure 28

Clear evidence Iraq/Saddam - Al Qaeda: Perceptions by Party
(source: PIPA surveys)
Figure 29

Iraq had WMD: Perceptions by Party
(source: PIPA surveys)
Figure 30

US has found Iraqi WMD: Perceptions by Party
(source: PIPA surveys)

- Republicans
- Independents
- Democrats
Figure 31

Most experts agree Iraq - WMD: Perceptions by Party
(source: PIPA surveys)

- Republicans
- Independents
- Democrats
Figure 32

Most experts agree Iraq - Al-Qaeda: Perceptions by Party
(source: PIPA surveys)

- Republicans
- Independents
- Democrats
Figure 33A

Clear evidence Iraq - WMD: Perceptions of Republicans by education
(source: Harris surveys)

Figure 33B

Clear evidence Iraq - WMD: Perceptions of Democrats by education
(source: Harris surveys)
Figure 34A

Iraq had WMD: Perceptions of Republicans by education
(source: Harris surveys)

Figure 34B

Iraq had WMD: Perceptions of Democrats by education
(source: Harris surveys)
Figure 35A

Iraq had WMD: Perceptions of Republicans by education (source: PIPA surveys)

Figure 35B

Iraq had WMD: Perceptions of Democrats by education (source: PIPA surveys)
Figure 36A

US has found Iraqi WMD: Perceptions of Republicans by education
(source: PIPA surveys)

Figure 36B

US has found Iraqi WMD: Perceptions of Democrats by education
(source: PIPA surveys)
Figure 37A

Clear evidence Iraq - Al-Qaeda: Perceptions of Republicans by education
(source: Harris Surveys)

Figure 37B

Clear evidence Iraq - Al-Qaeda: Perceptions of Democrats by education
(source: Harris surveys)
Figure 38A

Clear evidence Iraq/Saddam - Al-Qaeda: Perceptions of Republicans by education
(source: PIPA surveys)

Figure 38B

Clear evidence Iraq/Saddam - Al-Qaeda: Perceptions of Democrats by education
(source: PIPA surveys)
Figure 39A

Most experts agree Iraq - WMD: Perceptions of Republicans by education
(source: PIPA survey)

Figure 39B

Most experts agree Iraq - WMD: Perceptions of Democrats by education
(source: PIPA survey)
Figure 40A

Most experts agree Iraq - Al-Qaeda: Perceptions of Republicans by education
(source: PIPA surveys)

Figure 40B

Most experts agree Iraq - Al-Qaeda: Perceptions of Democrats by education
(source: PIPA surveys)