

Patriotism in the American News: The Effect of an Uncritical American Public on
International Relations

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Abstract:

In the United States, journalists learn the importance of objectivity, fairness, and independence. However, these values are often undermined, especially in times of crisis. Following the September 11 attacks, the media responded with a particularly patriotic slant to their reporting. Television news was marked by news reporters wearing flag pins; flag images; and red, white, and blue, patriotic banners. An experiment using patriotic and neutral news stories shows that generally American viewers of patriotic images did not report that patriotic news stories were less fair, sensational, biased, accurate, important, newsworthy, or balanced. The results of this experiment suggest that Americans are comfortable with the flag and other patriotic images enmeshed in their news broadcasts. This paper argues that an uncritical American public can have a significant impact on the foreign policy of the United States. In particular, if patriotic images and themes are accepted by the American public, political leaders are given more latitude in decision-making. This is because uncritical patriotism serves as an underpinning for the normative component of policy legitimacy.

INTRODUCTION:

In the United States, journalists learn the importance of objectivity, fairness, and independence. However, these values are often undermined, especially in times of crisis.

Following the September 11 attacks, the media responded with a particularly patriotic slant to their reporting. Television news was marked by news reporters wearing flag pins; flag images; and red, white, and blue, patriotic banners. One commentator suggested that “[i]f any of the pillars of journalism have been shaken (since 9/11) it has been independence” (Birge, 2004).

We know that the public often rallies around the president in times of foreign crisis (Mueller; see Brody and Shapiro for an exception). Scholars and popular press articles have documented the use of patriotic graphics and story frames, but few studies have looked at the effects of these images on the viewer’s perception of the stories themselves. After five years of ‘the war on terror’ we ask: does the public perceive news coverage differently when it is decidedly patriotic? That is, do viewers believe overtly patriotic news coverage to undermine credibility, fairness, or balance? Does partisanship or views of the media affect these perceptions? This study begins to answer these questions. We find that generally viewers of patriotic images did not report that patriotic news stories were less fair, sensational, biased, accurate, important, newsworthy, or balanced.

We argue that this is important because uncritical patriotism underpins the normative component of policy legitimacy. According to George (1989), policy legitimacy has two components. First, a leader “must convince people that he knows how to achieve these desirable long-range objectives” (George, 1989:235). George calls this the cognitive component that establishes the feasibility of the policy. Second, an American leader must convince others in his administration, Congress, and the public “that the objectives and goals of his policy are desirable and worth pursuing – in other

words, that his policy is consistent with fundamental national values and contributes to their enhancement” (George, 1989:235). This is the normative component of policy legitimacy.

This essay will first assess American journalistic standards in the face of 9/11 and the war in Iraq, arguing that the American media became decisively more patriotic after 9/11. We then present evidence from an experiment we conducted to test American viewers’ perceptions of patriotic news. We expected that Americans would not acknowledge a difference in patriotic vs. non-patriotic versions of the same news stories, and indeed, we were correct. Americans seem to take patriotic news for granted. Finally, we evaluate the ramifications of these findings for the study of American foreign policy and international relations. We argue that uncritical American patriotism bolsters the normative component of policy legitimacy, and allows President Bush more latitude in foreign policy decision-making. This is true despite mid-term electoral defeat for the Republicans which was due, most directly, to a failure in the cognitive (not normative) component of policy legitimacy.

American journalistic standards

Because the public relies on the media for guidance and is ultimately the most trusted source of information especially during times of crisis (Carpini and Williams, 1987), the American media hold that it is especially important for the press to remain fair so the public can make their own decisions (Barton and Campbell, 2001). Bias during coverage of crisis can derive from a number of different sources, including journalists’ own ideology (Reynolds & Barnett, 2003a) and a reliance on official sources or frames of

the event (Reynolds & Barnett, 2003b). When consensus exists among elites, media coverage reflects that consensus in coverage that is one sided (Hallin 1984; Robinson 2000; Powlick and Katz 1998; Entman, 2004).

