

When Going to War Is Costly: A Comparative Study of Audiences and the Partisan Press

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Daniel Stevens¹ and Barbara Allen²

Abstract

Much of the conventional wisdom about partisan media effects is based on the single case of the United States. Without more comparative research, we know little about whether the findings are generalizable, however, and thus cannot be certain of their causes. But comparative research presents several challenges. This paper takes advantage of the case of the War on Iraq to examine the effects of partisan press coverage on perceptions of leaders and ultimately on voting behavior in two countries, the United States and Britain. We test three competing hypotheses of partisan media effects. We find support for the argument that the reputation of the incumbent party moderates the influence of partisan coverage on perceptions of war but also show that opposition partisan media coverage undermines perceptions of the qualities of incumbent leaders. Media outlets that support the incumbent do not have similar positive effects. We conclude that the war cost a left-wing leader, Blair, more than a right-wing leader, Bush, because of (1) the ambivalence of incumbent-supporting newspapers in Britain, (2) the absence of a parallel to the boost in approval that incumbent-supporting newspapers provided for Bush, and (3) greater damage to perceptions of Blair's attributes among readers of opposition-supporting newspapers.

Keywords

partisan journalism, voting behavior, media audiences

¹University of Exeter, Penryn, UK

²Carleton College, Northfield, MN, USA

Corresponding Author:

Daniel Stevens, University of Exeter, Treliever Road, Penryn, TR10 9FE, UK.

Email: D.P.Stevens@exeter.ac.uk

Much of the conventional wisdom about partisan media effects is based on the single case of the United States. This includes the recent intensification of interest in the impact of bias in news reporting and consumption (e.g., Dilliplane 2014; Hopkins and Ladd 2014). But without more comparative research, we know little about whether its findings are generalizable. Comparative research is challenging, however, because different countries have their own media systems, politics, and issues, making it hard to separate differences due to media from differences that are a consequence of these other factors. An ideal comparison would be of partisan media effects for the same salient issue in more than one country in a similar political context, such as during an election. This paper makes such a comparison using press coverage of the issue of the War in Iraq in the United States and Britain in elections in 2004 and 2005.¹ We confirm some strong parallels in partisan press influence but also critical variation that we attribute partly to differences in the expectations about, and in the partisan media coverage of, right-wing and left-wing executive leadership. As well as for the effects of war as an election issue, our findings have implications for voting behavior in that they suggest that the traits “owned” by leaders of parties are somewhat less resilient to media coverage than are the issues “owned” by parties.

Media, the War in Iraq, and the Elections of 2004 and 2005

The War in Iraq as an Issue in the United States and Britain

We begin by justifying our claim that the War in Iraq was a similarly salient issue in both countries that offers leverage for a comparison of media effects. Figure 1 shows net approval of President George W. Bush and Prime Minister Tony Blair, a key measure of public opinion, from September 2001 through to the month of the U.K. general election in May 2005, six months after Bush’s own reelection in November 2004. The two leaders’ approval ratings tracked each other remarkably closely, seemingly in response to events in Iraq: The series correlate at .88, a positive relationship that did not characterize their approval ratings prior to 9/11 or other time series over this period such as consumer sentiment.²

While it is known that wars have the potential to sway public opinion and elections like other “performance issues” (Berinsky 2009; Croco 2011), for example the economy, the responses of domestic audiences in terms of vote preferences may be moderated both by expectations stemming from the partisanship of the incumbent government and from the partisanship of the individual (Koch and Sullivan 2010; Petrocik 1996). There are different expectations of right-wing and left-wing governments. Consistent with this, despite the similarities in public opinion shown in Figure 1, the *effects* on the reelections of these leaders seem to have been quite different. While Labour won an unprecedented third term in Britain, it captured only 35 percent of the vote on a weak turnout, a drop of 5.5 points in support from 2001, and its majority in the House of Commons was reduced by one hundred seats. The third party, the Liberal Democrats, which consistently opposed the war, gained four points during the campaign, while the

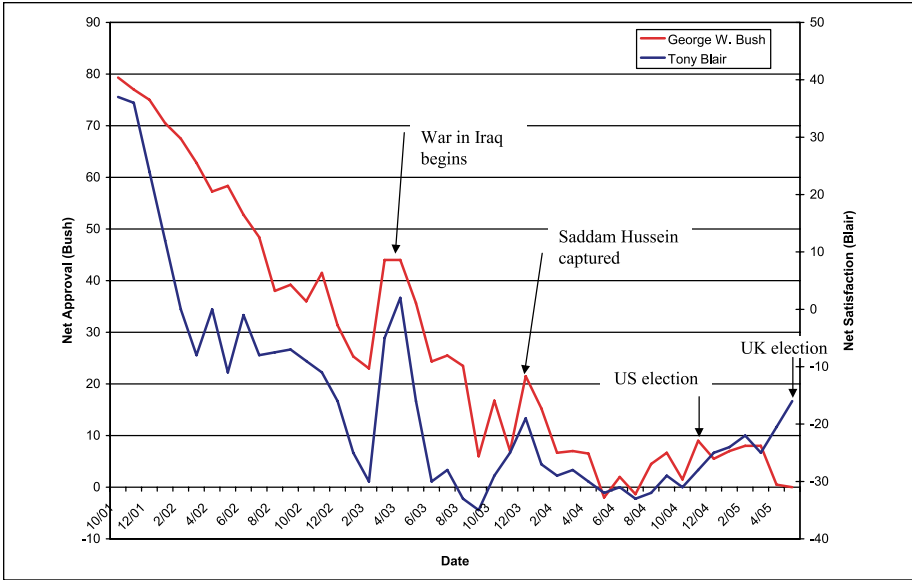


Figure I. Approval/satisfaction with George W. Bush and Tony Blair from October 2001 to May 2005.

Source. Gallup presidential approval ratings (the United States), Ipsos-MORI prime-ministerial satisfaction ratings (the United Kingdom).

highest combined vote for minor parties on record was apparently due to “immigration, Iraq, and Europe” (Webb 2005: 119). In contrast, George W. Bush increased his number and share of the votes from 2000, became the first candidate for president to secure a popular majority of votes for sixteen years, and unlike any of his post-New Deal Republican predecessors was reelected with Republican majorities in both houses of Congress (see the online appendix for additional discussion of the outcomes of these elections).

Most research on the 2004 election in the United States agrees that the War in Iraq was a drag on support for George W. Bush but argues that some combination of factors—the war on terror or perceptions of Bush’s qualities as a strong and decisive leader—limited its damage (e.g., Gershkoff and Kushner 2005; Lewis-Beck et al. 2008). With the British election of 2005, there is consensus that the Iraq War cost the Labour party votes, partly by diminishing perceptions of Blair’s character (Clarke et al. 2009). However, explanations for *how* these qualities come to be emphasized and understood in judgments of incumbent performance are lacking—most prominently the influence of media.

