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Politics, Public Opinion, and the Media:
The Issues and Context behind the Demonstrations

Joris Verhulst and Stefaan Walgrave

February 15 was organized by a closely collaborating transnational network of social movements. Demonstrations in all eight countries studied in this volume shared the same action repertoires, frames, and goals (see chapter 1). Yet, each country's protest was organized by specific national movements against the backdrop of specific national opportunities. It goes without saying that mobilizing against war in the United States, for example, was different than mobilizing in Germany. The protests were rooted in, or at least affected by, different national political and societal contexts. The UK government supported the war and sent troops to help the Americans get rid of Saddam Hussein, and the Belgian government strongly opposed the war— the position of the government in each country must have had consequences for its protest movement. Since the political and societal context in each of these nations was substantially different, we expect the demonstrators in each to be different too and to bear the traces of their respective milieus. In chapter 2 we analyzed the general, non-issue-specific structural similarities and differences among the eight countries in terms of access for challengers and strength of the progressive social movement sector. The approaches to social movements among these core elements of the political opportunity structure remained unrelated to the Iraq conflict. Since we are studying a single protest event and not a social movement, and since we are interested here in the individual features of the demonstrators and not, the levels of mobilization in the different countries, we need to complement the classic opportunity structure elements with more specific contextual factors. We accept that protesters' engagement is determined not only by large overall structures but

also by specific political and societal contexts. As relevant context factors, we take into account politics, media, and public opinion. As Rucht and Neid-hardt (1991) state, political elites, mass media, and public opinion are among the most important reference groups for social movements and protest.[1] Mutually influencing each other, political elites form the power center most movements are trying to influence; the media can marginalize movements or they can be an important ally affecting public opinion, and public opin-ion support can boost a movement's mobilization and subsequent political impact.

By focusing in this chapter on politics, media, and public opinion, we underscore our claim that protests such as the worldwide February 15 demonstrations cannot be fully understood within the general context of a certain society with its inclination to nurture or discourage protest in gen-eral. The protested issue itself matters, as do the stance of government and opposition on the issue; the way the media handles it; and the resonance of political positions and media coverage in the public. In other words, apart from the long-term, general political opportunity structure, the specificity of the February 15 events calls for a more specific political context.

Why do politics, media, and public opinion matter? Protest can, on the one hand, be marginal, rowing against mainstream opinion and behavior in society; on the other hand, it can also sail on dominant opinion and prac-tice in a given society. In the first instance, protesters are a minority fighting a conflictual issue with a clear domestic target; in the second, protesters are representatives of a majority struggling for a valence issue mostly without domestic target, since (almost) everybody seems to agree. We expect this diverging context, apart from affecting the size of the mobilization, to dra-matically affect the kind of people showing up to vent their discontent. In a nutshell, our general argument runs as follows: if protesters stand up against dominant opinion and practice in a given society, they will differ from the population at large in terms of sociodemographic profile (higher education), political attitudes (more political interest, stronger ideological stance), and political behavior (more protest participation, more associational member-ship). Protesting groups that go against the mainstream are often strong";. The opposite applies to valence issue mobilization, in which we expect "weak" groups also to be represented and, thus, a more representative sample of the population will take the streets.

Government and Opposition on the War

Obviously, the official positions regarding the war differed dramatically among the eight countries, which include the most war-favoring countries, like the

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United States and the United Kingdom, and some of those most fiercely against the war, Germany and Belgium. Yet, not only government's official stance matters. The opposition counts too: it may support government or fight it. In some of the studied countries, moreover, government was internally divided; in others, the opposition parties were internally split. In short, the alignment of government and opposition regarding the war is an important context variable. For example, if the Left opposes war, against a right-wing government that backs it, we expect mobilization against the war to take the form of antigovernment protest, predominantly populated by left-leaning persons and groups. Let us sketch in some more detail the government-opposition configuration in the eight countries. Figure 3.1 summarizes our argument and places the countries on a single pro-war to contra-war continuum.