Although the First Amendment allows for a press that can publish what is considered morally, politically, or otherwise objectionable, the press tends to cooperate with officials by refraining from broadcasting information when asked – this is referred to as “informal censorship” (Graber, 2003). Media reactions to informal censorship can vary. For example, the State Department effectively convinced the media not to air a tape of Bin Laden because of the “secret messages” that could be included (Graber, 2003). The press seemed convinced of the purported national security threat that might stem from airing such a tape. The media were also banned from showing footage of soldier’s caskets coming back from Iraq and Afghanistan (Zabarenko, 2005), and the military bought the rights to privately owned satellite images of the Middle East following the start of the 2003 Iraq war (Graber, 2003). Reporters did publicly criticize the administration for trying to impose censors on their filming of bodies (Zabarenko, 2005). However, informal censorship, or informed coercion, can be as powerful as written censorship laws Graber (2003). Media may be afraid to dissent and equally afraid to report dissent (Brody, 1991) for fear of looking unpatriotic (Graber, 2003). Elite consensus and governmental censorship (either formal or informal) can contribute to an atmosphere in which media increase the amount of patriotic media content.

Particularly interesting to our essay is the idea that media can become caught up in a patriotic milieu. This may lead to unwavering support of the administration which contributes to the strength of the rally effect (Baker and Oneal, 2001). This is especially

relevant to our study because it is known through media studies of agenda setting and framing that the public looks to the press to decide what issues are salient and in what context to think about those issues (McCombs and Shaw, 1972; Entman, 1993; 2004). Here we take on two questions. First, if the media use patriotic frames to discuss issues, how does the audience perceive that information? Second, how does audience perception affect US foreign policy?

Patriotism in the American news

Patriotic journalism is said to be dangerous because it “denies to the public the information and detached perspective people need to make sound decisions” (Kern, 1994). It is fairly evident that American media have gone in this direction in their reporting following the September 11 attacks. Although there is no documentation in academic journals of the wearing of flag lapel pins by journalists or flag covered graphics, the incidents are very prominently discussed in popular press and trade publications (*New York Times*, *Los Angeles Times*, *Columbia Journalism Review*, *American Journalism Review*, *Quill*). The *Los Angeles Times* interviewed Jimmy Kelly of *Time Magazine* who said, “our friends in cable TV...have muddied the waters...they plant the flag on their screens and try to stick a waving flag on virtually everything that moves, and the subtle implication is that the network has gone to war as well, on the side of the US troops” (Shaw, 2003). Some even say that “flag symbolism is almost always associated with a sustained propaganda program....and it is patently clear that certain groups claim a monopoly over the flag and attempt to exclude those who do not accept their definition of patriotic loyalty”(Boime, 1990).

Another major criticism of American news is the use of the pronoun “we” which has become commonplace in war coverage (Rutenberg and Carter, 2001; Paletz, 1994; Seib, 2004). Originally used in the Gulf war by media, it has been adopted by journalists after September 11 and during the Iraq war to add a distinct American (and patriotic) aspect to the coverage. When a particular policy is tied to patriotism, those who question that policy can easily be labeled disloyal and unpatriotic.

On September 20, 2001, the *New York Times* published an article about the majority of cable news shows using the flag in their broadcasts. In that article Harvard professor Alex Jones said that immediately after 9/11 the emotional, editorialized, supportive coverage was understandable, but now the news must remain vigilant and critical so as to remain loyal to the criteria of their jobs (Rutenberg and Carter, 2001). Conniff complained that it is “sad that a lot of journalists have little to do but wear flag lapel pins and read Pentagon press releases about the war...” (Conniff, 2002). She also criticized the cable networks for creating catchy phrases like “America’s New War” and playing “drum-and-horn” music that made it seem as if the networks were operating as an arm of the government (Conniff, 2002). Even after the initial shock of 9/11, patriotic news coverage in the US has been documented by scholars (Zelizer, 2004; Bennett, 2003; Schwalbe, 2006).

Some tie patriotism in the news to the commercial nature of the news business in America today. Kalb (1994) sums it up well asking, “has the commercial nature of the American media so distorted its journalistic integrity that it’s incapable of providing facts that lower ratings or investigative reporting that draws the ire of popular presidents...?” Seib (2004) notes that “Fox, in particular, staked claim to a niche audience of viewers

with a fondness for red-white-and-blue coverage, and when it was successful imitators followed” (79). As noted in the case of the first Gulf War, networks that do not present negative reporting or stories contrary to the administration’s line can obtain large audiences because that may be what the public wants to hear (O’Heffernan, 1994).

A Pew survey conducted after the September 11 attacks indicated that only four percent of Americans put the freedom of the press to report what it thought was in the national interest equal to the government’s ability to censor the news (Pew 2001, as cited in Graber, 2003). In February 2003, there was more nuance to the poll results. A Pew poll done in February 2003 reported in the *Los Angeles Times* said that seven in 10 Americans thought it good for coverage to have “a strong pro-American point of view;” however, the same poll reported that a majority of viewers valued neutrality in the media. This might have meant that the public either didn’t understand objectivity or had mixed feelings about it (Lester, 2003). Or it may suggest that the public didn’t include patriotism in their assessment of what neutrality/objectivity means. It may be that the public operates under the assumption that all reports have and should have an American slant.