News Media and New Media

Extensive media coverage of international struggle primes the public to weigh considerations of conflict in their evaluations of the incumbent and his or her government.

Much has been written about the tendency to provide one-sided coverage during at least the early stages of a war (e.g., Baum and Potter 2008). In this context, media influence on perceptions of the attributes required from leaders, such as strength or trustworthiness, may become especially noteworthy (Merolla and Zechmeister 2009). These established patterns of media influence have recently been joined by a focus on the effects of an increasingly fragmented and partisan information environment. However, there is disagreement about their nature and scope. We examine three major theories.

1. *Reinforcement* accounts suggest that “people do not so much believe what they read [in the newspapers], but read what they believe [in the newspapers]” (Newton 2006: 217). In this account, partisan biases are solidified or reinforced by consistent exposure to congruent viewpoints and limited exposure to counterattitudinal information (Stroud 2008).
2. Others argue, however, that the effects of exposure to congruent and incongruent partisan news are *asymmetric*. For example, coverage of Barack Obama on Fox and of John McCain on MSNBC in 2008 undermined perceptions of them among viewers of those stations, but coverage of Obama on MSNBC and of McCain on Fox did not enhance perceptions (Smith and Searles 2014). This conforms both to the notion of a psychological predisposition to pay closer attention to incongruent information because it is viewed as more informative, and also to motivated reasoning (e.g., Levendusky 2013), which suggests that when such “unpalatable” views filter into partisans’ information environment, not only is the contrary input rejected but partisans’ original views are strengthened. Thus, in contrast to *reinforcement* theories, in this account, it is news about issues or figures with partisan viewpoints counter to the media source that carry most influence.
3. A third theory incorporates notions of party reputations, issue ownership, and audience costs (Koch and Sullivan 2010; Petrocik 1996). It argues that partisans have different expectations of parties’ economic and issue priorities in government, as well as when it comes to waging war. In addition, research on issue ownership shows that media tend to focus disproportionately on the issues that are consistent with existing party reputations and cleavages—“the press . . . operates from a more partisan perspective than the campaigns” (Petrocik et al. 2003–2004: 615)—and, in terms of traits, “portrays Republicans and Democrats in different ways” (Hayes 2005: 911).³ Extending this to media during conflicts, we should see partisan media effects on perceptions of war that will be positive for right-wing governments, who will receive a very positive press from right-wing newspapers, relative to left-wing governments, who have bucked reputation by prioritizing guns over butter, and for whom coverage from left-wing newspapers will be ambivalent or hostile. A corollary is that opposition-supporting newspapers’ coverage of war will have relatively less impact on a right-wing than a left-wing government, exacerbating the effects. In this account, the effects of partisan media are contingent on the partisanship of the government as much as on the partisanship of the media outlet.

Hypotheses

We test these three theories of the effects of partisan media in the context of the War in Iraq and the November 2004 and May 2005 elections in the United States and Britain. At odds with issue ownership and the expectations of its supporters, the war was prosecuted by a left-wing government in Britain, and, in line with issue ownership and the expectations of its supporters, by a right-wing executive in the United States. We concentrate on the effects of exposure to newspapers on perceptions of (1) the war and (2) the incumbent leaders, and, indirectly, (3) on their influences on vote preferences. We examine three hypotheses about partisan media effects derived from the theories we have outlined.

Reinforcement Hypothesis: More, and more positive, coverage in newspapers increases support (1) for the war and (2) its leader among readers of incumbent and opposition newspapers. Due to self-selection, and because positive coverage is less likely in opposition newspapers, their readers become less supportive of the war and its leader while readers of incumbent-supporting newspapers become more supportive.

The *Reinforcement Hypothesis*, thus, implies an influence of both incumbent and non-incumbent supporting newspapers such that their coverage exacerbates existing partisan divisions. Readers of incumbent-supporting newspapers encounter more coverage that is positive (or less negative), while readers of opposition-supporting newspapers encounter more coverage that is negative. Buffeted by self-selection, this serves to harden existing opinion. We should, therefore, see readers of Republican and Democrat, Labour, and Conservative newspapers moving further apart as a result of coverage of the War in Iraq.

Opposition Media Effects Hypothesis: Coverage of war by opposition-supporting newspapers diminishes support (1) for war and (2) for perceptions of the incumbent leader, while coverage of war by incumbent-supporting newspapers has no impact.

If the *Opposition Media Effects Hypothesis* is valid, we should see decreases in support due to coverage of the War in Iraq among readers of Conservative-supporting newspapers in Britain and Democrat-supporting newspapers in the United States: To reiterate, it is news about issues or figures with partisan viewpoints counter to the media source that carry most influence, and the War in Iraq was an issue primarily framed in terms of the incumbent government and its leader. For readers of Republican- or Labour-supporting media, however, this is news about the in-party, and the *Opposition Media Effects Hypothesis* suggests that we should see no effects of coverage of Iraq on the perceptions of these consumers.

Ownership Hypothesis: Coverage of war in incumbent-supporting newspapers enhances support for (1) war and (2) its leader under a right-wing government, but

Table 1. Summary of Hypotheses.

Effects of Coverage of War on Support for War and the Incumbent Leader	
Hypothesis	
Reinforcement	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Coverage in incumbent-endorsing newspapers increases support 2. Coverage in opposition-endorsing newspapers decreases support
Opposition media effects	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Coverage in incumbent-endorsing newspapers does not affect support 2. Coverage in opposition-endorsing newspapers decreases support
Ownership	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Coverage in newspapers endorsing a right-wing incumbent increases support; coverage in newspapers endorsing a left-wing incumbent does not affect, or decreases, support 2. Coverage in newspapers endorsing a right-wing opposition decreases support for a left-wing incumbent more than coverage in newspapers endorsing a left-wing opposition decreases support for a right-wing incumbent

has no impact or diminishes support for war and its leader under a left-wing government. Concomitantly, coverage of war in opposition-supporting newspapers has less impact on support for war and its leader under a right-wing than under a left-wing government.

