

The Political Fortunes of War:  
Iraq and the Domestic Standing of President  
George W. Bush

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July 2004

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## Acknowledgements

The authors are grateful to James Stimson and Christopher Wlezien for helpful suggestions on the manuscript.

## ABSTRACT

This paper provides a preliminary quantitative assessment of just how much the Iraq war may be costing President Bush in his bid for re-election. The assessment is made against the background of several sets of polling results, but is referenced in particular to historical data on the correlation between a President's popularity or approval ratings over the course of his first term and the result of the election that would give him a second term. Incumbent presidents who win re-election have generally enjoyed approval ratings in their fourth year of office of almost 60 percent. The approval rating of losers has been below 50 percent.

Our main finding is that American casualties in the Iraq war have had a measurable negative impact on the President's job approval rating. Specifically, Bush's job approval rating has declined by just over 1 percent for every 100 deaths of American service personnel. Using this estimate, the war may have cost the president over 10 percent in his job approval ratings.

As of June 2004, the average of all approval polls for President Bush was 47 percent. Absent the casualties that have been suffered in Iraq, we believe Bush's approval rating would likely be on the order of 10 percentage points higher — 57 percent — quite comfortably in the range of past incumbent presidents who were re-elected.

Has the war cost Bush the election? It has certainly made it more competitive than it would otherwise be. Bush finds himself on the cusp. Following our analysis, a continuation of the status quo — a daily death toll of several soldiers — is likely to hold down his approval ratings and place his re-election seriously in doubt.

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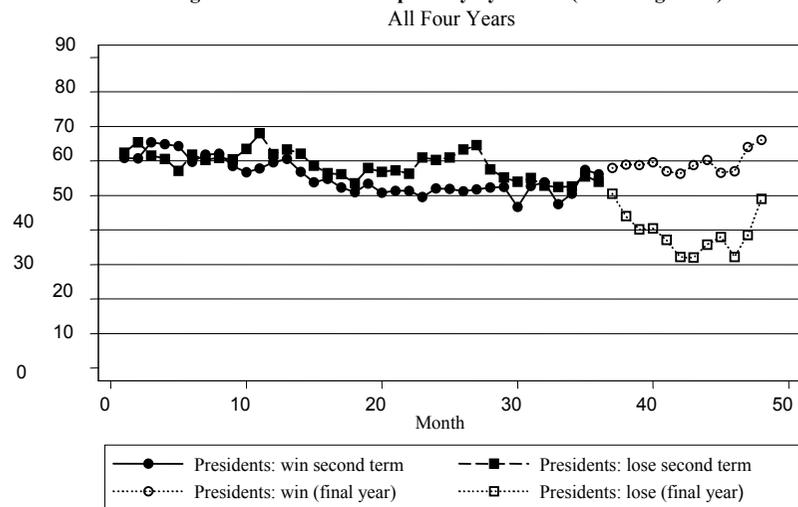
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## Introduction

Three important facts now permeate political discussion in the United States. First, President Bush's job approval rating reached its lowest point ever during May 2004. Second, the erosion of approval for Bush is widely ascribed to the failure to bring stability and security to Iraq, and in particular to the continuing accumulation of American casualties. Finally, based on historical patterns, Bush's re-election is in some doubt given his low approval rating.

The data in Figure 1 shows the month-by-month average of popularity for all presidents from Eisenhower through Clinton, divided into two groups: those incumbent presidents who win re-election, and those presidents who do not. (Percentage approval rating is shown on the vertical axis.)

Figure 1: Presidential Popularity by Month (excluding Bush)

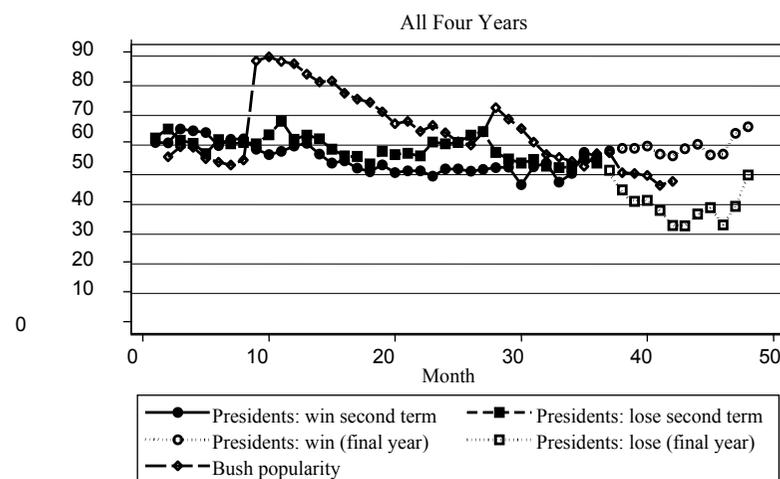


For the first three years of a president's term there is little discernable difference between those presidents who will win versus those presidents

who will lose re-election. But there is a dramatic separation between the winners and losers in the final year of the term. Presidents who go on to win re-election have an average approval rating in their fourth year of almost 60 percent. Presidents who will not win re-election have an average approval rating almost 20 points lower (although the gap closes to about 10 points in the final month).