It is clear that the framing of news can shape political discourse (Reese, Gandy, and Grant, 2001; Wolfsfeld, 1997; Entman, 2004; Scheufele, 1999). We also know that framing was especially important during the September 11 coverage. CNN, for example, did not interview a source or entertain any idea that failed to support the Bush administration during the aftermath – anything less would be un-American. The elite source consensus combined with headlines such as “American Under Attack” set up the

frames for military response, justification, and unity after the attacks (Reynolds and Barnett, 2003b).

Studies have shown that increased exposure to media during hostile events creates more anxiety and fear in the viewing public (Huddy et al., 2003). The viewer is likely to rely on the government for alleviation of fear and will exhibit increased feelings of patriotism and pride. And, perhaps, then patriotic framing of events would not be perceived as undermining fairness, accuracy, or balance

Of course, we should not expect all viewers to react the same way to patriotic news stories. We know that individual characteristics play a role in viewer perception of media content. For example, the literature shows that partisanship plays a role in the perception of media bias across a wide-range of issues (Comstock and Scharrer, 1999; Arpan and Raney, 2003; Gunter, Christen, Liebhard, and Chia, 2001; Giner-Sorolla and Chaiken, 1994). Gunther et. al. (2001), for example, conducted a field experiment on the topic of primate research. Two groups: those self-proclaimed supporters of such research, and those opposing it, were participants. No matter the side, participants felt that the same media coverage of the issue was less agreeable to their position on the issue. Arpan and Raney (2003) found similar results in an experiment of perceptions of home-town sports teams in home town newspapers versus newspapers of other towns. Participants were more likely to find bias against their home team in stories. Moreover, partisans were more likely to remember those stories disagreeable to their opinions. This is to say that, “partisans remember and focus on a disproportionate amount of dissonant content (Gunter and Christen, 2002). In addition, Iyengar and Kinder (1987) have shown that strong partisans are

more likely to resist framing. We would expect, then, that Democrats and liberals (who are more opposed to the Iraq war and the conduct of President Bush's 'war on terror') would perceive patriotic coverage to be more biased or inaccurate.

Yet, although scholars, journalists, and pundits have noted and critiqued the use of patriotic images, we do not know very much about how viewers perceive this patriotic coverage. Because of the increasing attention being paid to the use of the flag in news broadcasts, especially by elite and print media, we decided to test its real impact on viewers' perceptions.

Testing American Viewers' Perceptions of Patriotic News Stories

In order to test viewer perceptions of patriotic news stories, two newscasts, one patriotic and one neutral, were created for a simple experiment. Each newscast contained three identical news stories from shows previously broadcast on a local station. The three segments were approximately 30 seconds long each and recorded by the station news anchor who was wearing a flag lapel pin. To ensure the same anchor intonation and mannerisms, the same recording was used for both patriotic and neutral versions and digitally manipulated by the researchers to include patriotic elements. For the neutral version, we digitally removed the anchor's flag lapel pin. The patriotic version included three distinct variables, a flag lapel pin, a flag graphic, and a patriotic themed title for the broadcast. The prominent graphic used in the patriotic broadcast has been featured on several CNN primetime news broadcasts as recently as March 2006.

The first news story was on the weakening U.S. economy. Both patriotic and neutral newscasts included the same graphics and titles for this story. The only

difference here was in the lapel pin worn by the anchor; the story title and graphic were both neutral so we could measure the effect the lapel pin had on the audience. The second story concerned the Iraq war death toll reaching 2000. Variables manipulated in this segment included the inclusion of the anchor flag pin and the over-the-shoulder flag graphic for the patriotic version. The last story covered the government's lack of progress on protecting identified easy terrorism targets. The patriotic version included the flag lapel pin, the over-the-shoulder flag graphic and patriotic title, as well as a patriotic lower third with the anchor's name. The neutral broadcast's title and graphics remained nondescript throughout all segments.¹

We expected that those who watched the patriotic versions of news stories would not perceive those stories to be less fair, newsworthy, biased, accurate, important, or balanced. A *t*-test between the patriotic and non-patriotic versions showed no significant differences in perceptions of the different stories overall. The respondents who received the patriotic broadcast rated these stories as no less objective, fair, biased, accurate, important, or balanced than those who saw the non-patriotic version. This finding suggests that the viewers in our sample either did not notice the patriotic symbolism or did not consider it to affect bias, fairness or balance. This is in-line with the literature on reactions to terrorism.