The *Ownership Hypothesis* suggests that differences in the impact of media coverage of conflicts stem from the interaction of partisan media with the hawkish and dovish reputations of the incumbent parties of government. Right-wing governments benefit from coverage of war in incumbent-supporting newspapers whereas left-wing governments reap no such rewards. The corollary is that right-wing governments also suffer less from coverage of war in opposition-supporting newspapers than left-wing governments. If the Ownership Hypothesis is valid, we should see a positive influence of Republican-supporting newspapers on perceptions of the war and its incumbent leader in the United States but either no impact or a negative influence of Labour-supporting newspapers on perceptions of the war and its incumbent leader in Britain. We should also see less influence of Democrat-supporting newspapers in the United States than of Conservative-supporting newspapers in Britain.

Table 1 provides a summary of the expectations. As the table indicates, support for each hypothesis is contingent on the combination of the effects of coverage in incumbent and opposition newspapers. For example, while both the *Reinforcement* and *Opposition Media Effects* hypotheses predict that coverage of the War in Iraq in Democratic and Conservative-supporting newspapers will reduce support for the war and diminish perceptions of the incumbent leader, they differ in their implications for the effects of incumbent-supporting newspapers.

The hypotheses are mutually exclusive within types of dependent variable, for example, both reinforcement and ownership cannot be true of perceptions of the war, but we cannot rule out the possibility that different hypotheses will be supported for the different categories of dependent variable, for example, that media influence on perceptions of war will differ from perceptions of leaders.⁴

Data and Method

None of the research on partisan media bias of which we are aware has examined these three theories of partisan media effects simultaneously, partly we suspect because of lack of suitable data.⁵ In addition to the amount and tone of coverage by partisan media of the same salient issue in more than one country, we need data on individual-level attitudes and preferences, as well as exposure to those media. For individual attitudes, preferences, and exposure pertaining to the issue of the War in Iraq, we draw on two data sets: the 2004 National Annenberg Election Survey (NAES) and the 2005 British Election Study (BES) face-to-face survey. Both are panel surveys with pre- and post-election waves. Data on the amount and tone of coverage of the War in Iraq in British media come from a team at Loughborough University that analyzed election reporting from twelve newspapers (see online appendix for details), which encompass most newspaper readers in Britain. Stories were coded for primary and secondary themes and for tone on a scale from “bad news,” through “mixed news,” to “good news” or simply descriptive for each of the parties. We adopted as similar an approach as possible for the U.S. newspapers (for statistics on reliability, see the online appendix). Newspaper exposure in the United States is complicated by the absence of a national press. However, the NAES asked its national sample of respondents which newspaper they read most often, listing more than thirty possibilities. We coded coverage of the War in Iraq in fourteen newspapers, the qualifying criteria being that their content was available on Nexis and that they were read by at least fifteen respondents⁶: *Atlanta Constitution*, *Chicago Sun Times*, *Denver Post*, *Houston Chronicle*, *New York Daily News*, *New York Post*, *New York Times*, *Orange County Register*, *Philadelphia Inquirer*, *St. Louis Post*, *San Jose Mercury*, *USA Today*, *Wall Street Journal*, and *Washington Post*. Seven of the fourteen were among the top ten selling newspapers in the United States in 2004, according to the Audit Bureau of Circulations, with the lowest circulation being the thirty-first ranked *San Jose Mercury*. The average number of readers per newspaper in the sample was seventy-nine. While this is not a random sample of newspapers or newspaper readers, it is unclear how its nonrandomness would systematically affect findings about partisan effects.⁷ Stories were coded for tone on the same scale as for Britain’s, from “bad news,” to “good news” or “mixed” for each of the parties in the United States. News stories without a clear partisan tenor were classified as descriptive. In both countries, we coded bad news stories for the incumbent leader, his government, or party as a -1 and good news stories with a +1. Bad news stories for an opposition party or candidate were scored as +1 for Bush or Blair, good news stories for an opposition party as -1 for Bush or Blair. Mixed stories for either party or candidate or descriptive stories were coded as 0.

We note but reject four objections to comparing U.S. and British media effects. First, it could be argued that the two media systems are too different. For example, although Hallin and Mancini (2004) group the U.S. and British media systems under the “liberal” label, they also point to important differences. Other researchers have both noted differences and been less willing to put the United States and Britain in the same category (e.g., Brüggemann et al. 2014; Esser and Umbricht 2013). However, many of these differences stem from the public broadcasting system in Britain, which does not pertain to the press. Indeed, we reexamined Brüggemann et al.’s (2014) rankings of seventeen western democracies on the three dimensions (out of six) that seem most strongly related to press coverage of an issue such as the War in Iraq: the press market, political parallelism, and journalistic professionalism. On these dimensions, Britain is the closest country to the United States other than the Netherlands. Second, it could be objected that the British newspapers are national, whereas the U.S. newspapers are a mixture of newspapers with a broadly national readership such as the *New York Times* and the *Wall Street Journal*, and local readership such as the *San Jose Mercury*. However, local newspapers in the United States also carry national news and, by the same token, national news coverage in Britain is filtered through the local context because voters cast a ballot for a local constituency representative rather than the prime minister. Third, cuts to staff in the United States mean that newspapers often rely on syndicated columnists—we could be coding the same story in different newspapers—and reporters from wire services and other journalism bureaus, who strive to be nonpartisan to be carried by as many newspapers as possible. However, in examining these potential problems, we found little evidence of either: To be sure, reporters often covered the same speeches the candidates were giving on the stump but the newspapers varied in their reporting and presentation (see the online appendix for examples). Fourth, it could be argued that, unlike Britain, partisan media in the United States is concentrated in cable television and talk radio (e.g., Hopkins and Ladd 2014; Levendusky 2013; Smith and Searles 2014). However, the 2004 NAES shows that more respondents had read a newspaper in the past week than had watched cable news. Moreover, American newspapers routinely endorse candidates, with the evidence being both that editorial preferences are correlated with newspapers’ reporting (de Leon 2016; Druckman and Parkin 2005; Entman 1989; Larcinese et al. 2011; Puglisi and Snyder 2008)—“newspapers with relatively conservative (liberal) editorial pages also tend to have relatively conservative (liberal) news” (Puglisi and Snyder 2015: 262)—and also influence readers’ vote choices (Dalton et al. 1998; Entman 1989). Our claim is not that U.S. newspapers are as partisan as the press in Britain; it is that they are in many cases recognizably partisan and that there is variation in that partisanship (Puglisi and Snyder 2015: 262). Indeed, U.S. newspapers are not regarded by their readers as unbiased: The *Philadelphia Inquirer* and *Atlanta Constitution* are viewed as liberal and the *Wall Street Journal* and *New York Post* as conservative, for example, but the *Atlanta Constitution* as more liberal than the *Inquirer* and *Wall Street Journal* as somewhat less conservative than the *New York Post*.⁸

We classify the partisanship of newspapers by their editorial endorsements (Ansolabehere et al. 2006; Ho and Quinn 2008; Stroud 2010).⁹ In both countries, not

Table 2. Summary Statistics for the Measures Exposure to Coverage of the War in Iraq in the United States and British Newspapers.

