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THE POLLS—A REVIEW

AMERICAN PUBLIC OPINION AND THE GULF WAR: SOME POLLING ISSUES

JOHN MUELLER

When the crisis in the Persian Gulf began with Iraq's invasion of Kuwait on August 2, 1990, American public opinion became a major consideration. The importance of public opinion in the crisis was fully apparent, of course, to the polling agencies and to the newspapers and television networks that sponsor them. Accordingly, the agencies blew their budgets on telephone surveys asking hundreds of questions seeking to assess the reaction of the American public to events relating to the Persian Gulf.

The data were created prodigiously, but not always very systematically, by the polling agencies, who were chiefly trying, of course, to generate data for short-range journalistic purposes, not longer-range academic ones. But because they were asking a lot of questions that tried to get at the same issues, they fortuitously created a body of data that supplies some interesting comparisons. This article discusses a few issues concerning polls and polling that emerge when one sorts through this mass of data.¹

Question Wording

It is hardly novel to observe that the wording of a question can substantially alter the responses generated. Although this means that it is essentially impossible to come up with a single number reflecting what the public's opinion about anything actually *is*, the polling agencies are often expected by their clients to carry out this tricky feat, and they spend a great deal of time and effort trying to comply. The published results of such exercises can be misleading.

1. For a further discussion of the data, see Mueller (in press).

JOHN MUELLER is professor of political science at the University of Rochester. For generous assistance in supplying data, I would like to thank William C. Stratmann and John Palmerini of the Gordon S. Black Corporation, and Thomas W. Graham and the Institute on Global Conflict and Cooperation at the University of California, San Diego. I would also like to thank Marc Maynard of the Roper Center for assistance.

In the crisis period leading up to the war a central issue concerned the number of Americans who favored war. If the United States went to war, the politicians—particularly those in Congress who were to vote on the issue on January 12, 1991—wanted to know if opinion was behind them. The polls tried to supply the answer, but essentially it was a hopeless enterprise.

For example, a *Washington Post* report at the end of December 1990 concluded at one point that “Persian Gulf hawks currently outnumber doves by better than 2-to-1.” This conclusion was based, it said, on “a computer analysis of the public’s response to eight key questions.” Later in the same article, however, it pointed out that “depending on how questions are framed, support for a hard line can be depressed to the 40 or 50 percent range or increased to 70 or 80 percent” (Morin and Dionne 1990).² Actually, it was possible to generate an even wider range of responses.

Table I supplies the responses to a set of questions all of which were asked in mid-November 1990. One of the questions the *Post* analysts relied on is question number 1. On examination, the question proves to be an easy one to agree with. Although there was a growing debate at the time about whether to rely on force rather than on economic and diplomatic sanctions to drive Iraq from Kuwait, almost all members of the establishment debate could be expected to agree with this question since those favoring sanctions generally also said they would support the use of military force if sanctions were eventually found to be inadequate. Moreover, the phrase “the use of military force” avoids the troubling word “war” and could be accepted by people willing to agree to limited bombing missions.

The other questions in table I are not so accommodating to the hawk position, and they generate far lower numbers in support of war. Question 4, in fact, finds that doves outnumbered hawks by 2 to 1, even though it includes the wistful promise that war would “bring the situation to a close.” One might conclude from this array of results that at the time these polls were in the field, 28 percent of the population was willing to initiate war, 38 percent was willing to go to war, 46 percent was willing to engage in combat, and 65 percent was willing to use military force. The question array does not really allow for comparisons that precise, but the dilemma for the pollster is clear.

As a comparison of question 4 with questions 1–3 may suggest, substantially more people were likely to express a hawk sentiment if the question simply asked whether the country should go to war than if the question gave them a choice between war and something else. In November, two related questions were asked at the same time

2. For a valuable discussion of some of the problems in this issue, see Morin (1991c).

(and apparently on the same poll). One found that 54 percent of the population supported “the U.S. going to war” when sanctions were not mentioned as an alternative, while the other found that only 46 percent were willing even to “take military action” when the sanctions option was furnished.

Question options also made a great deal of difference when respondents assessed the likelihood of war. At various points in the crisis people were asked, “Do you think the United States is going to get involved in a war with Iraq, or not?” while others were asked, “Do you expect the United States military to end up fighting against Iraq or do you think the situation will be resolved without fighting?” The latter formulation consistently found war anticipation to be about 20 percentage points lower. Similarly, the number willing to approve George Bush’s November 1990 decision to send additional troops to the Gulf area dropped 20 percentage points when the phrase “or should he have waited longer to make that decision” was supplied as an option.