The most eminent war-initiating country was, of course, the United States: framed by the "war on terror" in the post-9/11 era, the U.S. government was eager to invade Iraq with the threefold objective of diminishing the Iraqi threat to engage in terrorist acts or acts of war in the region and dispossessing the country of all resources to do so; bringing about a regime change, leading to better life conditions for the Iraqi people; and effectuating the first step in the democratization of the Middle East. The U.S. government—led by Republican president George W. Bush, backed by a neo-conservative administration consisting of Vice President Dick Cheney, Defense Minister Donald Rumsfeld, and his deputy Paul Wolfowitz—was supported by almost all Republican congress members. The Democratic opposition, conversely, was internally divided on the issue. On October 10, 2002, Congress approved a resolution authorizing the American president to "use

	Government	Government parties	Opposition parties
War-initiating countries			
United States	pro	right/conservative (pro)	Center Left
United Kingdom	pro	center left (divided)	Conservative and Liberal
War-supporting countries			
Spain	pro	right/conservative (pro)	Center and Far Left
Italy	pro	right/conservative (pro)	Center and Far Left
Netherlands	pro	right/conservative (pro)	Center and Far Left
War-opposing countries			
Switzerland	contra	center left (contra)	Left (Greens)
Belgium	contra	center left/liberal (contra)	Right/Conservative
Germany	contra	center left (contra)	Right/Conservative

Figure 3.1. Position of government and opposition parties regarding Iraq War

the armed forces of the United States as he determines to be necessary and appropriate . . . against the continuing threat posed by Iraq." The resolution was backed by 296 members of the House and opposed by 133. Of the Democrats, 126 voted against it, while 81 of them supported it, whereas only 6 of 212 Republicans voted against the bill. In the Senate, the pro-contra ratio was even more in favor of war: only one of the forty-nine Republican senators voted against, and twenty-one of the fifty Democratic senators supported the war resolution, among them future Democratic presidential candidate John Kerry. Although war support seemed overwhelming, African American, Latino, and female legislators voted in majority against the war (Cortright 2004, 8–11). In short: the government was firmly pro-war and the opposition did not really challenge government.

The United States' most staunch ally and war defender, especially active in developing public arguments in favor of war, was the United Kingdom represented by its Labour prime minister Tony Blair. The United Kingdom would remain the only Western European country with a left-wing government to endorse the war. In this perspective, Labour's internal struggle is far from surprising: on February 27, 2002, 121 of 408—nearly one in three—Labour members of Parliament voted against war. This was the biggest revolt ever within a UK government party. The Tories supported Blair, but the Liberal Democrats fully opposed war, with 52 of their 54 members rejecting it. UK government, hence, was painfully divided on the issue: war supporters found support among Conservatives, whereas Labour Party dissidents were backed by the Liberal Democrats.

Spain and Italy were among the most overtly war-supporting countries. The Spanish government, in particular, seemed to follow U.S.-UK war policy. Spain, in fact, sent (noncombat) troops, whereas Italy's support would be limited to opening bases and airspaces to the coalition (though not for direct military attacks). An almost equally large left-wing opposition challenged the Iraq policy of Spanish conservative Partido Popular prime minister Aznar. The Italian case was very similar, with Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi of Forza Italia and his right-wing government coalition fully backing war and a strong and united left-wing opposition ferociously against it. In both countries, the political polarization around the Iraq issue was huge.

Prime Minister Balkenende of the Netherlands and his right-wing government with Christian-democrats and liberals also supported the idea of war: the Dutch government agreed to send (noncombat) troops to the region. The social democrats and greens resolutely opposed to this involvement. The situation in the Netherlands was a bit peculiar, though, because Balkenende I had resigned from office. Three weeks before February 15, general

elections had been held but the new government, which would be called Balkenende II, would not be formed until May 26. At the time of the February 15 demonstrations, government negotiations were just starting; thus, the Dutch government could not as clearly be situated in the pro-war camp as its Italian and Spanish counterparts.

In Germany, chancellor and chairman of the German social democrats Gerhard Schröder had been openly opposing a possible war during his fall 2002 election campaign. This stance had helped him and his green coalition partner a new term. Later, however, the Schröder government would become somewhat more temperate in its condemnation of war, granting the U.S. troops clearance to use German airspace for matériel and troop transport and not even ruling out a possible UN Security Council vote in favor of war. This slightly more flexible attitude led Angelika Beer, the newly elected leader of the government-participating Green Party, to condemn this clearance, arguing that it would be a breach of the German constitution. In summary, the German government was not really divided about potential participation in a possible war; there were, however, minor frictions on the degree of non-participation they should adopt. Both parties agreed that Germany would not take part in any military action against Iraq, not even when this would be endorsed by the UN. Meanwhile, opposition leader Angela Merkel (Christian-democrat) had also turned her party's stance from one of compliance with the United States to a cautious and moderate antiwar position. Thus, in Germany both government and opposition ultimately rejected an upcoming war.