What is the pattern of President Bush's job approval? Figure 2 adds his numbers to the graph. The figure shows that the Bush presidency has been something of a roller coaster ride.

Figure 2: Presidential Popularity By Month (including Bush)



Like most presidents before him, Bush experienced a mild decline in approval after his first months in office, but the large "rally effects" of the events of September 11, 2001, and the initial phase of the war in Iraq had significant upward effects on his approval. The 9/11 rally pushed his approval ratings to the highest level ever for an American president and it also created the longest enduring rally for any president.<sup>1</sup> The rally at the

<sup>1</sup> Marc J. Hetherington and Michael Nelson, 'Anatomy of a Rally Effect: George W. Bush and the War on Terrorism', *PS: Political Science and Politics*, 26 (January 2003), 37-42.

beginning of the war against Iraq arrested a gradual drop in his approval that had begun after October 2001 (albeit from an extraordinarily high level).

However, the President's job approval has been declining almost since the moment that he declared an end to major combat operations in Iraq on May 1, 2003. The decline has been steady and seemingly inexorable, interrupted only by a minor rally that followed the capture of Saddam Hussein. As the graph shows, by the end of June 2004 the President's approval level of 47 percent was well below the average for past presidents who successfully sought re-election, although it is still higher than the level of those who lost.<sup>2</sup> As several polling specialists have noted, the President is clearly in a political danger area in which re-election, although not foreclosed, will be difficult.<sup>3</sup>

How much of the decline in Bush's approval is due to the war and occupation? This question is actually more complicated than it may seem. That President Bush has suffered a loss in job approval is clear. But how much of that is really due to the war and occupation? What of other factors such as the economy, which by all accounts had contributed to the early weakness in Bush's approval ratings but now appears to be growing robustly? Will that not push Bush above the "winner's threshold?"

The transition of authority in Iraq also deserves particular attention. The mere fact of the handover may improve Bush's fortunes. In fact, the shift in American military strategy in Iraq has seemed clear since a truce was declared in Fallujah and the Marines withdrew to their bases. In Fallujah and elsewhere, American troops have attempted to remain in the

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<sup>2</sup> Here and elsewhere in this paper, presidential approval is defined as the weekly average of questions posed by four major polling organizations: Gallup/CNN/USA Today, ABC/Washington Post, CBS/New York Times, and the Pew Center for the People and the Press. The same applies to approval of the President's handling of the situation in Iraq, which is discussed later in this paper. Iraq approval is occasionally supplemented by other polling organizations that inquire into approval of the handling of Iraq policy (Los Angeles Times, Fox News). The polls were retrieved from [www.pollingreport.com/iraq](http://www.pollingreport.com/iraq).

<sup>3</sup> Richard Brody suggests that an incumbent must have an approval rating of at least 47 percent to win re-election, while others place the figure somewhat higher. See Richard A. Brody, *Assessing the President*, (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 1991), and Michael Lewis-Beck and Tom W. Rice, "Forecasting Presidential Elections: A Comparison of Naïve Models," *Political Behavior*, 6 (1984), 9-21.

background and allow local security forces to handle the situation in conjunction with the interim central government, a process that has been accelerated since the transition to Iraqi sovereignty.<sup>4</sup> To the extent that this strategy succeeds, will Bush not reap a political benefit? Already one sees the result of the change in strategy: the casualty rate among American soldiers dropped from almost five per day during the intense violence in April to less than two per day during June.<sup>5</sup>

The analogy to President Nixon's strategy of "Vietnamization" seems apt. In November 1969, Nixon announced in a nationally televised speech that responsibility for the war would be progressively transferred to South Vietnamese forces and that American troops would be gradually withdrawn. Although American casualties continued at the rate of twelve deaths per day in the four months after Vietnamization was announced, this figure represented half the toll compared to Nixon's first ten months in office. The response of the public was clear. The percentage of the public who approved of "President Nixon's handling of the situation in Vietnam" rose by 13 points after the Vietnamization policy became known, and his general job approval rating increased by almost 10 points.<sup>6</sup> Both remained substantially higher than previously through January of 1970. As the war dragged on into 1970, this "Vietnamization rally" evaporated, but for current purposes the important point is that the short-term boost in Nixon's rating was substantial, and it lasted several months. A similar boost for Bush from "Iraqification" would put his approval ratings squarely in the range of the "winners" shown in Figure 1, although there are four months to go before the election.

