

## **The Media and the Foundations of Presidential Support: George Bush and the Persian Gulf Conflict**

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*When the United States began its overt military conflict with Iraq in January 1991, the American news media focused attention powerfully and seemingly unceasingly on the Gulf crisis for a period of almost three months. Through analysis of data collected in a panel survey conducted before and after the war, we found that paralleling this surge in media coverage were significant alterations in the ingredients of Americans' assessments of George Bush's job performance. After the war, these assessments were based much more on citizens' beliefs about his effectiveness in managing the conflict, and much less on their confidence in his handling of other foreign relations matters or the domestic economy. We found as well that these shifts were regulated by citizens' levels of political knowledge, exposure to political news, and interest in the war. Greater shifts were associated with higher levels of knowledge and lower levels of exposure and interest. These findings challenge traditional views of these dimensions of political involvement and support an alternative view derived from contemporary psychological theories of information processing.*

The 1991 Gulf War was certainly a momentous event in recent history, and its impact on the American public is likely to have been multifaceted. For example, events in the Gulf may well have altered Americans' confidence in the U.S. military and their support for government spending on defense. Or the war

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may have changed public support for Israel, the Arab nations, or particular U.S. foreign policies in dealing with the Middle East. Our focus in this article is on yet another potential effect of the war—on the process by which Americans evaluate their president's job performance.

Public opinion about presidential performance exerts powerful forces on policy formation and implementation in Washington. Opinion polls document a president's popularity across the country, and perceptions of his popularity in turn partly regulate his ability to control political events. Popular presidents have their way with Congress and the federal bureaucracy, while unpopular ones struggle much less successfully to shape legislative decision making (Neustadt, 1960; Rivers & Rose, 1981). Thus, the public's judgments of presidential performance are quite consequential.

A look at public opinion poll results suggests that the Gulf War may have had a profound impact on Americans' views of George Bush's performance. As documented by numerous public opinion polls, including those done by the CBS News/*New York Times* and by the Gallup Organization (Staff, *The Gallup Poll Monthly*, 1991, p. 12), Bush's approval ratings were moderate just before the war began, in October 1990, at about 55%. When, after a gradual massing of allied troops in the Middle East, the U.S. initiated air attacks on Iraq in mid-January 1991, approval ratings began to increase. And in March, by which time the military efforts were completed, approval ratings soared to nearly 90%. Although the following months saw a gradual decline in this positive sentiment, even three months later they were still near 70%, quite a high level.

What accounts for the dramatic increase in presidential approval between the fall of 1990 and the spring of 1991? Perhaps it was simply the military alliance's success at ending the Iraqi occupation of Kuwait. But if this was all that drove the approval increase, it is puzzling as to why the rise began in January, just after the war began but before it was clear that U.S. efforts would be successful. We therefore focus here on another possible explanation—the starting point of which is the theory of priming.

### *The Theory of Priming*

The notion of priming begins by acknowledging evidence from psychological research indicating that when people make judgments or decisions, they rarely take into consideration the entire array of available relevant evidence. Rather, because of the cognitive burdens imposed by a complete and comprehensive information search and integration process, people tend to "satisfice" rather than "optimize" (see Simon, 1957; Simon & Stedry, 1968). That is, they often derive their decisions from limited subsets of the available information pool so as to make satisfactory judgments without expending a great deal of effort.

According to the theory of priming, satisficing operates for political judg-

ments just as it does for other sorts of judgments. When Americans are asked to evaluate the job performance of their president, an optimal assessment might entail gauging the president's performance in a wide array of policy domains and integrating those domain-specific judgments into an overall summary. More likely, according to the theory of priming, people would employ a satisficing approach: assessing presidential performance in only a small subset of policy domains, using a sample of convenience.