We also expected those who watched the patriotic versions of news stories would be less afraid of future terrorist attacks. This hypothesis was not supported within the group as a whole. Overall, the data do not show respondents who watched the patriotic news stories to be less afraid of future terrorist attacks. (The exceptions here were liberals and Democrats and will be discussed below.)

¹ More details about methodology can be found in the appendix.

The experiment's findings support some of our expectations: American viewers of patriotic stories are not more likely to view them as biased, unbalanced, unfair, or sensational. However, our hypothesis that patriotic versions of news stories would lead to less fear was not supported in the overall sample.

Findings Related to predispositions

We now turn to findings associated with partisanship and conceptions of the media. All participants were asked to identify themselves according to political party affiliation (Democrat, Republican, Independent, other) and political orientation (on a 10-point scale, liberal to conservative). In addition, participants were asked how liberal or conservative the media are on a 10-point scale. In this sample, 69% felt the media to be liberal and 31% said it was conservative. Because of the mainstream media criticism of "liberal bias" and the idea that the literature says viewers are likely to think the media is biased against their point of view, we wanted to see if respondents who thought the media was conservative (6-10 on a scale) would report less bias on the patriotic version of the Iraq and the terrorism story. The literature suggests that there may be differences in how individuals with different predispositions perceive the patriotic news stories.

The most significant findings here related to the perceptions of Democrats, Liberals, and those who view media as conservative. We expected those in this group who watched patriotic versions of the news stories would be more likely to rate those stories as biased or inaccurate. Self-identified Democrats who saw the patriotic version of the terrorism story rated it as more biased (Patriotic $M=6.63$, neutral $M=4.30$, $t(27) = 2.80$, $p < .009$) than their counterparts who saw the neutral newscast. We also found a

significant relationship for perceptions of anchor objectivity among liberals, (Patriotic $M=5.16$, neutral $M=6.68$, $t(52) = -2.25$, $p < .029$). Liberals who watched the patriotic version were significantly less likely to perceive the anchor as objective.

In addition, Liberals who viewed the patriotic version reported being less afraid of a terrorist attack ($M=5.16$) than liberals who saw the non-patriotic version ($M=6.86$), $t(52) = -2.75$, $p < .008$. The same pattern was found among Democrats, $t(27) = -2.33$, $p < .028$, with those who saw the patriotic version reporting less fear of a future attack. Even though Democrats and liberals rated the anchor in the patriotic version as less objective, they seem comforted by the story's patriotic tendencies. We would expect to see this relationship, however, in Republican and Conservative participants and did not. This relationship is curious and certainly requires further study, and may suggest the unconscious response that viewers have to these images.

An Uncritical American public and International Relations

What, then, does it matter that the American public seem comfortable with a patriotic press? How does this help us understand current and future American foreign policy behavior and international relations? We turn here to a discussion of the role of domestic policy legitimacy in American international behavior.

George argues that policy legitimacy has two components: the cognitive and normative. The cognitive component establishes the feasibility or achievability of the policy: a leader "must convince people that he knows how to achieve" policy objectives (George, 1989:235). The normative component establishes the desirability of the policy or the normative basis for the policy.

George (1989:584) notes that policy legitimacy is important to the President of the United States so that “the forces of democratic control and domestic pressures do not hobble him and prevent him from conducting a coherent, consistent, and reasonably effective long-range policy.” In the United States, policy legitimacy is tied to the role of political elites and public opinion in policymaking because these political forces have a powerful role in decision making and may act as a counterweight to leaders and their agendas. Therefore, policy legitimacy is important because it creates a “fundamental consensus” which eases constraints on policymaking (George, 1989:585). Moreover, it is important to remember that policy ideas are conveyed through political communication in the mass media. As Trout (1975) asserts: “the process of shaping the image of the environment in support of a given policy at a given time is both politically significant and at the foundation of legitimation” (1975:256).