Of course, the opposite is also true. If "Iraqification" fails and American soldiers continue to die, the failure could drive the President's popularity even further downward. The important question is this: by precisely how much?

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<sup>4</sup> Ann Scott Tyson, "US military lowers profile in Iraq," *Christian Science Monitor*, June 30, 2004, 1.

<sup>5</sup> Based on figures reported by the US Central Command, as summarized on the iCasualties website: <http://icasualties.org/oif/Details.aspx>.

<sup>6</sup> The comparison is to mid-September 1970, because news reports of Nixon's Vietnamization initiative began appearing in October. Figures are from the Gallup Poll, retrieved from the IPOLL database of the Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut (also available via Lexis-Nexis).

To answer these questions, we need an analysis that goes beyond the fluctuations reported in the latest poll. In this paper, we hope to provide initial answers by reporting research on two sets of questions: the President's handling of the situation in Iraq and the President's job approval rating.

*The President's Handling of the Situation in Iraq:* how much have the war and occupation actually affected judgments of Bush's stewardship? Over the past year, Europeans expressed wonder at the relatively high percentage of Americans who continued to endorse the initiation of the war or who considered it "right" or "justified". How could this opinion hold given the lack of evidence that Iraq had possessed the infamous weapons of mass destruction and given the daily evidence that the occupation was much more difficult than decision makers in the Bush administration had predicted? But for Americans, the justification for the war and the handling of the occupation may be separate issues. One is a retrospective judgment, heavily influenced by animus toward Saddam Hussein and the continuing belief that removing him was justified. The second concerns the President's stewardship of the war and occupation. One can hold to the belief that the war was a good idea while at the same time believing that the occupation has been handled badly, which may be the more politically relevant judgment at the moment.<sup>7</sup>

Thus, regardless of how popular the initiation of the war, a separate question is this: How much has the cost of the war influenced people's judgments of Bush's handling of the conflict? What, if anything, is likely to change it?

*The President's Job Approval Rating:* In turn, we must ask how much the war has affected more general judgments of Bush's performance as President. Conventional wisdom suggests that other factors (especially the

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<sup>7</sup> For a detailed analysis of all polling material concerning war against Iraq as well as the use of force by the United States more generally, see Richard C. Eichenberg, "Victory Has Many Friends: American Public Opinion on the Use of Military Force, 1981-2004," unpublished manuscript, Tufts University, available at: <http://ase.tufts.edu/polsci/faculty/eichenberg/victory.pdf>. The best comprehensive analysis of the public's reaction to the costs (casualties) and benefits of military intervention is Eric V. Larson, *Casualties and Consensus* (Santa Monica, CA: the Rand Corporation 1996).

economy) are important determinants of presidential job approval. Has this been the case with Bush? Will the President's weakness on Iraq be mitigated by an improving economy?

The remainder of the paper reports our research on these two sets of questions. In the conclusion, we draw on our analysis to explore the implications for the outcome of the presidential election in November.

## The President's Handling of Iraq

In the spring of 2002, a "senior official" of the Bush administration told journalist Nicolas Lemann that the events of September 11, 2001 had "drastically reduced the American public's usual resistance to American military involvement overseas...the senior official approvingly mentioned a 1999 study of casualty aversion by the Triangle Institute for Security Studies, which argued that the 'mass public' is much less casualty averse than the civilian elite believes; for example, the study showed that the public would tolerate thirty thousand deaths in a military operation to prevent Iraq from acquiring weapons of mass destruction."<sup>8</sup>

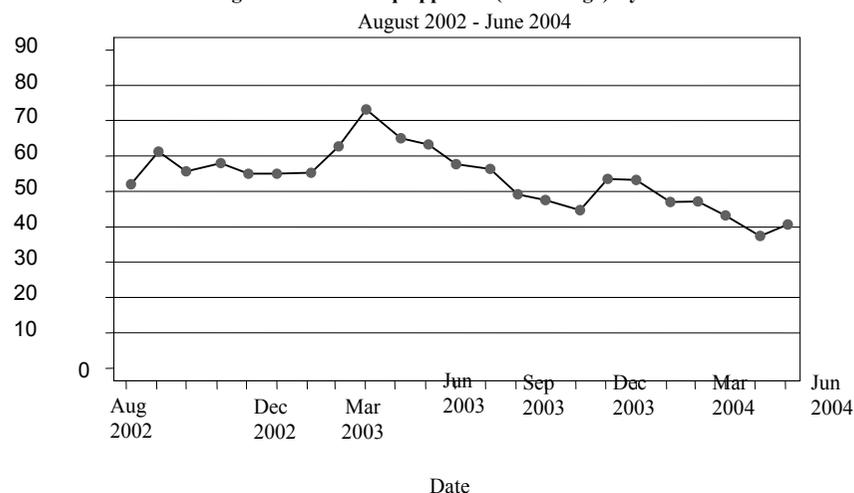
A closer reading of the substantial polling that has been done on the subject of war against Iraq would have revealed warning signs that the public's approval was not unconditional. In Table 1, we summarize average responses to all available polls from 1992 through March 18, 2003 that questioned Americans about using military force against Iraq. Clearly, support in the abstract for attacking Iraq has always been fairly high – 62 percent on average for all available questions. However, the average masks some important sensitivities in public opinion. When ground troops are mentioned, support drops to 56 percent, and when casualties are mentioned, it is even lower (50 percent). Most importantly, when ground troops and casualties were mentioned together, support collapsed to 39 percent.