Which particular pieces of information get used are those that come to mind quickly and automatically for an individual citizen—those that are most accessible (Higgins & King, 1981; Wyer & Hartwick, 1980). And the accessibilities of various policy domains are in turn presumed to be determined importantly by news media coverage. Issues that have been the subject of extensive attention on television and radio and in newspapers are particularly likely to come to citizens' minds shortly thereafter and thereby to enjoy enhanced impact on presidential evaluations. In contrast, topics that have been addressed only minimally in the news media are rarely primed and are therefore likely to play little if any role in presidential assessment processes (Iyengar & Kinder, 1987; Iyengar, Kinder, Peters, & Krosnick, 1984; Krosnick & Kinder, 1990).

### *Application to the Gulf Crisis*

In light of these principles, it is interesting to consider the potential impact of news coverage of the 1991 Gulf War on American's evaluations of George Bush. With the onset of the war came a drastic alteration in the content of news coverage across the country. Before the overt military actions began in Kuwait, Americans heard about this conflict in the Middle East relatively infrequently. But once the armed combat began in January, it became the central focus of many people's media exposure every day for months. Certainly, then, the ingredients of Americans' presidential evaluations must have shifted significantly as the result of the war if the theory of priming is correct.

As easy as this prediction is to derive from the theory, it is quite a bit more difficult to specify *a priori* exactly how these ingredients are likely to have shifted. The most straightforward prediction would suggest that assessments of Bush's handling of the Gulf crisis would come to loom large in people's overall evaluations of him. This simple prediction follows naturally from Iyengar and Kinder's (1987) finding that priming requires a close fit between the domain of judgment that is the intended target of priming and the news stories that constitute the prime itself. However, it is conceivable that focusing Americans' attention on this conflict overseas might have increased their attention to other international relations issues as well, thereby increasing the impact of these issues on overall presidential evaluations. In addition, we might expect to see handling of domestic issues such as the economy recede in American's thinking by virtue of

their relative neglect by the news media. Exactly which ingredients of performance evaluations rose and fell in importance presumably hinged upon precisely how Americans construed the meaning and significance of the Middle East conflict. Thus, shedding light on these changes is one approach to gaining insight into how the public made sense of the war.

To do so, we set out to assess the impact of the Gulf crisis on the ingredients of presidential appraisals. Specifically, we analyzed national panel survey data collected before and after the war. Included in both the prewar and postwar interviews were extensive batteries of questions assessing respondents' perceptions of presidential performance overall and in specific policy domains. Thus, these data provided an opportunity to assess the impact of the war on presidential evaluation processes, and we shall do so below.

### *Identifying the Most Vulnerable Citizens*

In addition to characterizing shifts in determinants of presidential evaluations for the nation as a whole, we were also interested in identifying those segments of the public whose evaluation strategies were most and least influenced by the media. Our prior research on priming indicated that political expertise or involvement may be an important moderator here (see Iyengar et al., 1984; Krosnick & Kinder, 1990). While the judgments of political novices have at times appeared to be highly responsive to news media emphasis, experts have seemed to be much more immune to these pressures. As we have seen this pattern before, so might we see it again here.

However, the empirical evidence on the moderating role of political expertise is actually rather inconsistent, in part depending upon the particular operationalization of expertise employed. Although priming effects have been weaker among people highly knowledgeable about politics in some investigations (see Iyengar et al., 1984; Krosnick & Kinder, 1990), no differences between highly knowledgeable and less knowledgeable people have appeared in others (Iyengar & Kinder, 1987, chap. 10). Furthermore, other methods of assessing political involvement (such as reported interest in politics, frequency of exposure to political news, and frequency of political participation) have failed to distinguish people most susceptible to priming from those resistant to media influence (Iyengar & Kinder, 1987, pp. 90–97). These latter findings are puzzling especially because these measures are typically moderately and positively associated with political knowledge (see, e.g., Krosnick & Milburn, 1990) and might therefore be expected to behave similarly. Consequently, it seems sensible at this point to step back and think carefully about exactly how particular aspects of political expertise or involvement might shape presidential evaluation processes and therefore how they might moderate priming effects.