George suggests that because information about policies will be more detailed and sophisticated at the elite level and less so at the level of the mass media, leaders’ communication via the mass media will be more broadly consistent with dominant national values, myths, and identities. In his work on coalition building, Snyder (1991) notes that because these “myths are necessary to justify the power and policies of the ruling coalition, the leaders must maintain the myths or else jeopardize their rule” (1991:17). Patriotic images support national identity and national myths. Snyder’s work, like George’s, directly addresses why international relations scholars should be concerned with the relationship between patriotic images and domestic political considerations. As Armstrong and Farrell note: “in many cases, states seek to legitimise their conduct, not by reference to some international standard but in terms of their

own national culture, traditions and norms.” (2005, 7)

In the American case, patriotism is tied to conceptions about the role of the United States in the international system (Roselle, 2006). The common American understanding of the US as the “lone surviving superpower” and the ‘benevolent’ hegemon fits neatly with the flag-waving and patriotic press.² As Huntley (2006:6) notes, “the vision reinvokes pre-Cold War notions of the American mission to deliver a safer world through virtuous exercise of American power.” The point in this paper is that this view is not only (re)created/sustained by political elites, but by public acceptance as well. And one central way that this view is sustained for the public is through a patriotic press accepted as such by the average American citizen.

Of course the results of the November 2006 mid-term elections in the US must be addressed, and could certainly be pointed to as evidence that the public is not as ‘uncritical’ as we suggest here. We believe this reading of the election results would be a mistake. This is because we believe the results to indicate a breakdown, not in the normative component of policy legitimacy (on Iraq, for example), but a breakdown in the cognitive component. Many American voters see the present administration as incompetent in a number of areas – from handling Hurricane Katrina, to Iraq, to corrupt officials, to the economy. In fact, nationwide exit polls show that the most important issues for voters were 1. the economy, 2. corruption/ethics, 3. terrorism, and 4. Iraq.³ So care should be taken in evaluating the American election results. They may not represent a grand repudiation of the Iraq War, the ‘war on terror,’ or American international

² Further work needs to be done on the meaning of patriotic images for viewers. Some viewers might argue that the flag represents only ‘support for our troops,’ not some overarching symbol for American identity in the international system.

³ This takes numbers of those who ranked an issue extremely important and very important. (www.cnn.com/ELECTION/)

behavior in general. On the other hand, now that the cognitive component of policy legitimacy has been seriously undermined, patriotic images that underpin normative arguments about US foreign policy may be harder for American citizens to swallow.

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Appendix: Methodology

This study was conducted with 104 participants divided almost equally between college freshmen and community members. Only freshmen could be used for the college sample because our news anchor previously attended the university and might be known by older students thus skewing results in the questions asked about anchor objectivity and trustworthiness. The non-student participants were recruited from local neighborhoods, college dining hall employees, local high school teachers, community organizations and retirement communities.

The participants were placed into two different groups through a random assignment of colored note cards. Each group went to a separate room where a proctor script was read to the group. Each group was proctored by one of the authors. Seventy subjects participated in the experiment in December 2005. The sample was heavily skewed toward younger people, so we added in the rest of the subjects in March 2006, focusing on retirement communities and community organizations, resulting in an average age for the total sample of 40 years old.

Half of the sample watched and answered questions on the patriotic newscast while the other half viewed the neutral broadcast. After each 30 second segment the tape was paused and the participants answered seven questions regarding the bias, balance and fairness of the segment and two questions about the anchor (see appendix for questionnaire). These questions asked respondents to use a 10-point scale to assess characteristics of news story and anchor. At the end of the three segments memory questions were posed about information presented in the broadcast. The viewers were also asked open ended questions about the anchor as well as the graphics used in the

newscast they saw. Finally, demographic and political affiliation questions were asked, including perception of media bias and frequency of news viewership.

Viewers were divided approximately equally between students (n=55) and non-students (n=49). In terms of political affiliation, 28% were Democrats, 38% were Republicans, and 25% were Independents. The sample included 52% self-identified liberals and 48% conservatives. Forty percent were men and 60% were women.

Table 1. Effects for Self-Identified Democrats

	Objective	Bias	Whether there will be more terrorist attacks in future
<i>t</i> value	-2.36	2.80	-2.33
Patriotic	<u>M</u> = 5.05	M=6.63	<u>M</u> = 5.32
Neutral	<u>M</u> = 7.40	M=4.30	<u>M</u> = 7.20

Table 2. Effects for Self-Identified Liberals

	Objective	Whether there will be more terrorist attacks in future
<i>t</i> value	-2.25	-2.74
Patriotic	<u>M</u> = 5.16	<u>M</u> = 5.16
Neutral	<u>M</u> = 6.68	<u>M</u> = 6.86

Table 3. Effects for Self-Identified Conservatives

	Sensational	Whether Washington is doing a good job to prevent terrorism
<i>t</i> value	2.19	2.35
Patriotic	<u>M</u> = 7.21	<u>M</u> = 6.52
Neutral	<u>M</u> = 5.71	<u>M</u> = 4.90