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<sup>8</sup> Nicholas Lemann, "The Next World Order," *The New Yorker*, April 1, 2002; available at [http://www.newyorker.com/fact/content/?020401fa\\_FACT1](http://www.newyorker.com/fact/content/?020401fa_FACT1). The survey question from the Triangle Institute Study is reported in Peter D. Feaver and Hans H. Kohn, eds, *Soldiers and Civilians: The Civil-Military Gap and American National Security* (Cambridge, MA: M.I.T. Press 2001), p. 485.

The same hesitation is visible in responses to a question that asks respondents if they “approve or disapprove of the President’s handling of the situation in Iraq” (see Figure 3). In the fall of 2002, as debate over a possible war intensified, approval actually dropped a bit, and averaged noticeably less than the 62 percent mentioned immediately above. People, it seemed, were worried. However, once the war commenced and progressed quickly to victory, an even higher percentage endorsed the outcome. At the time of the fall of Baghdad (April 9) and the President’s “mission accomplished” speech (May 1), approval of his handling of Iraq was above 70 percent.

Figure 3: Bush Iraq Approval (Percentage) By Month



The change in popular sentiment since then is familiar. As Figure 3 shows, approval of the President’s handling of Iraq has eroded by more than 30 percentage points, although there are occasional upward spurts, especially at the time of Hussein’s capture in December 2003. Our purpose in this section is to provide a statistical summary of this process of fluctuation around a trend of seemingly inexorable decline in the President’s Iraq approval rating. Following the tradition of presidential approval studies, we conducted statistical estimates of the Iraq approval question as a function of two sets of factors: i.] the cumulative level of American

casualties; and ii.] a series of “rally” (positive) and “setback” (negative) events that might move the approval rating significantly upward or downward.<sup>9</sup> Our methodology included standard econometric techniques for sorting out these effects in a time series.<sup>10</sup>

The results, shown in Table 2, are very clear. The casualty rate has had a highly significant, negative effect on judgments of the President’s handling of Iraq. The death of 100 service personnel is associated with a decline of almost 3 percentage points in the Iraq approval series. Since March 19, 2003, therefore, the death of 857 Americans has resulted in a decline in approval of approximately 25 percentage points.

Perhaps surprising to those who follow the polls on a daily or weekly basis, most events related to the war have had no significant impact on public opinion. The start of the war on March 19, 2003 did cause an 11 point rally for the President, but many other events –both triumphs and setbacks – had virtually no statistical impact. Even the capture of Saddam Hussein, which generated substantial media coverage and did cause a visible upward movement in the series, did not have an impact that was statistically significant.

The obvious conclusion from these results is that the casualty rate has indeed had a consistent, inexorable downward impact on assessments of Iraq policy, and only a truly major event such as the outbreak of the war itself is likely to affect these assessments one way or the other. Perhaps this explains what might otherwise seem a curiosity. Beginning with the appointment of an Iraqi prime minister on May 28, President Bush has

<sup>9</sup> The econometric literature on presidential approval is surprisingly uniform. The four central works are: John Mueller, *War, Presidents, and Public Opinion* (New York: John Wiley, 1973); Samuel Kernell, “Explaining President Popularity,” *American Political Science Review*, 72 (June 1978), 506-522; Brody, *Assessing the President*; and Robert S. Erikson, Michael B. MacKuen, and James A. Stimson, *The Macro Polity*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

<sup>10</sup>Space precludes an extended discussion, but a brief summary of our statistical techniques follows: we first estimated the Iraq approval series as a function of the factors mentioned in the text by employing OLS (ordinary least squares). In all cases, the results revealed highly significant autocorrelation, so a second set of estimates was constructed using the previous week’s approval rating as a predictor. Since substantial serial correlation remained even in these estimates, we estimated a third set using an ARIMA model (autoregressive moving average). The ARIMA estimates are presented here. A complete report of the estimates is available on the website that accompanies this paper: <http://www.ruf.rice.edu/~stoll/bushpop>.

enjoyed a period of relatively good news concerning Iraq – at least in contrast with the violence of April and the prison abuse scandals of May. On June 1, the Iraqi President was named, and during the D-day celebrations on the beaches of Normandy, Bush could at least claim some solace from the muted criticisms of European allies who had opposed the war. Finally, the UN was primarily responsible for coordinating the formation of the Iraqi interim government, and on June 8 the UN Security Council approved the transfer of sovereignty.