Trend Lines That Do Not Move

In the prewar phase many questions were asked about various Gulf policy options—support or opposition for war or for continued reliance on sanctions. Quite a few commentators have concluded that Bush was gradually able to shift public opinion toward support of war (Duffy and Goodgame 1992, p. 41; Gergen 1991/92, p. 6; Hinckley 1992, p. 113; Inman et al. 1992, pp. 70–71; Smith 1992, p. 162), but poll data suggest otherwise. Indeed, the most remarkable aspect of public opinion on such matters was that it changed very little, particularly during the interval between November 8, 1990, when Bush announced he was increasing troop levels in the Middle East, and January 16, 1991, when the war began—this despite the fact that there was at the same time a very substantial public debate over whether war or continued sanctions should be used to pressure Saddam Hussein out of Kuwait. It may be, of course, that quite a few people were changing their minds, but, if so, any movement from one side to the other was canceled out by people switching in the opposite direction. While it is possible to argue from some data that there was something of a movement toward greater hawkishness during this period, other data indicate something of a movement toward dovishness, and there are considerable data to suggest that there was no change at all.

A dilemma for pollsters working with trend data is that trend lines that do not move tend not to be accepted as news by their journalistic clients. When opinion—rather unexpectedly, perhaps—did not change

very much during the Gulf War debate, there were two methods for generating interesting copy. One was to change the questions all the time, hoping to come up with interesting and topical, if perhaps ephemeral, findings. The other was to stress time series that did happen to move. Gallup seems to have succumbed to the latter temptation in this case. Although the agency had asked seven questions that showed little or no opinion change between December and January and only one that did, the question that was given big play and portrayed on the cover of the January 1991 issue of the *Gallup Poll Monthly* was the one that did move. The eight items are displayed in table II with the question that did move listed first.³

There is some evidence to suggest that, despite the rather remarkable imperturbability of most trend lines during this period, some interesting changes were going on underneath. For example, surveys in November twice asked those who disapproved of Bush's handling of the situation *why* they did so. Overall levels of support did not change between the two polls—both found 36 percent to disapprove (see the November 14–15 and November 29–December 2 polls in table III, question 13). However, in the first poll it was found that those disapproving because they felt Bush was moving too slowly against Iraq outnumbered those who disapproved because they felt he was moving too quickly by 44 to 37. But 2 weeks later, when war seemed more likely, these percentages were reversed.⁴ Unfortunately, despite this intriguing finding, the follow-up question asking why the respondent disapproved was not repeated in later polls.

The Perils of Instant Polling

The developments in the Gulf crisis were watched especially closely by the public in the first 2 weeks of January 1991, just before the start of the war. Not surprisingly, a great deal of polling was carried out in that period to tap changes and inflections in public attitudes. Some

3. It is fairly similar to the one that follows it in that it supplied more than one option, and a comparison might lead one to suspect that Americans became more willing between December and January to abandon sanctions for "the use of armed force" than to abandon them in order to "initiate a war." However, a *New York Times* survey in the field at the same time finds no change in the comparative appeal of these two options: "start military actions" and "wait longer to see if the trade embargo and other sanctions work."

4. The authors of the poll reports in *Public Opinion and Demographic Report* (March/April 1991, p. 77), whose write-ups betray a notably hawkish orientation, pointedly report the first of these breakdowns but not the second. Relatedly, Everett Carl Ladd uses the first of these breakdowns to demonstrate that "polls now show a growing segment wanting stronger US action" (1991). How one can show from a single data point that sentiment is growing is not made clear. See also Gergen (1991/92, p. 9).

data from several polls conducted for ABC News and the *Washington Post* furnish an interesting—and perhaps cautionary—opportunity to compare instant, single-evening polls with ones conducted over somewhat broader time spans.

In the days just before the war began, two instant polls were run: one on January 9, immediately following the unsuccessful talks between Secretary of State James Baker and Iraqi Foreign Minister Tariq Aziz, and the other on January 13, immediately following similarly unsuccessful talks between UN Secretary-General Javier Perez De Cuellar and Saddam Hussein. Not surprisingly, both polls found substantial drops in the percentages anticipating there would be a diplomatic solution to the crisis.