The most traditional and long-standing approach to political involvement

presumes that one can understand the impact of the news media on any particular individual by considering two regulatory factors: dosage and resistance (Converse, 1962; McGuire, 1968; Zaller, 1987, 1989, 1992). The greater one's dosage of media content, the more one should be influenced by it. Presumably, dosage is the result of the conjunction of two factors: exposure to the news media coupled with high interest in politics. On the other hand, the more knowledge one has, the more resistant one should be. Individuals with little knowledge about politics have only a minimal ability to see flaws or distortions in new information, and they have few other bases from which to derive political judgments. Therefore, they should be highly responsive to news media content. In contrast, highly knowledgeable individuals are equipped to counterargue new information and assimilate it into their preexisting store of knowledge. They may therefore be especially resistant to the influence of any single dose of new information.

Exposure, interest, and knowledge are typically positively correlated with one another, but this theoretical perspective predicts these variables to have oppositely signed effects on priming. Therefore, these perspectives offer potential explanations for the inconsistencies in prior studies of priming. None of these studies entailed multivariate analyses gauging the effect of each dimension of involvement while controlling for the effects of the others. Therefore, the resulting confounding of oppositely signed effects could well have yielded inconsistencies from study to study. All this suggests that we conduct multivariate analyses and look for additive and interactive effects of political involvement measures on changes in presidential evaluation ingredients produced by the Gulf War. In the investigation described below, we did just this.

### **Our Investigation**

#### *Data and Methods*

The data we analyzed were collected as part of the 1990–1991 National Election Panel Study (NJES) of the Political Consequences of War (Miller, Kinder, Rosenstone, & the National Election Studies, 1991). For details on our measures and analytic strategy, see Krosnick and Brannon (1993). For this survey, a nationally representative sample of 2000 American adults was interviewed during November and December 1990 and January 1991, prior to the major events of the war and the dramatic increase in media attention to the Gulf crisis. Of these individuals, 1385 were interviewed a second time during June and July 1991, long after the military efforts were completed.

During both the pre-war and post-war interviews, respondents were asked an extensive series of questions addressing many political beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors. Of most significance for the current investigation, respondents ap-

praised George Bush's handling of the Gulf crisis, his handling of foreign affairs generally, his handling of the domestic economy, and his job performance in general. Also, respondents reported their overall evaluations of Bush on a 101-point feeling thermometer. These latter two judgments were highly correlated ( $r_{\text{time } 1} = .75, p < .01$ ;  $r_{\text{time } 2} = .78, p < .01$ ), so we combined them into a single index of respondents' attitudes toward Bush. In addition, respondents were asked questions measuring their knowledge about politics in general, their exposure to political information through the news media, and their interest in the Gulf War. As expected, these three indices of political involvement were moderately positively correlated with one another ( $r_{\text{knowledge, media}} = .35, p < .01$ ;  $r_{\text{knowledge, interest}} = .18, p < .01$ ;  $r_{\text{media, interest}} = .29, p < .01$ ).

Consistent with popular opinion polls of the time, the NES survey data revealed a sharp increase in public approval of Bush's performance after the war. Our sample also voiced more approval of Bush's handling of the Gulf crisis, foreign relations, and the economy after the war than before (approval ratings increased 22.7%, 12.5%, and 10.9%, respectively). Thus, the war clearly enhanced Americans' sentiments toward Bush.

We assessed the impact of the war on the ingredients of overall Bush evaluations by regressing these evaluations on respondents' approval of his handling of the Gulf crisis, foreign relations generally, and the economy. Separate regressions were conducted using the pre-war and post-war data; then, the two waves of data were combined into a single analysis that included a variety of multiplicative interactions involving time of measurement and the three dimensions of political involvement.

## Results

*Regression analyses.* When we examined the basic priming effects, ignoring political involvement, we found that, as expected, the impact of Gulf crisis performance increased substantially (by 50%) after the war, while there were negligible changes over time in the impact of foreign relations performance or economic performance. Thus, the unstandardized regression coefficient for Gulf crisis performance rose from .21 to .30,  $z = 3.30, p < .001$ ; whereas the *bs* for foreign relations performance, .22 and .21, and for economic performance, .26 and .27, were virtually unchanged (*zs* yielded nonsignificant *ps*).