	(Log of) Volume and Tone of Stories	
	M (Among Readers)	SD
The United States		
Nonreaders = 23%		
Democratic newspapers	-8.09	3.28
Republican newspapers	5.59	5.02
Independent newspapers	-6.61	3.28
Britain		
Nonreaders = 45%		
Labour newspapers	-1.43	3.20
Conservative newspapers	-4.93	0.65
Independent newspapers	-5.12	1.16

all newspapers endorsed a candidate or party; we classify these newspapers as independent. We assume that while we may see some influence of independent newspapers on their readers, they will not be as strong or conform to any particular model. Instead, we expect independent newspapers to evince weaker or mixed effects. In the United States, we examine the period of just more than sixty days from roughly Labor day, September 1, until the day before the election. For Britain, our media content covers the entire period of twenty-nine days after the dissolution of Parliament. Our measure of coverage is the log of the product of the number of stories and their overall tone. This operationalization accounts for more, and more positive or negative, coverage in newspapers and its likely diminishing marginal effects.¹⁰ Table 2 provides summary statistics for newspapers in the two countries. There are two key messages. First, Democratic newspapers in our sample gave the issue of the war more attention than Republican newspapers¹¹ and that coverage skewed negative, whereas Republican newspaper coverage skewed toward the positive. In Britain, while the Labour and Conservative press devoted similar levels of attention to the War in Iraq, there was also a difference in tone: Most coverage was negative, but Labour newspapers were less negative than Conservative (and independent) newspapers. Second, on average, the tone of coverage was more negative toward Blair and the Labour government than it was toward Bush; indeed, the only newspaper in Britain with a net positive tone on Iraq was *The Sun*. But it is also noteworthy that the War in Iraq featured more prominently during the election campaign in the United States; indeed, in Britain, the issue only received comparable attention for about a week toward the end of the campaign—prompted by the leaking of the attorney general's memo on the legality of going to war. Nevertheless, on nine of the last eleven days of the campaign in Britain, there were more stories about Iraq than any other issue.

We link the data on the number of stories on Iraq and their tone to the 2004 NAES and 2005 BES surveys by using the respondent's self-reported readership of

newspapers. For example, if a respondent in Britain read *The Guardian*, our measures of coverage are derived from the number of stories about Iraq and their tone in *The Guardian* during the campaign. If she read the *Daily Mail*, our measure of coverage is derived from the log of the number of stories and their tone in the *Daily Mail*. Respondents who claimed not to read newspapers are assumed to have been exposed to no stories.¹² Self-reported media exposure can be problematic because respondents tend to overestimate their frequency of use of media, and because we do not know whether the exposure that is reported is to the content that interests the researcher. However, we rely on the newspaper a respondent claimed to read most often rather than on how often she claimed to read it. Moreover, to the extent that our measure of exposure mixes readers of a newspaper who read its coverage of the War in Iraq with readers who did not, our estimates of the influence of partisan coverage are likely to be conservative.¹³

Measuring the partisanship of the newspaper by its editorial endorsement raises issues of causation: If newspapers provide the partisan slant that their readers want, we may wrongly attribute effects to coverage of Iraq that are in fact effects of their audiences. While our data do not allow us to definitively eliminate this possibility, readers may choose their newspapers but they do not choose what those newspapers report or their tone. More important, almost none of the newspapers we analyze changed their endorsements from 2000 to 2004 in the United States, or from 2001 to 2005 in Britain, that is, from before the war: If their readers' preferences changed due to the War in Iraq, there is little sign that the newspapers followed suit. Finally, our modeling approach using panel data means that if reporting on Iraq was simply tailored to the existing views of a newspaper's readers, we should not observe any effects of coverage during the campaign.

We estimate a path model using a combination of logit, ordered probit, and ordinary least squares regression contingent on the dependent variables. We do not employ listwise deletion but use the maximum information available to estimate each path in the model; indeed, the estimates are identical to an alternative generalized structural equation model.¹⁴ Figure 2 depicts the main paths estimated, excluding the control variables. The models estimate perceptions of the War in Iraq and the war on terror in the postelection surveys ($time_t$) as functions of perceptions in the preelection surveys ($time_{t-1}$)—self-selection among readers, or the effects of newspaper coverage of Iraq that caters to their preferences, will be reflected in preelection perceptions—as well as of media coverage during the campaign. The model assumes that perceptions of the war as a performance issue (Berinsky 2009), along with possible additional direct effects of media coverage, affect perceptions of the leaders' relative qualities, following Nadeau et al.'s (1996: 248) argument that “leadership evaluations . . . are explicitly comparative” (see also Rahn et al. 1994; Sullivan et al. 1990). These then feed into overall feelings toward the candidates.¹⁵ In keeping with a wealth of literature on voting behavior, the model then estimates affect toward the candidates as influencing vote preference (e.g., Clarke et al. 2009; Lewis-Beck et al. 2008).¹⁶

The measures of approval of the war and of the leaders' qualities differ slightly across the two surveys but are as parallel as possible (see the online appendix). Both

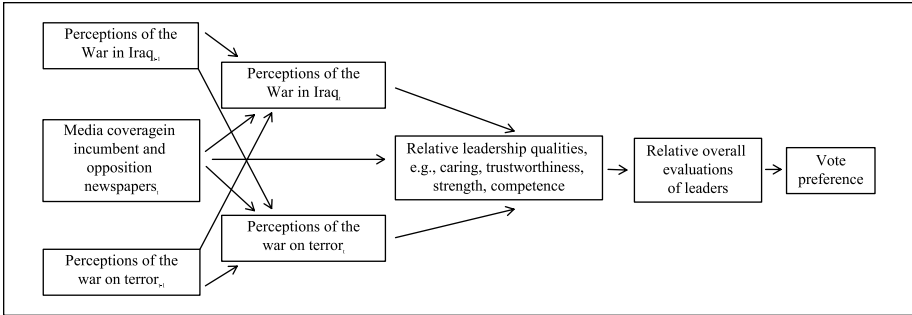


Figure 2. Model of the influence of media coverage of the War in Iraq in the United States and Britain.

surveys asked about approval of the handling of Iraq and of terrorism. For leaders’ qualities, we use the NAES questions about caring for other people, trustworthiness, strength, and effectiveness, while the BES asked about competence, responsiveness, and trustworthiness. One of these attributes is identical, while there are parallels between “caring for other people” and “responsiveness,” and between “effectiveness” and “competence” (Hoegg and Lewis 2011). There is no BES equivalent of strength as an attribute, but we include it because it appears to have been part of Bush’s appeal (Lewis-Beck et al. 2008). All variables other than media coverage were recoded from 0 to 1, and from -1 to +1 for evaluations of leaders, with negative numbers indicating that the comparison with the alternate leader was unfavorable to the incumbent.