In Belgium, all political parties simply (tacitly) agreed on the national government's antiwar stance. In Belgium, although led by center-right (liberal) Prime Minister Guy Verhofstadt seconded by center-right (liberal) Foreign Minister Louis Michel, government fiercely and loudly opposed war. The country even temporarily blocked a NATO decision about potential support for Turkey, in case that country would have become engaged in the war. All opposition parties, from Greens to Christian Democrats, opposed war as well.

In Switzerland too, all parties rebuffed the possibility of war on Iraq. But in line with the country's long-standing neutrality tradition, Switzerland opposed war only silently. The only exception was the Green Party, which wanted the Swiss government to breach its silent opposition and make a clear and manifest statement against war.

Figure 3.1 summarizes our findings; it shows that the number of different government-opposition configurations is limited. In the officially war-opposing countries Switzerland, Belgium, and Germany, governments and the challenging parties all rejected war; antiwar was a valence issue. In Spain,

Italy, and the Netherlands, countries that supported the war but did not participate in it, right-wing government was in favor of war but the left-wing opposition vehemently opposed it. In these countries, the conflict corresponded with the traditional government-opposition clash. In the United States and the United Kingdom, the governments were, of course, pro-war, but the opposition was divided: U.S. Democrats were split, while UK conservatives supported Blair and UK liberals rejected war. The most complex configuration doubtlessly was found in Britain with the leading party, the Labour Party—the only European left-wing party in power to support the war—bitterly divided on the issue. Taking all this into account, we ordered the eight nations, from most war-seeking to most war-opposing. Although the Netherlands and Spain superficially had the same political configuration, it is clear that the Spanish government went much further in defending the war than the Dutch did. We will use this favoring-opposing order of countries throughout the book.

Mass Media and the War

Mass media are significant political actors; they intermediate between politics and the population, and their coverage affects both public opinion and political actors' behavior. Especially when it comes to international affairs, conflicts, and war, mass media are often the sole information channel people can rely on. Therefore, international war and conflict are interesting cases for those studying the relations among the elite, mass media, and public opinion. The 1991 Gulf War, especially, received ample scholarly attention (Bennett and Paletz 1994; Taylor 1992; Wolfsfeld 1997). By and large, the argument goes that the American government effectively succeeded in steering and manipulating the news flow to legitimize its military actions in the Gulf (Hachten and Hachten 2000). The more general idea is that political elites determine media coverage, be it completely and monolithically (Herman and Chomsky 1988) or only to a limited extent and in combination with other actors (Bennett 1990). Either way, the media take cues from political elites, and their independence is limited, especially in war times (Entman and Page 1994). Entman conceptualized this top-down process as "cascading activation" (Entman 2003). The ruling administration feeds other political elites; these affect the media and their news stories, which affect public opinion. Entman acknowledges that a feedback mechanism exists and that lower-level frames affect higher levels but this is not the rule.

The 2003 Iraq conflict increased attention to the interaction between media coverage and war. One key difference between the 2003 conflict and the 1991 Gulf War is that there were very few officially war-opposing voices

to be heard in 1991. In 2003, many national governments opposed it and tried to sell their point of view to national and world public opinion. A real battle over the facts and their interpretation took place on the international media scene, with the UN Security Council as a primary stage. As a consequence, and corresponding with the elite-dominance hypothesis, we expect substantive differences in war coverage across nations in 2003, with the national media following their governments.

A few 2003 Iraq War studies were recently published focusing on the American media (Calabrese 2005; Entman 2004; Lule 2004; Rutherford 2004). One study concluded that the American media, as expected, supported the bellicose president and hardly fostered any war-opposing sources (Rendall and Broughel 2003). Comparative studies about the media coverage of the 2003 Iraq War are rare (Berenger 2004). Hooghe and Stolle (2005), analyzing a week of TV news coverage in nine different nations in the run-up to the war, counterintuitively found that differences between countries were limited. Only the American and, to a certain extent, French TV stations had diverging, more war-supporting or war-opposing coverage; in other war-supporting nations (the United Kingdom, for example) the TV news coverage was not different from that in war-opposing countries (Germany, Belgium). The authors, hence, reject the idea that TV news tends to follow the national government's position. Their analysis, though, is confined to only one week's media and a limited amount of news items per country. Moreover, coverage in TV news may be much more mainstream and homogeneous than in newspapers.