Yet, at the end of June, approval of President Bush's handling of the situation in Iraq improved only slightly from May – to 42 percent - essentially the same as it has been in April if we allow for the three percent margin of error. Certainly there has been no rally that compares to the one enjoyed by Nixon after Vietnamization was announced. Although the transition to sovereignty is a major milestone in the history of the war, the lack of any real impact on the trend of public opinion is in keeping with our statistical findings. Whether this same pattern applies to the President's broader job approval rating is the question we address in the next section of this paper.

## The President's Job Approval Rating

Of course, one might argue that the President's broader job approval rating is the more important issue, for this figure takes account of citizen policy evaluations beyond the single issue of Iraq, and it is job approval that figures prominently in scholarly studies of incumbent prospects for re-election.<sup>11</sup> As we noted earlier, presidents with a job approval rating of less than 50 percent are unlikely to be re-elected. During June, Bush's job approval rating averaged 47 percent in five major polls.<sup>12</sup> It is therefore

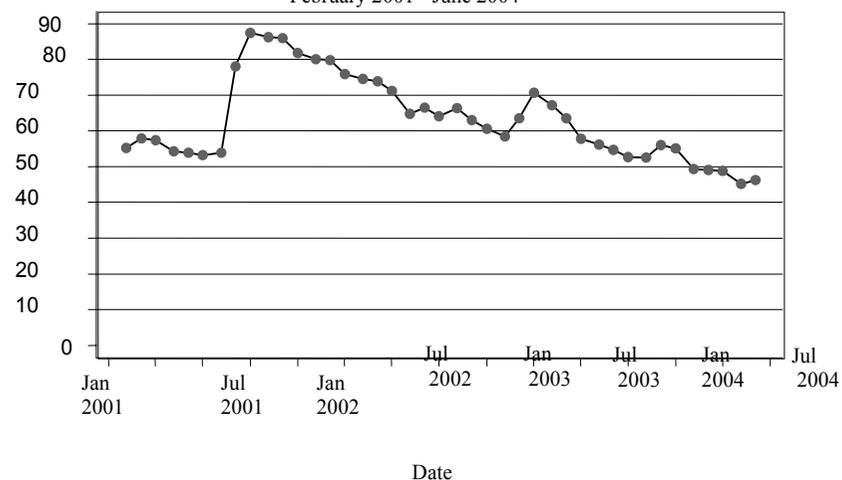
<sup>11</sup> See Brody, *Assessing the President*; Douglas Hibbs, "Bread and Peace Voting in U.S. Presidential Elections," *Public Choice*, 104 (2000), 149-180; Larry M. Bartels and John Zaller, "Presidential Vote Models: A Recount," *PS: Political Science and Politics*, 34 (March 2001), 9-20; and Christopher Wlezien, "On Forecasting the Presidential Vote," *PS: Political Science and Politics*, 34 (March 2001), 25-33.

<sup>12</sup> The five were conducted by the Pew Center for the People and the Press; ABC/Washington Post; the Los Angeles Times; CBS/New York Times; and Gallup/CNN/USA Today.

important to ascertain the effect of the war on the President's broader job approval.

Figure 4 shows the answers to the standard survey question that asks "do you approve or disapprove of the way George W. Bush is handling his job as President?"

**Figure 4: Bush Job Approval (Percentage) By Month**  
February 2001 - June 2004



We note immediately the unusual, roller-coaster characteristic of the Bush Presidency, divided into several distinct phases. A first phase, lasting through September 10, 2001, resembles the course of many other presidencies: approval begins to decline soon after the inauguration, although it may respond to short-term events and the presidents' policy successes and failures, especially on economic issues.<sup>13</sup> The second phase began on September 11, 2001. In the aftermath of the attacks in New York and Washington, Bush's approval surged to the highest level ever recorded, and well into 2002 it remained above the average for his entire term. This was the largest and longest "rally" in presidential approval that has ever

<sup>13</sup> Brody, *Assessing the President*; Mueller, *War, Presidents, and Public Opinion*; Kernell, "Explaining Presidential Popularity," and Erikson, MacKuen and Stimson, *The Macro Polity*.

been recorded.<sup>14</sup> A third phase of the Bush Presidency began with the war against Iraq, when his slowly declining approval from September 11<sup>th</sup> surged once again after the war began (although not to the levels of fall 2001). After the end of major hostilities on May 1, 2003, approval began a long decline to the 47 percent level cited immediately above.

How much of the decline in this latest, post-Iraq war phase is due to the unpopularity of the war and occupation, and in particular to the casualties that have been suffered? To answer this question, we first divided the Bush presidency into two parts: the first including the period before the commencement of the war in Iraq, and the second including the period since the commencement of the war on March 19, 2003.