When we examined the regulatory impact of each dimension of political involvement individually, the basic priming effect was apparent primarily among low-involvement respondents. That is, Gulf crisis performance became a more important determinant of overall evaluations after the war among low-knowledge, low-exposure, and low-interest respondents (increases in *b* of .10, .15, and .20, respectively; all *ps* < .01). No such priming effect was apparent among the high-knowledge, high-exposure, and high-interest respondents (in-

creases in *b* of .06, .04, and .04, respectively; all *ps* ns). Thus, we replicated the pattern we have observed in previous studies of priming (e.g., Krosnick & Kinder, 1990). However, these analyses confound the three dimensions of involvement with one another. We therefore estimated a much-expanded within-subjects repeated-measures regression equation that again predicted overall Bush evaluations including all three aspects of political involvement simultaneously.

In this regression, the three domains of presidential performance, the three aspects of political involvement, and the within-subject variable of time (prewar vs. postwar) were entered as main effects. All two-way and three-way interactions were also included, as well as three four-way interactions between time, exposure, interest, and domain-specific performance. This analysis revealed a number of intriguing results. First, all three domains of presidential performance were apparently subject to priming effects. Gulf crisis performance became more important after the war, just as we had seen previously. But it also became apparent that other aspects of foreign relations and the domestic economy became *less* important determinants of overall Bush evaluations after the war. Thus, as the Gulf crisis occupied the spotlight, it drew attention away from these other domains of performance.

Furthermore, as expected, we found that these three priming effects were all regulated by political knowledge, media exposure, and interest. However, the directions of these regulatory effects were exactly opposite to those predicted by the traditional dosage/resistance perspective. The priming effects were stronger among highly knowledgeable individuals than among less knowledgeable ones. And the priming effects were greater among the least interested people and those least exposed to political news.

*Assessing the political significance.* These results make it clear that priming affected the impact of all three policy domains on overall presidential evaluations. Furthermore, these effects were clearly regulated by the three dimensions of political involvement in different ways. Thus, the findings described above highlight significant psychological shifts in the American public's political information processing. In order to understand the political significance of these effects, however, we must turn our attention to assessing how much of the postwar rise in President Bush's approval ratings is attributable to these priming effects.

As we described above, popular polls showed that presidential approval increased from about 56% in October/November 1990, to about 76% in June 1991. This increase is presumably due to at least two changes: (1) increased positivity of Americans' assessments of President Bush's handling of the Gulf crisis and his handling of foreign relations; and (2) increased weight attached to these two domains, and reduced weight attached to his handling of the economy, which was evaluated more negatively (i.e., priming effects).

To assess how much of the increase in overall evaluations was due to each of these components, we conducted regression analyses to estimate what postwar evaluations of Bush's overall performance would have been had the ingredient weights remained unchanged. This exercise revealed that the shift in domain-specific ratings could account for 82% of the pre-to-post increase in overall evaluations, while .18% of the increase was attributable to the priming effects.

*Broader priming effects?* Before concluding our analyses, we examined one more set of expanded regression equations predicting overall evaluations of Bush's performance. In addition to the three domain-specific performance evaluations used thus far, we included the five other general political beliefs measured in both waves of the NES survey that we thought might have been subject to priming effects. These included two beliefs directly related to the conflict: whether it was a good idea to send U.S. military forces to the Gulf, whether U.S. defense spending should be increased or decreased, and whether the position of the U.S. in the world had recently grown stronger or not. They also included two economic judgments: whether the nation's economy as a whole had gotten better or worse recently, and whether the respondent's family's financial situation had recently improved or declined.