Regarding the war in Iraq in 2003, the question is threefold. First, did the media emphasize the salience of the Iraq issue? Second, did mass media support or oppose war on Iraq? And third, how did the mass media regard the protests against war? The third question will be covered in chapter 12, and the first two are largely addressed in this section. Governments in the eight nations diverged fundamentally in their stances on Iraq, and the opposition parties in the different countries had differing opinions. Consequently, we expect the national mass media to bear the traces of these political differences. Are political intercountry differences reflected in media differences?

It is clear that the Iraq issue was extremely prominent in all mass media in all countries in the period preceding the February 15 protests. People's attention was aroused, and media coverage of the imminent war was extensive. Previous peace demonstration waves, like the protest against the deployment of cruise missiles in Europe in the early 1980s, had drawn on much less media attention. Although foreign politics is not the primary issue in most countries' media, the Iraq crisis was omnipresent. In a comparative analysis

of two major newspapers in each of four countries—France, Germany, Italy, and the United Kingdom—Kritzinger (2003) contrasted the amount of attention devoted to the Iraq conflict with the amount of coverage of the 1999 Kosovo crisis, both for the January–March period. Despite the fact that the Kosovo crisis was happening geographically much closer to the countries under study, differences in coverage are striking. In one newspaper, the Iraq crisis got at least forty times the attention as the Kosovo crisis had four years earlier, and in most newspapers Iraq was five times more written about than Kosovo.

In terms of the framing of the imminent war, we engaged in an original media analysis in the eight nations under study. In each country, we content-analyzed three newspapers: the major left-leaning broadsheet, the major right-leaning broadsheet, and the most popular national (or local) newspaper. Each paper was scrutinized for Iraq conflict articles for two months—between January 21, 2003, that is, three weeks preceding the February 15 protests, and March 21, 2003, the day after the invasion of Iraq started (see appendix B for more information).

A first step to assess the media's position on the war is to chart the discussion about the justness of the war. Were only arguments in favor of the war mentioned, only arguments that dismissed a potential war on Iraq, or was coverage fairly neutral? Table 3.1 contains the results of this exercise per country. First, it shows that the discussion about war and its justification was at the heart of the media coverage in the run-up to the war. In well over half of all (potential) Iraq War articles, at least one motive for or against war was mentioned. Media did not just report about war preparation, its cost, the new weaponry, the respective strategies, the likely course and consequences. Overall, the press devoted a large amount of its coverage to the question of why this war was necessary or unnecessary. We would need systematic comparative data about previous conflicts to substantiate this—for example, late-stage coverage of the Vietnam War, which was also largely devoted to war's justification—but it appears that this obsession with war's justification or disqualification was exceptional. People who followed the media in the run-up to the war on Iraq were, thus, constantly confronted with arguments about the war and incited to take sides in the debate between supporters and opponents.

Yet, clearly, there are some striking differences among the countries. The debate about the reasons for war was not equally strong in all countries. In Spain, the United States, and the United Kingdom as well as in Belgium and Germany, the articles mentioning one or more reasons for or against war outnumbered the ones that did not bring up any of these. One possible explanation could be the link with the national governments' stances on war:

Table 3.1. Media mentionings of reasons for going and not going to war (percent)

	US	UK	SP	IT	NL	SW	BE	GE	Total
No reasons mentioned	34.4	30.3	34.9	53.5	61.7	85.4	43.4	20.0	44.8
Only reasons pro-war	16.5	24.2	20.4	18.0	11.7	3.1	14.6	15.3	15.8
Only reasons antiwar	12.5	15.6	25.1	21.1	16.7	9.6	21.6	20.2	18.1
Reasons pro- and antiwar	36.7	29.9	19.6	7.4	9.9	1.9	20.4	44.4	21.2
Inclination of coverage (arguments in articles)	+4.0	+8.6	4.7	–3.1	–5.0	–6.5	–7.0	–4.9	–2.3
Article pro-war inclination	5.3	10.9	7.0	4.1	2.2	0.0	0.8	2.8	4.1
Article antiwar inclination	1.9	5.7	14.5	9.1	8.9	1.6	7.4	6.9	7.3
Inclination of coverage (coder judgment)	+3.4	+5.2	–7.5	–5.0	–6.7	–1.6	–6.6	–4.1	–3.2
N	425	488	387	635	639	322	514	509	3,927

Note: For more information on data collection, see appendix B, this volume.

the first three countries were most involved" in the build-up toward war, and the two latter were the most fierce war opposers in our sample. In Italy, the Netherlands, and Switzerland, this was exactly the other way round: here, official war support or opposition was less explicit, possibly leading the media to engage in more descriptive coverage of the eventuality of war.