Analysis

Table 3 displays the results for the United States. A glance at the estimates immediately indicates that there were media effects *during* the campaign, that is, controlling for precampaign approval of the War in Iraq and the war on terror. Campaign coverage of the War in Iraq in Democrat and Republican newspapers was not polarizing; we do not observe positive effects for readers of Republican newspapers and negative effects for readers of Democratic newspapers. Thus, the *Reinforcement Hypothesis* is not supported. We do not see effects from incumbent-supporting newspapers on any of the dependent variables, with just one exception: More, and more positive, coverage of the War in Iraq in Republican-supporting newspapers was associated with more approval of the war on terror. This suggests that the impact of the war on terror in limiting the electoral costs of the War in Iraq for Bush stemmed from media coverage in Republican-supporting newspapers.

There are more widespread effects of newspapers that supported the Democrats, however. Coverage of the War in Iraq in Democrat-supporting newspapers diminished perceptions of Bush as a caring, trustworthy, and strong leader compared with Kerry. We do not see any direct effects of newspaper coverage beyond these: They appear not to have directly affected perceptions of the candidates’ relative effectiveness, nor

Table 3. Effects of Media Coverage in the 2004 U.S. Election.

	Approval		Specific Leadership Qualities				Vote		
	War in Iraq _t	War on Terror _t	Cares	Trustworthy	Effective	Strong	Overall Feelings	Rep.	Dem.
Coverage in Republican newspapers	-0.056 (0.036)	0.073 (0.027)*	0.003 (0.006)	-0.005 (0.007)	0.000 (0.002)	-0.001 (0.005)	-0.003 (0.002)		
Coverage in Democratic newspapers	0.049 (0.034)	0.045 (0.041)	0.009 (0.004)*	0.013 (0.003)*	-0.003 (0.002)	0.003 (0.002)†	0.002 (0.002)		
Coverage in independent newspapers	0.045 (0.015)*	0.019 (0.016)	0.008 (0.001)*	-0.005 (0.002)*	-0.000 (0.001)	-0.002 (0.001)†	-0.005 (0.003)		
Approval of War in Iraq _{t-1}	2.80 (0.19)*	2.11 (0.17)*							
Approval of war on terror _{t-1}	1.66 (0.11)*	2.34 (0.19)*							
Republican identifier	0.50 (0.17)*	1.07 (0.18)*	0.14 (0.06)*	0.18 (0.04)*	0.12 (0.02)*	0.14 (0.03)*	0.08 (0.02)*	1.47 (0.20)*	0.05 (0.23)
Democrat identifier	-1.18 (0.24)*	-0.65 (0.13)*	-0.22 (0.03)*	-0.20 (0.01)*	-0.17 (0.03)*	-0.20 (0.03)*	-0.08 (0.02)*	-0.08 (0.19)	1.27 (0.21)*
Approval of War in Iraq _t			0.21 (0.03)*	0.25 (0.03)*	0.22 (0.01)*	0.21 (0.02)*	0.12 (0.03)*	0.66 (0.17)*	-0.94 (0.19)*
Approval of war on terror _t			0.19 (0.04)*	0.25 (0.04)*	0.16 (0.02)*	0.22 (0.04)*	0.09 (0.03)*	0.87 (0.23)*	-0.38 (0.30)
Approval of economy _t			0.37 (0.03)*	0.28 (0.03)*	0.22 (0.03)*	0.25 (0.02)*	0.09 (0.01)*	0.53 (0.16)*	-0.82 (0.21)*
Cares							0.27 (0.05)*		
Trustworthy							0.28 (0.02)*		
Effective							-0.01 (0.03)		
Strong							0.14 (0.02)*		
Overall feelings								3.41 (0.24)*	-3.29 (0.38)*
Constant	-2.16 (0.20)*	-2.00 (0.14)*	-0.32 (0.03)*	-0.31 (0.02)*	-0.12 (0.02)*	-0.17 (0.03)*	-0.12 (0.03)*	-2.59 (0.18)*	-0.78 (0.38)*
N	1,411	1,414	905	904	886	908	866	1,380	1,380
R ² /Pseudo R ²	.63	.62	.66	.68	.55	.61	.85	.70	.64

Note. Coefficients and standard errors are rounded. Standard errors are clustered by newspaper. Estimates in the columns under Approval and Vote are from logit models. Estimates in the columns under Specific Leadership Qualities and Overall Feelings are from regression models.
[†]p < .10. *p < .05 (two-tailed test).

overall feelings toward them. But the model does imply that there were indirect effects of newspaper coverage on perceptions of the candidates via its influence on perceptions of the war on terror in Republican newspapers.¹⁷ Indeed, the two qualities on which Democratic newspaper influence was largest, caring and trust, were also the strongest influences on overall feelings toward the leaders.¹⁸ As Table 1 indicates, the patterns of these effects on traits are consistent with the *Opposition Media Effects* and inconsistent with the *Reinforcement Hypothesis*. But to be able to evaluate whether they are more consistent with the *Ownership* than the *Opposition Media Effects Hypothesis*, we need to examine the estimates for the British case.

Table 4 displays the analysis of Britain. The estimates for the effects of campaign coverage on approval of the War in Iraq and war on terror indicate that there were also media effects in the British election and that they were mostly on Conservative newspaper readers, diminishing opinions of Blair on all three leaders' attributes. In addition, there was no parallel in Britain to the boost in perceptions of the war on terror that coverage in incumbent-supporting newspapers provided for Bush; indeed, for this dependent variable, media effects are limited to coverage by independent newspapers, and their implications are negative for the incumbent. The estimates in Table 4 are inconsistent with the *Reinforcement Hypothesis*, given the largely absent effects of incumbent-supporting media. The only impact of Labour newspapers' coverage that approaches statistical significance is on approval of the War in Iraq. This indicates that more positive coverage in Labour newspapers enhanced approval of the war, perhaps in an echo of the positive relationship between incumbent-supporting newspapers in the United States and perceptions of the war on terror. However, Labour-supporting newspapers in Britain were highly critical of the war—only *The Sun's* coverage was positive—while coverage in the Republican-supporting newspapers we examine was largely positive, meaning that this relationship indicates a gain for Bush and a loss to Blair. In addition, the estimates show that coverage of the War in Iraq in Conservative newspapers decreased support for the war under the left-wing Labour government in a way that coverage in Democratic newspapers in the United States did not. This is consistent with the *Ownership Hypothesis*. We also see that the negative coverage in Conservative-supporting, and, to a lesser extent, independent newspapers diminished evaluations of Blair's leadership qualities. One other relationship in Table 4 is noteworthy. All else equal, Conservative identifiers who approved of the War in Iraq were more likely to vote Conservative, whereas Democrats who approved of the war in the United States were less likely to vote Democrat. This is also likely a consequence of party ownership: Democrats who approved of the war rewarded the traditionally more hawkish incumbent party, whereas the same logic did not apply to Conservatives, that is, to reward the party with a more dovish reputation.¹⁹