Note that none of these questions directly implicated George Bush. Therefore, one might imagine that these beliefs would not be subject to priming effects involving overall Bush evaluations. However, we thought it also conceivable that the Gulf crisis related judgments might have had more impact on overall Bush evaluations after the war. And we thought that the economic judgments might have had less impact on overall evaluations after the war.

We assessed whether these beliefs were subject to priming effects both for the sample as a whole and among subsets of respondents defined by the three dimensions of political involvement. But whichever analysis we conducted, we found no evidence of any strong or reliable priming effects on any of the beliefs. Thus, it seems that in the case of the Gulf crisis, priming effects on presidential evaluations were confined to judgments directly involving George Bush.

## Discussion

### *The Impact of the Gulf Crisis*

Consistent with previous research on priming, the increased impact of Americans' assessments of George Bush's handling of the Gulf crisis on their evaluations of his overall job performance paralleled the news media's incessant focus on it. And at the same time, as attention to the war increased, attentiveness to other aspects of foreign relations and to the domestic economy decreased. Although this evidence does not pin the responsibility for these effects squarely

and unambiguously on the news media, these findings are nicely consistent with the theory of priming.

Because most Americans evaluated Bush's handling of the Gulf crisis much more positively than they evaluated his handling of the domestic economy or other aspects of international relations, this shift in focus contributed to the sharp increase in Bush's overall popularity. Of course, simply "winning" the war was, in and of itself, largely responsible for the surge in approval ratings. But priming contributed significantly to this shift as well.

These findings are in marked contrast to one plausible vision of the American citizen. One might imagine that political affairs are at the periphery of most Americans' lives most of the time because the more mundane and personal concerns of everyday life exhaust their abilities for cognitive engagement. But when a war occurs and intrudes into the daily lives of numerous people in powerful ways, their interest in and exposure to political affairs presumably surges. It is conceivable that this shift might lead people to become interested in and knowledgeable about a wide range of political issues beyond just the war itself, partly because the conduct of the war has effects on these various other issues. At the very least, because the Gulf War involved complex coordination of efforts by many countries worldwide, Americans might have become more attentive to and concerned about U.S. relations with these various other countries. Thus, perhaps one way ordinarily passive citizens may be drawn into participation in political affairs is when their attention is grabbed by large-scale and consequential events such as wars.

In fact, our results offer no support for this vision. Americans were apparently quite narrow in their response to the war, focusing their attention on it to the exclusion of other issues, even other foreign relations issues. Thus, the Gulf War did not induce cognitive engagement in an array of political issues. This result is in harmony with evidence from laboratory experimental studies showing that priming effects appeared only in policy domains that have been directly addressed in news coverage (see Iyengar & Kinder, 1987, chap. 11), and this correspondence enhances our confidence in those studies and in ours.

Might other wars have been capable of inciting broad cognitive engagement in politics? Certainly, the Gulf War was unusual in many respects, in terms of minimal casualties, a brief period of combat, and a variety of other attributes. Perhaps more costly wars conducted over more protracted periods of time lead Americans to attach cognitive significance to many other policy issues. But it may instead be that Americans' capacities for attention are limited to just a few issues at a time.

### *Moderators of Priming*

Our study also addresses the roles of political knowledge, exposure, and interest in regulating priming effects. When considered individually, these three

aspects of political involvement all seemed to have the same effects on priming: higher involvement was associated with reduced priming, just as sometimes has been seen in various previous investigations (Iyengar et al., 1984; Krosnick & Kinder, 1990). However, when these three variables were examined simultaneously, they turned out to have opposite effects on priming. High levels of political knowledge enhanced priming, and high levels of exposure and interest reduced priming.

The directions of these effects are in sharp contrast to those anticipated by a traditional view of political involvement. Greater media exposure and interest have been viewed as indicating stronger dosages of media content, whereas greater knowledge has been viewed as a basis for greater resistance to new information acquired from the media. Our findings clearly challenge this view.

