

Political Science 17.20

Introduction to American Politics

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Public Opinion
Lecture 13 (March 21, 2013)

Outline

- 1 From Individual to Aggregate Opinion
- 2 The Rational Public?
- 3 Elites, the Media, and Partisans

1 From Individual to Aggregate Opinion

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The Incoherence of Individual Attitudes

- **Attitude**: psychological tendency expressed by evaluating an entity with some degree of favor or disfavor
- The attitudes of individual citizens tend to be:
 - Ignorant
 - Unstable
 - Ideologically inconsistent
- More informed/engaged citizens are more ideological, but this reflects emotional factors as much as cognitive ones.

How Do Citizens Respond to Survey Questions?

- **RAS Model:** Attitudes are constructed “on the spot” on the basis of a sample of **considerations** derived from information received via the mass **media**.
- **On-line Processing:** Attitudes towards some high-profile objects (e.g., president) may reflect more information than citizens can remember.
 - **Save the summary** evaluation but **forget the details**.
- **Heuristics:** Gut feelings are an example of a cognitively efficient (though fallible) **decision shortcut**.
 - Is it unreasonable to vote for Obama “because he’s black”?

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Emergent Properties of Public Opinion

The Miracle of Aggregation:

- Random **noise** in citizens' responses (measurement error) cancels out when they are added together, strengthening the underlying **signal**.

Parallel Publics

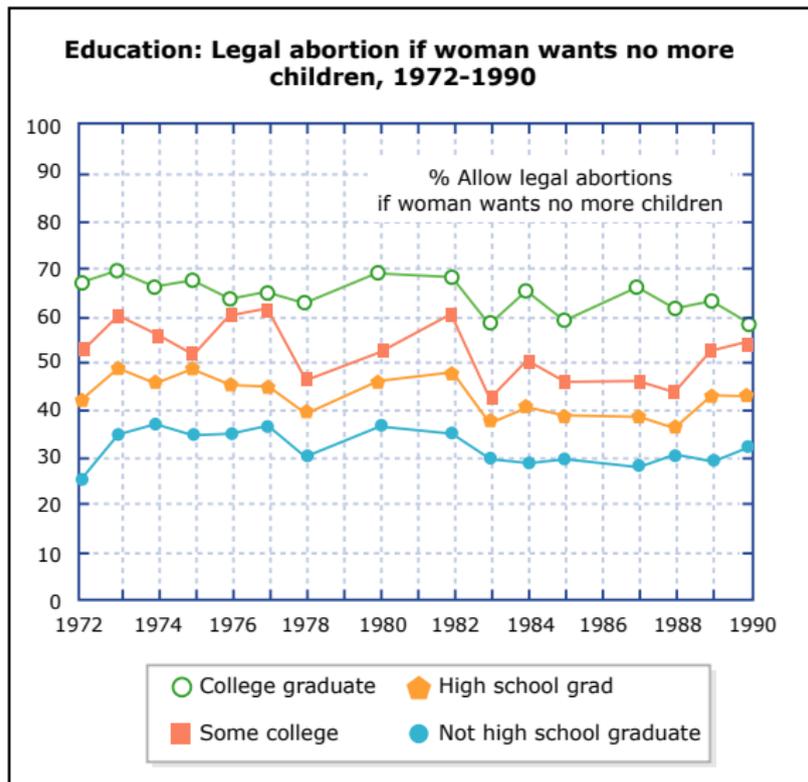


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Zaller's Theory

Three main factors:

- 1 **Predispositions** (party, values)
- 2 **Political awareness** (attention, knowledge)
- 3 **Information flows** (elite → media → public)

Mainstream effect:

Elites agree \implies support increases with political information

Polarization effect:

Elites disagree \implies opinion polarizes as information increases

→ If messages imbalanced, relationship may be curvilinear.