Following the literature on the correlates of presidential approval, for each of these two phases we estimate the impact of economic conditions, “rally events”, and the casualties of war (for the Iraq war period only).<sup>15</sup> Economic conditions are represented in the estimates by the year-on-year percentage change in real disposable income per capita. This measure has proven to be a powerful influence on electoral prospects in previous studies and for this reason should also have a strong influence on presidential approval.<sup>16</sup> The impact of potential rally events is indexed by the amount of coverage of the event in the *New York Times*.<sup>17</sup> Iraq war casualties are as reported by the US central command.

<sup>14</sup> Hetherington and Nelson, “Anatomy of a Rally Effect”.

<sup>15</sup> Our approach closely resembles the procedures employed in the scholarly studies cited in footnote 13 above.

<sup>16</sup> We are aware that there are alternative measures of economic performance, such as the index of economic performance employed by Erikson, Mackuen, and Stimson, *Macro Polity*, p. 44, or the cumulative growth in leading economic indicators employed by Christopher Wlezien and Robert S. Erikson, “The Fundamentals, the Polls, and the Presidential Vote,” *PS: Political Science and Politics*, (July 2004), forthcoming. We intend to evaluate these alternatives in future versions of this report. On the statistical power of disposal income, see Bartels and Zaller, “Presidential Vote Models”; Hibbs, “Bread and Peace Voting”; and Ray Fair, “The Effect of Economic Events on Votes for President: 1984 Update,” *Political Behavior*, 10 (1988), 168-179.

<sup>17</sup> The rally index for the event was based on the extent of coverage of the event on the New York Times (NYT) website. Word counts of all stories referring to the event were totalled for the day after the event, and every seventh day thereafter. The rally was considered over when the word count dropped below 20 percent of the maximum word count. To facilitate interpretation, word counts for a rally event were divided by the maximum word count.

The results are shown in Table 3. Turning first to the estimates for the first period (prior to the Iraq war), we find a surprise: economic performance, as measured by the change in disposal income, had no impact on presidential approval between January 2001 and March 2003. Perhaps our measure of economic performance is a poor one, but we find this explanation implausible given the demonstrated political importance of disposal income in a substantial body of previous scholarly research. More likely is the possibility that, beginning with September 11, the Bush Presidency essentially became a “war” presidency, with evaluations of the President dominated by a preoccupation with his handling of terrorism and war.<sup>18</sup> We should also recall that the economy and the President’s ratings ran in opposite directions following September 11, as the economy turned sour even as the President’s popularity soared. Finally, during 2001, it may be that voters did not hold Bush accountable for a recession that would have likely occurred regardless of who occupied the office.<sup>19</sup> In any event, we see in Table 3 that of the many rally events that we evaluated, only the attacks of September 11 and the speech by Secretary Powell to the United Nations Security Council in February, 2003 had an impact on presidential approval, and the latter effect was minor in percentage terms.

The results for the Iraq war period are shown in Table 4. Once again disposal income shows no significant impact, presumably for the reasons discussed above. For much of the period when the economy showed signs of improving, Bush’s popularity was declining as the occupation dragged on rather unsuccessfully. Especially during the first quarter of 2004, when economic indicators began showing real positive movement, dissatisfaction with the occupation was pushing Bush’s popularity downward. Further,

<sup>18</sup> As Mueller notes, it is historically unusual for Americans to name a foreign policy problem as the nation’s most pressing concern, but the period between September 11, 2001 and the Iraq war and occupation is in fact one of those periods. Between September 11<sup>th</sup> and the Iraq war, a higher percentage of Americans often listed foreign policy concerns as more important than domestic ones, and the percentage was higher than at any time since 1979 (Iran hostage situation). As noted immediately below, the economy became more important to the public through March 2003, but the pattern was reversed in April 2004 when Iraq once again jumped to the top of the list. See John Mueller, “American Public Opinion and Military Ventures Abroad: Attention, Evaluation, Involvement, Politics, and the Wars of the Bushes,” paper delivered to the Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, Philadelphia, August 28-31, 2003. The “most important problem” figures are from the Gallup Poll, as reported in the online Gallup Brain.

<sup>19</sup> We are grateful to James Stimson for calling this explanation to our attention.

during March-June 2004, a period that encompasses one of the most deadly months for US troops (April) and the prisoner abuse scandal (May) the war in Iraq moved ahead of the economy as the public's perceived "most important problem".<sup>20</sup>

The pattern of other results for the war period are not unlike those for the Iraq approval series reported above. Only truly dramatic events (the start of the war and the fall of Baghdad) have a statistical impact. Other events, including the first meeting of the Iraqi Governing Council and the UN approval of the occupation, have no impact.