The analysis shows important differences and similarities cross-nationally in the effects of partisan media. On one hand, the impact of news coverage on perceptions of war is more supportive of the argument of the *Ownership Hypothesis*, in which incumbent-supporting newspapers boost approval of war for the right-wing government but undermine it for the left-wing government. On the other hand, in elections in both countries, it was coverage of the War in Iraq in opposition newspapers that lowered

Table 4. Effects of Media Coverage in the 2005 British Election.

	Approval		Specific Leadership Qualities				Vote		
	War in Iraq _t	War on Terror _t	Responsive	Trustworthy	Competent	Overall Feelings	Labour	Con.	Lib Dem
Coverage in Labour newspapers	0.027 (0.014) [†]	-0.008 (0.015)	-0.004 (0.008)	-0.006 (0.008)	0.005 (0.0004)	-0.002 (0.003)			
Coverage in Conservative newspapers	0.029 (0.009)*	0.006 (0.007)	0.016 (0.003)*	0.021 (0.002)*	0.016 (0.001)*	0.003 (0.002)			
Coverage in independent newspapers	0.016 (0.018)	0.063 (0.013)*	0.006 (0.003)*	0.007 (0.005)	-0.003 (0.002) [†]	-0.002 (0.006)			
Approval of War in Iraq _{t-1}	3.01 (0.10)*	0.63 (0.08)*							
Approval of war on terror _{t-1}	0.35 (0.04)*	1.71 (0.13)*							
Labour identifier	0.17 (0.03)*	0.33 (0.05)*	0.14 (0.01)*	0.17 (0.01)*	0.14 (0.01)*	0.04 (0.01)*	1.53 (0.17)*	-0.89 (0.15)*	-0.39 (0.20)*
Conservative identifier	0.01 (0.05)	-0.09 (0.07)	-0.20 (0.01)*	-0.28 (0.01)*	-0.20 (0.01)*	-0.03 (0.01)*	-0.48 (0.31)	2.20 (0.11)*	-0.70 (0.23)*
Lib Dem identifier	-0.12 (0.08)	0.05 (0.05)	-0.01 (0.02)	-0.03 (0.02) [†]	-0.02 (0.02)	0.02 (0.01)*	-0.32 (0.31)	-0.64 (0.26)*	2.03 (0.14)*
Approval of War in Iraq _t			0.17 (0.01)*	0.21 (0.01)*	0.16 (0.01)*	0.02 (0.01) [†]	0.26 (0.21)	0.68 (0.31)*	-1.28 (0.23)*
Approval of war on terror _t			0.11 (0.03)*	0.12 (0.04)*	0.12 (0.03)*	0.02 (0.01) [†]	0.31 (0.18) [†]	0.04 (0.19)	0.32 (0.20)
Approval of economy _t			0.13 (0.02)*	0.24 (0.02)*	0.28 (0.02)*	0.04 (0.02)	1.60 (0.18)*	-0.04 (0.26)	0.56 (0.19)*
Responsive						0.17 (0.02)*			
Trustworthy						0.58 (0.02)*			
Competent						0.25 (0.03)*			
Overall feelings									
Constant	2.547	2.558	-0.20 (0.03)*	-0.27 (0.03)*	-0.20 (0.02)*	-0.03 (0.01)*	2.78 (0.25)*	-3.41 (0.22)*	-0.04 (0.16)
N			2,464	2,521	2,521	2,427	2,523	2,523	2,523
R ² /Pseudo R ²	.22	.10	.37	.45	.40	.85	.35	.48	.17

Note. Coefficients and standard errors are rounded. Standard errors are clustered by newspaper. Estimates in the columns under Approval are from ordered probit models. Estimates in the columns under Vote are from logit models. Estimates in the columns under Specific Leadership Qualities and Overall Feelings are from regression models. [†]p < .10. *p < .05 (two-tailed test).

perceptions of the qualities of the incumbent leaders. The marginal effects appear somewhat larger for Blair than for Bush, which would also be consistent with the *Ownership Hypothesis*. However, there were more articles about the war in the U.S. media than in the British media, which suggests that the actual impact on support for Bush may still have been greater.²⁰

To provide greater understanding of the implications of the estimates in Tables 3 and 4, we simulate the effects of variation in coverage in the two countries. We estimate the substantive effects of media coverage implied by our models for incumbent and opposition newspapers.²¹ (The statistically significant paths and their coefficients are shown in Online Appendix Figures A2 and A3.) We first calculate the effects of mean levels of newspaper coverage for the statistically significant paths from media coverage to approval of the War in Iraq (in Britain) and the war on terror (in the United States) by setting media coverage to its mean values for incumbent and opposition newspapers, and examining the differences with nonreaders of these newspapers. All other variables are kept constant at their means. We then calculate the effects of the other statistically significant paths in the models where they imply indirect effects of media coverage on voting, setting their values to those implied by the estimates from the previous path. For example, in the first row of Table 5, average coverage of the War in Iraq in Republican newspapers led to a probability of approving the war on terror of .67 among readers of Republican newspapers compared with .58 among nonreaders. We use these two values for the war on terror to calculate its effects on the probability of voting for Bush. This suggests an increase of about 2 percent in the probability of voting for Bush. The second row of Table 5 is based on a similar calculation, except the values for the effects of Republican news coverage on the probability of approval of the war on terror (.67 and .58) are first used to calculate the effects of the war on terror on overall feelings. The two values from this simulation of effects on overall feelings are then used to calculate the probability of voting Bush via this path. We do this for each path and then sum the effects of incumbent and opposition newspapers under "Total Effects."

The estimates indicate that the positive effects of Republican newspaper coverage on the probability of voting for Bush—on average, Republican newspaper coverage of the War in Iraq was positive, as shown in Table 1—largely canceled out the negative impact of Democratic newspaper coverage. The total effects of average Republican newspaper coverage are to increase the probability of voting Bush compared with nonreaders by about 3.5 percent; the total effects of average Democratic newspaper coverage are to lower the probability of voting for Bush by a little more, almost 4 percent. In an election in which the difference in the proportion of the popular vote was 2.4 percent, this confirms the importance of perceptions of the war on terror in Bush's reelection. Without the effects of Republican newspaper coverage, the election would have been even closer or potentially had a different outcome.