We would argue instead that our results support an alternative view of these dimensions of involvement, a view suggested by contemporary research in social and cognitive psychology. With regard to exposure and interest, this research suggests at least two reasons to expect weaker priming effects among the most exposed and interested. First, individuals who are only minimally exposed to and interested in the news media will probably absorb little other than the "big message" contained in the lead stories and repeated regularly across media and across time. In contrast, highly exposed and interested individuals are likely to absorb both the big message and a wide range of peripheral details and additional stories. Consequently, the priming impact of the principal message is likely to be diluted by the many other knowledge domains that are also primed. Thus, priming effects of a principal story (such as the Gulf crisis) should be strongest among individuals with lower exposure and interest levels.

There is a second reason to expect this pattern as well (see Hastie & Park, 1986; Lodge, McGraw & Stroh, 1989). People who are highly attentive to the flow of political news are likely to think a great deal about political affairs. This extensive thought is likely to lead them to form a set of general political evaluations (e.g., regarding a president's overall job performance) stored in memory, and to continually update them as new, relevant information is acquired. Therefore, if asked by a pollster to report an assessment of a president's performance, these individuals need only retrieve and report these on-line evaluations. These judgments have a great deal of inertia, because they are based on large sets of previously acquired information, so new pieces of information have only a small impact on them. Therefore, recent news media content would be expected to have relatively little effect on highly attentive citizens.

In contrast, citizens who pay little attention to the flow of news are unlikely to have such general political evaluations stored in memory. Consequently, they will most likely have to respond to an inquiring pollster by recalling whatever they can about presidential performance and deriving an overall evaluation on the

spot. As the theory of priming suggests, instead of drawing upon expansive arrays of performance domains, these individuals are most likely to consider only the small handfuls of performance domains that come to mind most easily. Thus, lower levels of exposure and interest would again be associated with the greatest priming effects because of the employment of a memory-based judgment strategy.

The memory-based judgments of low-exposure/interest individuals will only be influenced by news media content absorbed days or weeks earlier if that content had been stored in their memories and could be retrieved at the time of judgment. Therefore, factors that enhance the likelihood of storage and retrieval will enhance media priming effects. One such factor is political knowledge. The more schematically organized knowledge one has about a domain, the more efficiently and effectively one can make sense of new information, find an appropriate place to incorporate it into one's memory, and retrieve it sometime later (see Fiske & Taylor, 1991, pp. 121-132). Therefore, the more knowledge one has about politics, the more quickly and easily one can make sense of a news story and the more efficiently one can store it in and retrieve it from an elaborate and organized mental filing system. In contrast, individuals with minimal knowledge about politics presumably have more difficulty interpreting new political information, are unlikely to store that information in memory, and have difficulty retrieving whatever information they do store. Therefore, media priming effects would presumably be greater among highly knowledgeable individuals than among minimally knowledgeable ones.

In sum, then, greater knowledge constitutes a greater ability to interpret, encode, store, and retrieve new information. And higher levels of exposure and interest are associated with a greater likelihood of forming on-line political evaluations and a dilution of priming effects due to a wider range of knowledge being activated by media coverage. This alternative theoretical perspective is perfectly consistent with the results we observed here.

There is another way to think about the effect of political interest we identified. Recent studies suggest that priming manipulations may have the greatest impact when they occur without people paying much attention to them (Lombardi, Higgins, & Bargh, 1987; Strack et al., 1993). When people attend closely to and are aware of the potential impact of context on their judgments, they correct for it. In our case, highly interested viewers may therefore have said to themselves, "I know the news media have paid a lot of attention to inflation lately, but I don't want that to cause me to place too much weight on inflation in deriving my presidential performance evaluation. So I'll reduce its weight a bit." This could explain why weaker priming effects appeared among the most interested readers and viewers.