The death of American soldiers has had an impact, however. For every one hundred casualties, the President's job approval rating drops by a little over a percentage point. By these estimates, war casualties have cost the President a total of 10 percentage points in his approval rating.

Our results indicate that approval of the President's job performance would be substantially higher had he not ventured to war. Indeed, our results might actually understate the political cost that Bush has paid for the war. Had Bush not gone to war, it is entirely possible that improving economic conditions would by this time have pushed his approval ratings well into the zone of the "winners" that were shown in Figure 1. As we have just noted, however, the costs and frustrations of the war seem to have pushed economic considerations to the background even as the death of Americans pulled the President's popularity downward. But this enters the realm of speculation, a topic more properly suited for our conclusions.

## Conclusion: The Iraq War and the 2004 Election

Our results provide the basis for some informed, but cautious, speculation about the likely effect of the war on this year's presidential election. Perhaps the most tempting extrapolation of our results is that this may be an election in which the war — rather than the economy — dominates voter concerns. Since April, the situation in Iraq has been the "most important

<sup>20</sup> Jeffrey Jones, "About 6 in 10 Americans Dissatisfied: Economy, Iraq continue to be cited as country's most important problems" Gallup News Service, June 15, 2004.

problem" for voters, edging out economic concerns by a narrow margin. Together with our finding that the casualties in this war have had a stronger impact on the President's approval rating than economic performance, voter preoccupation with the war may produce an outcome in which Bush receives a smaller share of the vote than would normally be predicted given improving economic conditions.<sup>21</sup>

Much therefore depends on the course of events in Iraq now that sovereignty has been transferred. On one point there is little need to speculate. We have already seen that the process of forming an Iraqi interim government during May and June had no impact on public opinion other than to arrest a decline in approval ratings that had been underway since January. Certainly there was no triumphal "bounce" from the process, all the more surprising given that the transition was at least nominally managed by the United Nations, something many Americans had been demanding for months. More ominously for Bush, the transition to sovereignty itself seems to have been seen by Americans as more of a policy failure than a triumph. For example, a week before Mr. Bremer's departure from Baghdad, Americans by a surprisingly large margin (60 percent) believed that "[the transition] is a sign that the U.S. policy is failing because the U.S. is turning over government power to the Iraqis before it could bring stability to Iraq."<sup>22</sup> Given the haste of Mr. Bremer's departure, the continuation of violence in Iraq, and continuing daily reports of American deaths, one would be surprised to find any major "rally" in public opinion now that the transfer of sovereign authority is complete.

Of course, the major implication of our research is that the future depends on the rate of American casualties, and here we can conceive of three hypothetical scenarios. The first would be a calming of Iraq such that casualties decline to essentially zero and attention shifts to the mundane details of reconstruction and (peaceful) governance. In such circumstances, Bush's approval might actually improve, for the drag of the war would be

<sup>21</sup> Or, put differently, that a costly and inconclusive occupation may drive down the Bush vote from the level that the economy might predict. This is the pattern of findings in both Hibbs, "Bread and Peace", and Bartels and Zaller, "Presidential Vote Models", but see Wlezien and Erikson, "The Fundamentals," for an argument that leading economic indicators might better approximate economic concerns.

<sup>22</sup> Lydia Saad, "Americans Applaud Transfer of Sovereignty to Iraq, Have mixed expectations for future of Iraq", Gallup News Service, June 29, 2004.

lifted and economic fundamentals might very well take over. The second, opposite scenario, would be the collapse of governance in Iraq and the outbreak of civil conflict, a conflict in which US troops would almost certainly be involved. Here too prediction is fairly easy, for the combination of battle casualties and monumental policy failure that such a development would represent is likely to substantially erode support for the President.

The above scenarios may very well be the least likely. Far more probable perhaps is something resembling the continuation of the present: a difficult period of establishing stability and security at some cost in terms of American lives. In the three days after the formal handover of sovereignty, five Americans were killed. Of course, we cannot know if this rate will continue, but a casualty rate resembling that of June 2004 (just under two deaths per day) seems a reasonable, if unfortunate, estimate. On that basis, we would not expect any improvement in public assessments of Iraq policy, and by our estimates the President’s approval rating would decline by about half a percentage point per month. Such precise prediction is perhaps unwarranted, but a more general expectation would be that the President’s ratings are unlikely to take a sharp turn upward. The military presence in Iraq, in short, would continue to be a drag on the President’s chances for re-election (recall Figure 1).

Finally, there is one prediction that requires little cautious qualification: should Osama bin Laden be killed or captured, it would surely guarantee the President’s re-election. This prediction hardly requires additional commentary, but it is useful to point out that despite the decline in his overall approval and even approval of his handling of the “war against terror”, the issue of terrorism remains one on which Bush receives high marks from the public.