The effects of newspaper coverage implied by the estimates from the British election indicate a quite different overall impact. Labour newspaper coverage ultimately had essentially no impact on the probability of voting Labour. But the effects of coverage of the War in Iraq on readers of Conservative newspapers were to decrease the

Table 5. Effects of Media Coverage on the Probability of Voting for the Incumbent.

The United States	
Incumbent coverage → Approval of war on terror → Vote incumbent	.018
Incumbent coverage → Approval of war on terror → Overall feelings → Vote incumbent	.006
Incumbent coverage → Approval of war on terror → Cares → Overall feelings → Vote incumbent	.004
Incumbent coverage → Approval of war on terror → Trustworthy → Overall feelings → Vote incumbent	.005
Incumbent coverage → Approval of war on terror → Strong → Overall feelings → Vote incumbent	.002
Total effects	.035
Opposition coverage → Cares → Overall feelings → Vote incumbent	-.015
Opposition coverage → Trustworthy → Overall feelings → Vote incumbent	-.021
Opposition coverage → Strong → Overall feelings → Vote incumbent	-.003
Total effects	-.039
Britain	
Incumbent coverage → Approval of War in Iraq → Overall feelings → Vote incumbent	-.0001
Total effects	-.0001
Opposition coverage → Approval of War in Iraq → Overall feelings → Vote incumbent	-.0004
Opposition coverage → Approval of War in Iraq → Responsive → Overall feelings → Vote incumbent	-.0006
Opposition coverage → Approval of War in Iraq → Trustworthy → Overall feelings → Vote incumbent	-.0024
Opposition coverage → Approval of War in Iraq → Competent → Overall feelings → Vote incumbent	-.0008
Opposition coverage → Responsive → Overall feelings → Vote incumbent	-.0057
Opposition coverage → Trustworthy → Overall feelings → Vote incumbent	-.0253
Opposition coverage → Competent → Overall feelings → Vote incumbent	-.0080
Total effects	-.0431

Note. Tables show the change when average coverage in incumbent or opposition newspapers is compared with nonreaders, with all other variables set at their means. The rows represent each statistically significant path for incumbent and opposition newspapers implied by Tables 3 and 4. For purposes of comparability in Table 5, for Approval of the War in Iraq in Britain, we measure the change in the probability of a respondent saying strongly approve or approve versus disapprove or strongly disapprove.

probability of voting Labour by more than 4 points. Thus, the models indicate that newspaper coverage of the War in Iraq ultimately provided a marginal loss to the probability of voting for Bush, mostly because of positive effects on perceptions of the war on terror among readers of Republican newspapers, but lowered the probability of voting for Blair and the Labour Party by a larger amount—close to the 5.5 percent of the vote that Labour lost between 2001 and 2005.

The boost in the United States provided by incumbent media coverage of the war in the United States, in contrast to its absence in Britain, supports the *Ownership Hypothesis*. The implications of the effects of opposition media coverage on perceptions of the qualities of the prospective leaders are more ambiguous, however. The *Ownership Hypothesis* predicts that these should be more costly for perceptions of the qualities of left-wing incumbents than right-wing incumbents. While we see somewhat larger effects of Conservative newspapers than Democratic newspapers, the difference in total effects is less than half a point, and we do not want to make too much of it. We also see no effects of incumbent media coverage on perceptions of leadership in the United States. We, therefore, see this evidence as equally consistent with the *Opposition Media Effects Hypothesis*.²²

Discussion and Conclusion

This paper has tested different theories of the impact of partisan media coverage of conflict in the context of the War in Iraq and elections in the United States in 2004 and Britain in 2005. While obvious limits remain in a comparison of two cases, the analysis has provided several insights about the nature of partisan media effects. Of the three theories we tested, our analysis does not support reinforcement effects. This leaves two theories. Our evidence suggests differences in the nature of partisan media effects on perceptions of war itself from perceptions of leaders. On one hand, we found support for the argument that perceptions of war receive a boost from incumbent-supporting media when the incumbent party is right wing but not when it is left wing (the *Ownership Hypothesis*). On the other hand, this reputational effect does not clearly extend to perceptions of the qualities of the leaders, for which the direct impact of media coverage was confined to the opposition-supporting press, which undermined perceptions of the incumbent leader only marginally more for the left-wing than the right-wing incumbent. Although a post hoc explanation, this suggests that the impact of partisan media may vary between a performance issue such as war and perceptions of leaders themselves: The influence of media on the performance issue appears to be moderated by issue ownership whereas perceptions of leaders' traits are directly affected by opposition media coverage.

Our paper also speaks to media's influence on the different audience costs from going to war encountered by right-wing and left-wing leaders. The War in Iraq seems to have cost Blair electorally more than Bush for three reasons: (1) the ambivalence of incumbent-supporting newspapers about the war in Britain, whose coverage lowered approval of the War in Iraq among its readers; (2) the absence of a parallel to the boost in approval that incumbent-supporting newspapers provided for Bush by enhancing approval of the broader war on terror; and (3) more damage to perceptions of Blair's qualities as a leader among readers of opposition-supporting newspapers.

We see the War in Iraq as an example of a salient performance issue about which there were expectations regarding how the incumbent parties would behave based on their established reputations. It is, of course, possible that war and conflict are *sui generis* as issues; this study cannot rule that out. However, we see war as a performance

issue that reflects on an incumbent government and its leader in a similar way to others like the economy for which there are also expectations about the priorities parties will place on elements such as inflation, unemployment, taxation, and public spending (Petrocik 1996). Suppose a left-wing and a right-wing government in countries with similar political contexts succeeded in reducing unemployment but not inflation. With unemployment an issue owned by left-wing parties, the findings of this paper imply that the left-wing government would get more benefit from consumers of incumbent-supporting media for their management of the economy than the right-wing government. Moreover, the right-wing incumbent leader would also be expected to suffer more at the hands of opposition-supporting newspapers in terms of perceptions of his or her qualities as a leader. Future research could look at the effects on public opinion of media coverage of an issue like the 2008 financial crisis—perhaps in and out of elections—in countries with different media systems, variation in clarity of responsibility, and on elements of economic performance owned by left-wing as well as right-wing parties. In addition, while this is a paper about press coverage of an issue, since 2004–2005, cable news (in the United States) and the Internet have become increasingly important as sources of information. Much of their coverage of politics also tends to be identifiably partisan and prone to self-selection. While we would expect the pattern of effects from these partisan media to be similar to the partisan press, extending the analysis to other media provides additional opportunities for future research.