More interesting, however, both polls found notable, but temporary, upward bumps in hawkishness. Table III, question 14a, which presents the results from a question that made it quite easy for people to support war, illustrates the phenomenon best. If one reported only the instantly available January 9 or 13 data, one might suspect there was a rush within the public toward war.⁵ But data from multiday surveys in the field at the same time suggest that war fever before the war was a bit lower than it had been in the aftermath of the November 29 UN vote and, if anything, had declined some from levels found in early January.⁶

A similar phenomenon is found in table III, question 14b. In the January 9 poll there is an upward jolt for going to war immediately, but this is not found in the January 9–13 poll. (Whether the large

5. The polls from January 13 and January 11–15 are separate and were conducted by different agencies. Information available at the Roper Center does not make it clear what the origins of the January 9 and January 9–13 polls are. I have assumed that they, too, are separate polls. However, it is possible the January 9 poll comprises those respondents from the January 9–13 poll who were interviewed on the evening of January 9. In this case the argument in the text would be even stronger.

6. The article in the January 11, 1991, *Washington Post*, a day before Congress voted on the war resolution, reports from this series the points from November 30–December 2, December 14–18 (with its peculiarly high no opinion response probably caused by the fact that this rather complicated question was, in this case only, asked first in the poll), January 4–6, and January 9 (Morin 1991b). The January 8 report furnishes the December 14–18 and the January 4–6 points (Morin 1991a). Both thus give the impression of increasing hawkishness, and the January 8 article concludes that “a growing majority believes force should be used to drive Iraq out of Kuwait.” The notion of growth is hardly supported by the full array of data in table III, question 14a, and the idea that a “majority” supported war is undercut by data of the sort arrayed in table I. Other portions of these articles, however, note the public’s apparent willingness to support compromise and negotiations (Morin 1991b) and stress that public support for the war could “quickly evaporate in the face of even modest U.S. casualties” (Morin 1991a). As in Korea and Vietnam (see Mueller 1973), the public’s tolerance of American casualties in the Gulf War seems to have followed a logarithmic pattern: if the war had gone badly one could anticipate a quick drop-off of support at first, slower declines thereafter.

January 13 rise was similarly unique cannot be determined because the relevant question was not asked on the January 11–15 poll). And a nearly identical effect took place on Bush's support on Gulf policy: there were hefty jumps upward on January 9 and 13, while noninstant polls find his support to be no higher than in December and, if anything, lower than in early January (table III, question 13).⁷

Table III, question 15, does not allow for such comparisons because the hawkish question it documents was asked in the January 9 and 13 polls but not in surrounding ones. But the inference from table III, question 14a, suggests that the mid-January trend implied by these data is more apparent than real.⁸

It seems reasonable to infer from these results that events like failed peace talks, which are heavily reported, immediate, and disappointing, caused a temporary surge of outraged hawkishness that was essentially ephemeral. It may also be, however, that the sampling peculiarities of the overnight poll—and of the people who can be contacted under such circumstances—contributed to this variability. The data from the January 2 poll—an instant poll that did not come on the heels of a dramatic and disappointing event—may suggest this. In table III, questions 13, 14a, 15, that poll consistently registers a slightly higher (if less than statistically significant) hawkish response than multiday ones that were in the field at the same time.⁹

Whatever the explanation, caution in interpreting overnight polls seems to be in order. With improvements in telephone polling, it is now possible to assess the public's instant reaction to dramatic events, and the journalistic appeal of such data is undeniable. But the numbers these polls generate may substantially distort trends and even imply bogus ones.

7. The differences in question 13 and question 14a are significant at the .02 level or better using chi-square tests with 1 degree of freedom. Hinckley presents the November 14–15, December 9, and January 9 data points from question 13 and concludes that Bush's approval rating "steadily increased" during that period (1992, pp. 111, 113).

8. The January 9 and 13 polls also found an upward jump of 14 points in the percentage holding war to be likely, whereas the multiday polls conducted at the same time suggest a smaller (though still notable) rise.

9. The data in the tables presents the information as reported in the *Washington Post* and as deposited at the Roper Center. However, it turns out that the polls from early January are not entirely independent. Specifically, there were actually two polls, not four, both conducted by the same agency: one was conducted between January 2 and 6, the other between January 4 and 8. The January 2 poll in question represents the results obtained from those respondents questioned on January 2 from the January 2–6 poll. Thus they are not independent, and this makes the concern about the possible hawkish bias of instant polls of the time somewhat stronger. The January 4–6 poll is a composite of those people interviewed between those dates in the January 2–6 and the January 4–8 polls.