It is important to acknowledge, however, that the exposure and interest effects we observed could have occurred at a point in time much later than

encoding, via retroactive interference. People who were especially interested in politics and who absorbed lots of information about the war no doubt continued to attend closely to information about politics after the war as well. Consequently, as the news media's attention to matters other than the Gulf crisis increased during April and May of 1991, these highly attentive individuals were filling their minds with this new information, which would interfere with the cognitive effects of previously stored knowledge about the war. Thus, greater interest and exposure may yield more absorption of information about the war, but also of information about a range of other political matters as well. Individuals who were typically only minimally interested in and exposed to political information would have absorbed little political news after the war and would therefore have experienced much less postwar interference. This may explain why these people based their presidential evaluations in June and July 1991 on war-related attitudes.

This alternative interpretation of our results makes it clear how the timing of survey interviews can have tremendous impact on substantive conclusions about the war. Had a set of interviews been conducted during the war, in late January or February, we could have assessed the impact of exposure and interest on priming while avoiding confounding these factors with retention or retroactive interference. We might therefore have found more priming to be associated with greater exposure and interest at that time, reflecting greater dosage of media content, just as the traditional perspective on these measures of political involvement would have anticipated. In the absence of such data, the plausibility of the retroactive interference possibility must remain unclear for the moment.

#### *Generalizing to the Iran/Contra Affair*

The theoretical significance of these findings regarding political involvement is a bit difficult to assess with just this one investigation in hand. It is conceivable that there is something unique about the Gulf War that is responsible for these effects, so we might observe different patterns of results for other events. On the other hand, it is also possible that the patterns of effects observed here do indeed generalize across political contexts.

To assess this possibility, we conducted a reanalysis of data regarding priming in the context of the Iran/Contra affair (see Krosnick & Kinder, 1990). In their previous study, Krosnick and Kinder (1990) ignored exposure and interest and examined only the effect of political knowledge; as expected, they found priming to be decreased among highly knowledgeable citizens. Using the same methodology, we returned to those data and assessed the simultaneous effects of knowledge, exposure, and interest. And our findings were perfectly consistent with the ones reported above regarding exposure and interest in the Gulf War

context. High levels of exposure and interest were each associated with *reduced* priming effects individually. And once we controlled for these effects, political knowledge had no impact on priming.

These findings are encouraging in two regards. First, they suggest that the negative impact of exposure and interest on priming is not limited to the Gulf War case. In addition, this replication suggests that our Gulf War results are not the artifactual result of aspects of the 1990–1991 NES panel study design, because the Iran/Contra study design is quite different in numerous ways. For example, instead of being a panel study, the Iran/Contra investigation involved two independent cross sections of respondents: one interviewed before the scandal was revealed and the other interviewed afterward. And instead of a delay of months between the enhanced media coverage and postevent interviews, the Iran/Contra postevent interviews were conducted beginning the day after the revelation. It therefore seems unlikely that our present results are artifactually produced by some aspect of the 1990–1991 NES study design. Furthermore, the retroactive interference alternative explanation for the interest and exposure effects described above seems unlikely as well.

It is conceivable, however, that study design differences may account for the disappearance of the knowledge effect in the Iran/Contra case. Recall that knowledge may enhance priming by facilitating information storage and retrieval processes. Such processes are very likely to be involved in long-term priming over a period of months, as was the case in the Gulf War. But because the postevent interviews for the Iran/Contra case were conducted immediately after the revelation, long-term storage and retrieval issues were probably less relevant, thus explaining the lack of a knowledge effect in this case.

#### *Dimensions of Political Involvement*

Finally, our results suggest that researchers studying public opinion take a step back from traditional views of political involvement in light of contemporary theories of information processing and decision making. First, the sometimes-employed practice of combining measures of political knowledge, interest, and exposure into a single index of political involvement (e.g., Cassel, 1984; Chong, McClosky, & Zaller, 1983; Judd & Downing, 1990) now seems especially unwise, given that it may obscure effects of the components. Furthermore, head-to-head comparisons looking for the single most effective measure of involvement (e.g., Zaller, 1990) also seem misguided, because different dimensions may have oppositely signed effects and therefore do not reflect a single underlying construct. Rather, in line with other recent investigations (e.g., Krosnick & Milburn, 1990), our results illustrate why it is most sensible to treat political knowledge, interest, and exposure as distinct constructs that may have distinct effects on

political information processing and decision making. Therefore, multivariate analyses simultaneously examining these three dimensions seem in order for future studies.