Support for the Vietnam War

Mainstream



Polarized

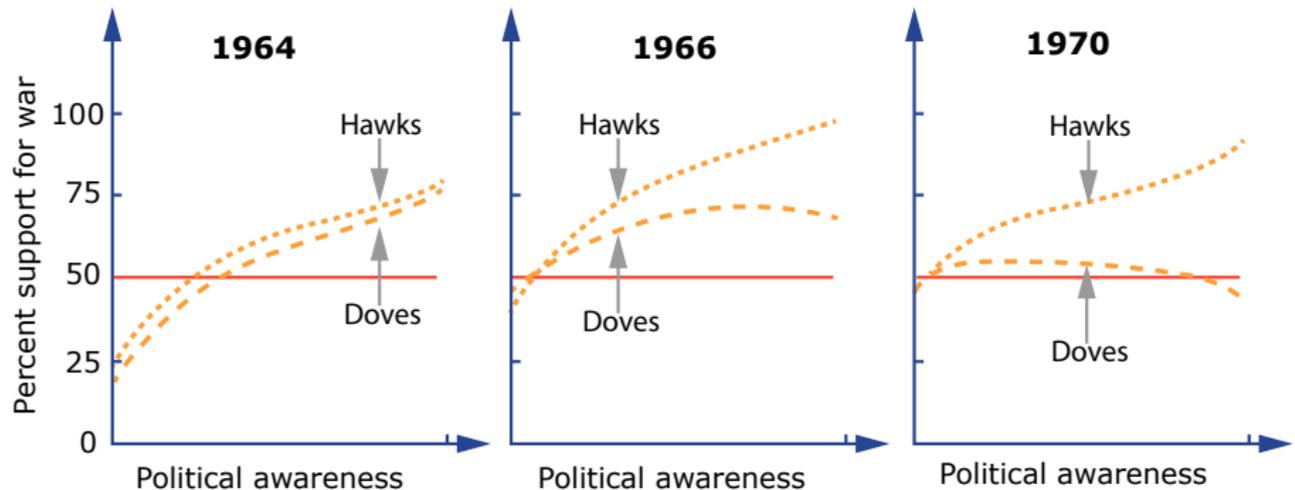


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Berinsky's Revision

- Berinsky criticizes the claim that citizens make rational decisions about war based on the anticipated costs.
- The pattern of **elite conflict** is crucial.
- But **citizens are not just passive recipients** of elite messages, but rather can infer the “correct” position for them based on the source (i.e., Bush) of pro-war messages, even in the absence of countervailing messages.
- Is this a reasonable heuristic?

The Iraq War

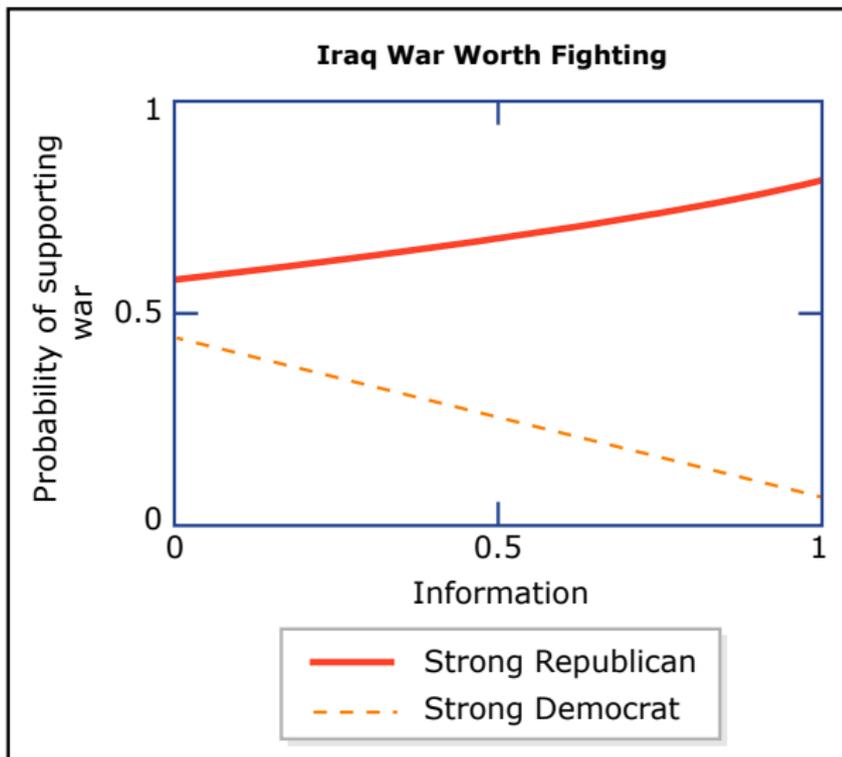


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