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I. Asking about Going to War

1. *ABC News/Washington Post*: Do you agree or disagree that the United States should take all action necessary, including the use of military force, to make sure that Iraq withdraws its forces from Kuwait?

	Agree, Use Force	Disagree	Don't Know	N
1990, November 14–15	65	26	8	(515)

2. *Gallup*: Now that the U.S. (United States) forces have been sent to Saudi Arabia and other areas of the Middle East, do you think they should engage in combat if . . . Iraq refuses to leave Kuwait and restore its former government?

	Engage in Combat	Do Not Engage in Combat	Don't Know	N
1990, November 15–16	46	40	14	(754)

3. *Los Angeles Times*: Overall, taking into consideration everything you heard or read about the Mideast crisis, do you think the United States should go to war against Iraq, or not?

	Go to War	Do Not Go to War	Don't Know	N
1990, November 14	38	53	9	(1,031)

4. *Gallup*: All in all, which of these courses of action do you agree with:
 The U.S. should keep troops, planes and ships in and around Saudi Arabia as long as is necessary to prevent Iraq from invading Saudi Arabia, but without initiating a war.

The U.S. should initiate a war against Iraq in order to drive Iraq out of Kuwait and bring the situation to a close.

	Initiate War	No War	Don't Know	N
1990, November 15–18	28	65	7	(1,018)

II. Eight Gallup Trends, November–January¹⁰

5. *Gallup*: Some people feel the sanctions imposed by the international community against Iraq should be given more time to work. Other people feel that it is time to take stronger action against Saddam Hussein, including the use of armed force. Which one of these views comes closer to how you feel?

	Give Sanctions More Time to Work	Time to Use Armed Force against Saddam	Don't Know	N
1990, November 29–December 2	46	48	6	(1,013)
1990, December 6–9	47	46	7	(1,007)
1991, January 3–6	36	57	7	(1,006)

6. *Gallup*: Which of the following three statements comes closest to your opinion?

The United States should withdraw its troops from Saudi Arabia.

The United States should continue to enforce sanctions and seek some form of peaceful solution to the crisis, no matter how long it takes, without initiating a war to drive Iraq out of Kuwait.

The United States should initiate a war to drive Iraq out of Kuwait if Iraq does not change its position within the next several months, in order to draw matters to a close.

	Withdraw Troops	Continue Sanctions	Initiate War	Don't Know	N
1990, November 29–December 2	9	46	42	3	(1,013)
1990, December 6–9	10	41	46	3	(1,007)
1991, January 3–6	8	43	45	4	(1,006)

10. Source: *Gallup Poll Monthly*, December 1990, January 1991, February 1991. Additional data from Roper Center.

7. *Gallup*: Do you approve or disapprove of the United States' decision to send U.S. troops to Saudi Arabia as a defense against Iraq?

	Approve U.S. Decision to Send Troops to Saudi Arabia as a Defense against Iraq	Disapprove	Don't Know	<i>N</i>
1990, November 29–December 2	65	30	5	(1,013)
1990, December 6–9	63	33	4	(1,007)
1991, January 3–6	64	30	6	(1,006)

8. *Gallup*: In view of the developments since we first sent our troops to Saudi Arabia, do you think the United States made a mistake in sending troops to Saudi Arabia, or not?

	U.S. Made a Mistake	U.S. Did Not Make a Mistake	Don't Know	<i>N</i>
1990, November 29–December 2	29	66	5	(1,013)
1990, December 6–9	28	66	6	(1,007)
1991, January 3–6	31	61	8	(1,006)

9. *Gallup*: Do you approve or disapprove of the way George Bush is handling this current situation in the Middle East involving Iraq and Kuwait?

	Approve Bush on Middle East	Disapprove	Don't Know	<i>N</i>
1990, November 29–December 2	58	33	9	(1,013)
1990, December 6–9	57	36	7	(1,007)
1991, January 3–6	60	34	6	(1,006)

10. *Gallup*: All in all, is the current situation in the Mideast worth going to war over, or not?

	Situation Worth Going to War Over	Not Worth Going to War	Don't Know	<i>N</i>
1990, November 29–December 2	51	41	8	(1,013)
1990, December 6–9	47	45	8	(1,007)
1991, January 3–6	47	44	9	(1,006)

11. *Gallup*: If the current situation in the Middle East involving Iraq and Kuwait does not change by January (January 15th), would you favor or oppose the U.S. going to war with Iraq in order to drive the Iraqis out of Kuwait?