This conclusion has substantive as well as methodological implications. Theorists have catalogued the many benefits of mass public engagement in the political affairs of democracies, as well as the dangers of apathy and ignorance (e.g., Dahl, 1989). At the same time, political observers have often lamented lack of political involvement in the American public and other mass publics across the globe (e.g., Kinder & Sears, 1985). The operating assumption here is that political involvement is a single entity that can be maximal, moderate, or minimal for a nation as a whole, or for any given individual. This assumption leads observers to presume that any single indicator of low involvement (such as a low turnout rate in an election) reflects low levels of engagement generally (see, e.g., Milbrath, 1965).

Our results suggest a different view of political involvement, one that treats involvement as having multiple distinct components. Any given individual may be exposed to lots of political information, but he or she may have no interest in it and may therefore retain little of it. Alternatively, an individual may be very interested in politics, but other aspects of life may be extraordinarily demanding, leaving little time for him or her to attend to contemporary events. Or by virtue of living in a household with others who frequently discuss political affairs, one may become highly knowledgeable about politics without any interest or exposure to the news media.

This new perspective is both encouraging and discouraging concerning the prospects for increasing mass involvement in democracies. On the bright side, any single piece of evidence indicating mass disengagement should not be so disappointing. That is, political involvement may be higher at a particular point in history than any single indicator (e.g., voter turnout) might suggest. But on the more discouraging side, the task of increasing political involvement entails increasing many different and distinct components: interest in political affairs, exposure to political information, storage of that information in memory, behavioral participation in political events, and so on. Our results suggest that large-scale social interventions intended to maximize involvement must be multi-pronged, and therefore perhaps much more complex and expensive than a simpler view of involvement might support. This is not to say that such efforts will be futile, but rather simply to suggest why they may be more difficult than might be imagined and how to make them most effective.

### Conclusion

In reporting our last investigation of priming effects, we concluded that "change over time in popular approval [of presidential performance]—and thus

the waxing and waning of presidential power—may depend the most on the citizens who know the least" (Krosnick & Kinder, 1990, p. 510). The findings of our more recent investigation clearly demand a revision of this conclusion. Instead, shifts in presidential popularity and power seem to be driven by citizens who are highly knowledgeable about politics but relatively inattentive to political news. This more textured conclusion makes it clear that, in social science as in all of life, things are often more complex than they appear at first.

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## Changes in Integrative Complexity Among Middle East Leaders During the Persian Gulf Crisis

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*Integrative complexity scoring was performed on almost 1250 paragraphs, whose source was the English transcription of materials produced by 14 Middle Eastern leaders between summer of 1990 and March, 1991. The data set was divided by leader, two levels of involvement in the Gulf crisis (high vs. peripheral), two political positions (adherence to pro- vs. anti-Iraqi policies), and seven temporal phases of the crisis (before the invasion of Kuwait, during and shortly after the invasion, diplomatic/economic attempts at solution, the last two weeks before the U.N. deadline for Iraqi withdrawal, aerial counterattack, ground counterattack, and after the cease-fire). Eight leaders provided sufficient material during at least four of the above phases for reliable scoring. Pro- and anti-Iraq leaders showed complexity changes in opposite directions across most phases of the crisis, except that both sides declined during the attempt to find a peaceful solution (October-December 1990). Individual changes, with particular attention to Saddam Hussein, are also analyzed. The results are interpreted in terms of cognitive management: the perceived costs and benefits of investing in particular strategies varying in complexity.*

In previous studies of crisis decision making during periods leading to the outbreak of war, we have examined the effects of stress, official role, degree of national involvement, increasing urgency and danger, and similar variables on integrative complexity. Integrative complexity is an attribute of information processing that generally indicates the extent to which decision makers search for and monitor information, try to predict outcomes and reactions, flexibly weigh

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