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Notes

1. Research on European Union (EU) elections provides one promising arena (e.g., Wilson and Hobolt 2015). However, EU elections are relatively low salience second-order contests (Schmitt 2005), and media coverage of them tends to reflect that.
2. Other factors that validate the comparison include long-term trends that have added to the presidentialization and personalization of British politics, and the impact of 9/11 on Britain, in which more Britons died than in any of the Irish Republican Army (IRA) terrorist incidents of the previous three decades—indeed, more died in the 9/11 attacks than would die on 7/7/2005. We address the issue of media systems below.
3. Issue ownership theory distinguishes between issues that parties own and “performance issues” that advantage no particular party but reflect on the competence of the incumbent government (Petrocik 1996). It is unclear where the War in Iraq would fit. But it seems

likely that a party that owns associated issues such as national security, foreign policy, and defense, and whose leaders are seen as stronger (Hayes 2005), will be more trusted to wage war successfully and that this is likelier to characterize right-wing parties such as the Republicans in the United States and the Conservatives in Britain.

4. A fourth theory of media effects could be termed a “*Cheap talk*” hypothesis. We discuss this in the online appendix.
5. There are, of course, other comparative studies but they tend to look at characteristics of different media systems (e.g., Albaek et al. 2014) or at media effects on knowledge (e.g., Curran and Aalberg 2013) rather than partisan media effects.
6. According to Gentzkow and Shapiro’s (2010) Figure 1, our sample consists of some of the most conservative newspapers in the United States such as the *Houston Chronicle* and *Wall Street Journal*, as well as some of the most liberal newspapers such as the *Atlanta Constitution* and *Philadelphia Inquirer*.
7. Research on local factors such as the effects of local casualties in war does not suggest that they are moderated by media exposure (Gartner and Segura 2000).
8. This is from Mondo Times (www.mondotimes.com), which allows ratings of a newspaper’s partisanship. Gentzkow and Shapiro (2010) show that these ratings correlate with alternative measures based on newspaper content. There are also several broader surveys on perceptions of bias in the media from the Pew Research Center, including the finding that a plurality of individuals think their own source of media tends to favor one side. For evidence that this characterized U.S. newspapers as far back as the 1930s, see Berinsky (2009).
9. Puglisi and Snyder (2015) describe this as one of three approaches to classifying partisan reporting, the others being comparing media text to the content of conservative and liberal figures’ rhetoric, and intensity of coverage of different topics or the tone of coverage of different topics. They find that the news and editorial content of newspapers in the United States are correlated.
10. The results are similar to those presented if we use a raw count of stories or of their tone.
11. This is not just an effect of the *New York Times* and *Washington Post* being relatively weighty in terms of their issue coverage and also classified as Democratic—with these newspapers excluded, Democratic newspapers still featured more stories on the issue.
12. Such a “content weighted” approach is criticized by Fazekas and Larsen (2016), although Schuck et al. (2015) provide a robust defense. This is also the method employed routinely in research on the effects of political advertising.
13. In addition, we control for lagged approval of the War in Iraq and of the war on terror.
14. This is because there are no latent variables. The National Annenberg Election Survey (NAES) employed a split sample design, which particularly affected the numbers of respondents answering questions on approval of the war on terror and the qualities of the leaders. However, selection into different parts of the survey was random; we have no reason to believe that there are differences between respondents who did and did not answer these questions. Nevertheless, the online appendix includes analysis and commentary on estimates using listwise deletion and multiple imputation of missing values. The results are substantively the same.
15. We also estimated models that focused solely on the incumbent leaders. These estimates were similar to those presented in the main text and are available in the online appendix.
16. We tested alternative paths, comparing the Akaike Information Criteria (in structural equation models), but variations from this model provided inferior fit. We also looked at other specifications including clustering standard errors based on state (the United States) or constituency (Britain). Neither affected the substantive implications that we report here.

17. There are also effects from independent newspapers but their signs are mixed, suggesting that there was a mixture of positive and negative effects for these readers.
18. We reestimated the models eliminating the readers of each newspaper to assess their influence on the results. Removing *New York Times* readers eliminated the influence of Democrat-supporting newspapers on perceptions of the War in Iraq, while the effect on trust remained statistically significant and the effect on caring marginally so. The size and statistical significance of coverage in Republican newspapers on perceptions of the War on Terror did not change. Thus, excluding readers of the *New York Times* did not change the substantive implications of the models. Eliminating other newspapers had smaller effects.
19. We also reestimated the models for Labour- and Conservative-supporting British newspapers, excluding a newspaper's readers each time. These models indicated that a single newspaper was not driving the results.
20. The Liberal Democrats represented an option to vote for a consistently antiwar party that did not exist in the United States. The substantive results do not change if we exclude Liberal Democrat identifiers, or Liberal Democrat identifiers and Liberal Democrat voters, from the models. We also looked at Liberal Democrats who *approved* of the war. They were no more likely to vote Labour than Conservative, consistent with the *Ownership Hypothesis*.
21. The effects for independent newspapers are crosscutting according to the analysis of the United States, leading to little net effect, and negative in Britain but less so than for Conservative newspapers.
22. We note that recent research in the United States has referred to "asymmetric polarization." While we do not wish to discount this as a possibility for part of what we are seeing, Berinsky (2009) finds partisanship coloring perceptions of wars in all the conflicts he studies. Polarization has intensified in recent times but the patterns are the same as for earlier wars. Moreover, the partisan effects that we observe in Britain, which has not seen the same phenomenon of growing antipathy toward the other party and its partisans, are just as strong.

Supplementary material

Supplementary material for this article is available online.

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Author Biographies

Daniel Stevens is a professor of Politics at the University of Exeter. He specializes in political communication and political behavior. This work has appeared in journals such as *American Journal of Political Science*, *Journal of Politics*, and *British Journal of Political Science*.

Barbara Allen is a professor and former chair of the Department of Political Science, Carleton and Director of Women's Studies at Carleton College, Northfield, MN. In addition to published works on the Martin Luther King, Jr. and the American Civil Rights Movement, she has written about federalism and the political thought of Alexis de Tocqueville in her book, *Harmonizing Earth with Heaven: Tocqueville on Covenant & the Democratic Revolution*. As well as studies of political communication, she has conducted community-based participatory research on topics of concern to Deaf Americans. She directed the feature length documentary, *Signing On: Stories of Deaf Breast Cancer Survivors, their Families and Community*.