	Favor Going to War with Iraq in January	Oppose Going to War with Iraq	Don't Know	N
1990, November 29–December 2	52	40	7	(1,013)
1990, December 6–9	53	40	7	(1,007)
1991, January 3–6	52	39	9	(1,006)

12. *Gallup*: Recently, the United Nations Security Council passed a resolution that allows Iraq one final opportunity to pull out of Kuwait by January 15th or else face possible military action. If Iraq lets this deadline pass, would you favor the U.S. and its allies going to war with Iraq in order to drive the Iraqis out of Kuwait, or not?

	Favor Going to War with Iraq in January	Oppose Going to War with Iraq	Don't Know	N
1990, November 29–December 2	64	31	5	(1,013)
1990, December 6–9	61	33	6	(1,007)
1991, January 3–6	62	32	6	(1,006)

III. Trends: Instant and Noninstant Polls

13. *ABC News/Washington Post, ABC News*: Do you approve or disapprove of the way George Bush is handling the situation caused by Iraq's invasion of Kuwait?

	Approve Bush's Handling of Iraq's Invasion	Disapprove	Don't Know	N
1990, November 14–15	59	36	5	(515)
1990, November 30–December 2	61	36	4	(758)
1990, December 9	62	32	6	(518)
1991, January 2	66	29	5	(352)
1991, January 2–6	61	30	9	(1,007)
1991, January 4–6	67	30	4	(1,057)
1991, January 4–8	65	28	8	(1,003)
1991, January 9 ¹¹	69	29	2	(511)
1991, January 9–13	60	31	10	(1,009)
1991, January 13	68	27	5	(781)
1991, January 11–15	61	29	11	(1,007)

11. Question preceded by: As you may know, U.S. Secretary of State James Baker held talks today with Iraqi Foreign Minister Tariq Aziz. They reported no progress in resolving the Persian Gulf situation. No further talks were scheduled.

14a. *ABC News/Washington Post, ABC News, Washington Post*: As you may know, the United Nations Security Council has authorized the use of force against Iraq if it doesn't withdraw from Kuwait by January 15th (1991). If Iraq does not withdraw from Kuwait, should the United States go to war with Iraq to force it out of Kuwait at some point after January 15th, or not?

	Go to War at Some Point after January 15 If Iraq Doesn't Withdraw from Kuwait	Do Not Go to War	Don't Know	N
1990, November 30–December 2 ¹²	63	32	4	(758)
1990, December 9	58	38	4	(518)
1990, December 14–18	55	30	16	(1,000)
1991, January 2	65	29	6	(352)
1991, January 2–6	62	33	5	(1,007)
1991, January 4–6	63	32	6	(1,057)
1991, January 4–8	62	31	6	(1,003)
1991, January 9	68	29	2	(511)
1991, January 9–13	61	32	7	(505)
1991, January 13	69	26	4	(781)
1991, January 11–15	60	33	7	(335)

14b. On several of these polls those in favor of war were then asked: How long after January 15th (1991) should the United States wait for Iraq to withdraw from Kuwait before going to war to force it out?

	Immediately, Right Away	Less than 1 Month	1–3 Months	4–6 Months	Longer	Don't Know
December 14–18	28	51	2	2	2	6
January 2	25	57	9	...	1	7
January 2–6	23	52	15	2	1	9
January 4–6	29	49	13	2	...	7
January 4–8	30	48	12	2	1	6
January 9	39	43	12	2	...	4
January 9–13	30	45	14	3	2	7
January 13	54	30	9	1	1	5

12. First sentence not included, but substance conveyed in earlier questions in the survey.

15. *ABC News/Washington Post, ABC News*: Do you agree or disagree that the United States should take all action necessary, including the use of military force, to make sure that Iraq withdraws its forces from Kuwait?

	Agree, Use Force to Make Sure Iraq Withdraws	Disagree	Don't Know	<i>N</i>
1990, November 14–15	65	26	8	(515)
1990, November 30–December 2	67	29	4	(758)
1990, December 9	65	31	3	(518)
1991, January 2	71	26	3	(352)
1991, January 2–6	68	28	4	(1,007)
1991, January 4–6	68	28	3	(1,057)
1991, January 4–8	69	27	4	(1,003)
1991, January 9	75	23	2	(511)
1991, January 13	74	24	3	(781)