**Table 1: Before the War: Percent of Americans Favouring the Use of Military Force Against Iraq in a Variety of Question Wordings (1992-2003)<sup>23</sup>**

|  | In Favour (%) | No. of Questions |
|--|---------------|------------------|
| <i>All Survey Questions on using force against Iraq<sup>24</sup></i> | 62            | 244              |
| Remove Saddam Hussein: no casualties mentioned                       | 64            | 102              |
| Remove Saddam Hussein: casualties mentioned                          | 50            | 14               |
| All questions that do <i>not</i> mention casualties                  | 64            | 208              |
| <i>of which:</i>   |               |                  |
| General military actions/force                                       | 67            | 103              |
| “Send troops”  | 57            | 55               |
| Send “ground troops”   | 56            | 44               |
| All questions that mention casualties                                | 50            | 36               |
| <i>of which:</i>   |               |                  |
| General military actions/force                                       | 49            | 16               |
| “Send troops”  | 42            | 3                |
| Send “ground troops”   | 39            | 4                |

<sup>23</sup> Adapted from Richard C. Eichenberg, *Defense in Democracies: Public Opinion on National Security and Why it Matters* (book manuscript in preparation, Department of Political Science, Tufts University). The largest number of surveys are from the IPOLL database available to members of the Roper Center for Public Opinion Research at the University of Connecticut (and also available via Lexis-Nexis). Additional surveys are from archives at the Institute for Research in the Social Sciences at the University of North Carolina, the Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research, the Pew Center for the People and the Press, the Program on International Policy Attitudes, and the Atlantic Trends surveys conducted by the German Marshall Fund.

<sup>24</sup> Includes questions through March 18, 2003. Includes all questions about the use of force of any kind for any purpose against Iraq.

**Table 2: Impact of American Casualties and Major Events on Approval of President's Handling of Iraq (March 19, 2003 to June 27, 2004)**

|   | Change in Approval (%) |
|---|------------------------|
| <i>Significant impact:</i>  |                        |
| Casualties (100s)   | -2.9                   |
| War against Iraq begins with air strikes (3/19/03)                  | 11.3                   |
| <i>No significant impact:</i>                                       |                        |
| Baghdad captured (4/9/03)   |                        |
| Bush "Mission accomplished" speech (5/1/03)                         |                        |
| UN security council approves coalition occupation of Iraq (5/22/03) |                        |
| Iraqi governing council meets for first time (7/13/03)              |                        |
| UN headquarters in Iraq bombed (8/19/03)                            |                        |
| Car bomb kills 14 Italian personnel (11/12/03)                      |                        |
| Saddam Hussein captured (12/13/03)                                  |                        |
| Prison abuse exposed (4/28/03)                                      |                        |

**Table 3: Impact of Disposable Income and Major Events on Presidential Job Approval Prior to Iraq War (January 20, 2001 to March 18, 2003)**

|  | Change in Approval (%) |
|--|------------------------|
| <i>Significant Impact</i>                                      |                        |
| World Trade Center & Pentagon attacks (9/11/2001)              | 15.7                   |
| Powell speech at UN about Iraq (2/5/2003)                      | 4.3                    |
| <i>No significant impact</i>                                   |                        |
| Percent change (yearly) in disposal income/capita              |                        |
| Initial air attacks in Afghanistan (10/7/2001)                 |                        |
| First special forces ground raids in Afghanistan (10/19/2001)  |                        |
| Northern Alliance captures Kabul (11/13/2001)                  |                        |
| Hamid Karzai sworn in as President of Afghanistan (12/22/2001) |                        |
| Bush speech to UN on Iraq (9/12/2002)                          |                        |
| Congress approves use of force against Iraq (10/11/2002)       |                        |
| UN Security Council resolution on Iraq (11/8/2002)             |                        |

**Table 4: Impact of Casualties, Disposable Income, and Major Events on Presidential Job Approval During Iraq War and Occupation (March 19, 2003 to April 30, 2004)**

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|   | Change in<br>Approval (%) |
|---|---------------------------|
| <i>Significant Impact</i>                                   |                           |
| Casualties (100s)   | -1.2                      |
| Iraq war begins (March 19, 2003)                            | 9.4                       |
| Fall of Baghdad (April 9, 2003)                             | 6.1                       |
| <i>No significant impact</i>                                |                           |
| Percent change (yearly) in disposal income/capita           |                           |
| Bush “mission accomplished” speech (5/1/2003)               |                           |
| UN approves occupation of Iraq (5/22/2003)                  |                           |
| Iraq governing council meets for first time (July 13, 2003) |                           |
| UN headquarters bombed (8/19/2003)                          |                           |
| Bomb kills 14 Italian personnel (11/12/2003)                |                           |
| Saddam Hussein captured (12/13/2003)                        |                           |
| Iraqi prisoner abuse revealed (4/28/2004)                   |                           |

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