

# H-Net Reviews

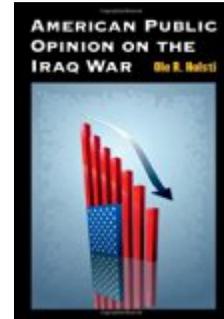
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Ole R. Holsti. *American Public Opinion on the Iraq War*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2011. xii + 226 pp. \$90.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-472-11704-8; \$40.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-472-03480-2.

Reviewed by Julia Azari (Marquette University)

Published on H-Diplo (December, 2012)

Commissioned by Seth Offenbach



Ole R. Holsti's new book, *American Public Opinion on the Iraq War*, is about public attitudes toward U.S. involvement in Iraq. Its objectives include assessing the overall public response to the war in Iraq, analyzing the impact of public opinion on policymaking, and extrapolating broader lessons about public opinion and foreign policy. Holsti accomplishes most of his goals.

This book has several crucial strengths. First, it is highly informative and well written. For these reasons alone, I would consider assigning it for the unit on war powers and foreign policymaking in my course on the American presidency. In an ample chapter that precedes the meat of his analysis, the author provides an overview of U.S. involvement in the Middle East going back to the 1950s. This chapter includes a description of the 1991 Gulf War as an important backdrop to the most recent invasion. Holsti also makes an interesting and important argument about the role of partisanship in public evaluations of the Iraq War. The book's third chapter, concisely titled "Partisanship," presents data that reveal strong partisan patterns in support for the war. Aggregate data suggest a public that was conflicted about the war and, eventually, flagging in its support. Breaking down question responses by partisanship shows a different picture, with support for the war remaining strong among Republicans, but not Democrats. These findings shed important light on the depth and scope of party polarization, suggesting that partisans in the electorate are highly consistent and cohesive in their views on the war. Interestingly, Holsti explains partisan divisions over the Iraq War in terms of events and factors specific to the situation—in particular, he cites efforts by the Bush administration to paint their opponents as traitors as a main

cause of polarized public opinion on the war. The hypothesis that leaders' actions can shape public discourse is worth further examination. However, the author does not seriously raise the possibility that partisan divisions are the result of differing worldviews and principles that inform citizens' evaluations of foreign policy.

One of the book's most compelling chapters examines the possible spillover effects of the war into public opinion on other foreign policy questions. Using history to provide a baseline, Holsti finds that fundamental views on America's role in the world have not changed, with the majority of Americans favoring active involvement in world affairs and military action in peacekeeping and humanitarian situations. However, he also finds that polls reveal an electorate that is more "gun shy" about foreign involvement than in previous decades (p. 121). For example, he notes that in 2001 and 2005, only about a quarter of respondents identified "reducing U.S. military commitment overseas" as a priority, whereas in 2008, this number rose to 45 percent (p. 118). The other analytical highlight, of particular interest to presidential scholars, concerns the impact of public opinion on the decision-making process in the George W. Bush White House. Holsti describes the central operating principles that shaped decisions within the White House, examining the statements of various advisors and policymakers. He also examines the administration's attitude toward and treatment of the news media, and the role of elections in shaping policy.

Holsti raises a number of provocative questions, such as why the administration's efforts to garner support for the war were not more successful, why the media was so

reluctant to challenge the Bush administration's claims about the situation in Iraq, and what the relationship between public opinion and foreign policy is overall. However, the book's major disappointment is that it does not engage very deeply with existing theoretical frameworks to address some of these questions. Immense bodies of research exist on presidential efforts to shape and shift public opinion, on the nature of public attitudes, and on mass and elite ideologies. In particular, the book's relatively superficial treatment of Brandice Canes-Wrone's *Who Leads Whom? Presidents, Policy, and the Public* (2005) and John Zaller's *The Nature and Origin of Mass Opinion* (2006) (both of which appear in the bibliography) and Samuel Kernell's *Going Public* (2006) (which does not) is striking. Holsti's analysis does not draw on the theories and debates generated by these seminal works. Had the author delved into one or two of these ideas, and employed a more systematic research design, he might have been able to offer a compelling answer to some of the bigger questions. By grounding the research more firmly in theories about the presidency and public persuasion, Holsti also could have addressed a key tension in the behavior of the Bush administration. Namely, why did the administration seem to work hard at fostering public support for the war, even as the administration remained relatively unresponsive to public preferences about Iraq policy?

A final criticism concerns a long section in the final chapter, which attempts to place public opinion on Iraq in the context of "stab-in-the-back" theories, which Holsti defines as "explanations for tragic events in which the heroes are betrayed by those who proved unworthy of the trust placed in them" (p. 167). This discussion comes off somewhat disjointed in the context of the rest of the book. The book would have made a stronger contribution to our theoretical understanding of public opinion in war if it had been more consciously grounded in a particular question, and the "stab-in-the-back" idea took the argument, in my estimation, furthest afield of the central questions of political science. More systematic final assessments of the limitations of wartime public relations efforts, partisan divisions over foreign policy questions, and transformations in public sentiment would have provided a more theoretically satisfying conclusion.

Overall, Holsti has produced an informative and provocative book, in keeping with his previous work on public opinion and foreign policy. It ties together several important dimensions of public opinion and the Iraq War, puts events in historical context, and attempts to capture real public attitudes about the nation's foreign policy. This book raises many excellent questions for historians and political scientists to pursue.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-diplo>

**Citation:** Julia Azari. Review of Holsti, Ole R., *American Public Opinion on the Iraq War*. H-Diplo, H-Net Reviews. December, 2012.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=36981>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.