A third general observation is that newspapers in all countries highlighted both sides' arguments in the debate. In none of the countries did one of the sides get all the credits. Even in the United States and United Kingdom, the balance was fairly equal, with a comparable number of articles mentioning no reasons at all, and articles mentioning arguments from both sides of the pro-contra war debate. At first sight, hence, the media coverage in the newspapers was fairly balanced, although we did not analyze how the arguments were presented. Still we find interesting country differences. It is, of course, difficult to weigh the arguments quantitatively against each other, but the table shows that there were considerable differences among the countries. Subtracting the percentage of positive arguments from the negative ones, we can rank-order the countries' media from supporting to opposing war. It comes as no surprise that the U.S. and UK press were most prone to war, with the former having a +4.0 and the latter a+8.6 percent difference between pro- and contra-war arguments. Newspapers in the United States and the United Kingdom seem to have been inclined to follow their political leaders in endorsing the war. In all other countries this difference is negative: the majority of the press in continental Europe seemed to have been on the same antiwar wavelength. Governments' antiwar stances were supported in the three war-opposing nations (Belgium, Germany, and Switzerland). Yet, strangely, in the three war-supporting countries (Italy, Spain, and the Netherlands), the press was been even more inclined to counter the official governments' pro-war arguments and to emphasize cases against war.

Finally, we asked our encoders to subjectively evaluate whether, according to their personal judgments, the article explicitly displayed a pro- or contra-war position. Each judgment, however, was only taken into account when they could substantiate it by indicating a (part of a) sentence that made clear their choice. Whereas the figures in the upper part of the table are more an indication of how the debate about (not) going to war was held, here we try to measure actual, explicit, and thus intended, media bias opposing or in favor of war. The results of this evaluation exercise are shown at the bottom of Table 3.1.

First, more than 10 percent of the articles analyzed displayed a bias for or against war. When we look at the spread of biased articles over the countries, we see a very similar pattern as in the previous analysis. Though in most

countries, many articles favoring or articles disapproving war were found, the differences are clear. The British press featured the most overtly war-endorsing articles, followed by the Spanish and U.S. Explicit antiwar articles, however, were most found in Italy, the Netherlands, Belgium, and Germany. Clearly, the Swiss press seems to have largely been joining that country's ever-neutral status. In none of the countries were both types of articles balanced. Overall, the press sided either with war endorsers or with war opposers. When we subtract the number of pro-war articles and the number openly opposing war, very similar results to those of the previous analyses appear: the UK press was most biased toward endorsing the war (+5.2 percent). The U.S. (+3.4 percent) and the UK media are the only ones to have positive balances between pro- and antiwar articles; in all remaining European countries, it is clearly negative.

Overall, the national newspapers produced a fairly balanced picture of the run-up toward war. Since the international debate about going or not going to war was very vivid, national media devoted a large amount their coverage to it. Yet, in both war-initiating countries, the United States and the United Kingdom, pro-war arguments clearly were more salient; and when the media in these countries explicitly took sides, they most often did so in favor of war, which was exactly the opposite for all other European countries in our sample. We conclude that there seems a causal link between official government positions and the press coverage of (upcoming) war. But this link is weak, and it is conditional. In war-leading nations the media seemed to follow the government, but in the countries where government only verbally endorsed the war, the press opposed the government viewpoint. In other words: only when national governments took strong and rigid positions were they followed by the press. Maybe the way national public opinion saw the eventuality of war was been a determining factor for the direction of press coverage.

Public Opinion and the War

Most new social movements neither have strong organizational resources nor are the beneficiaries of long-established loyalties that help them overcome periods of invisibility. The public's opinion on an issue determines the movement's mobilization potential. Although the relationship between what Klandermans (1984) called consensus mobilization and actual turnout is not linear, because of diverging action mobilization capacities, a favorable public opinion can boost protest turnout. Also, public opinion support is relevant in terms of the protest's impact. Supportive public opinion is paramount especially for countries waging war: Did the public in the eight nations favor war or not?

Between January 21 and 27, 2003, just before the February 15 protests, European Omnibus Survey (EOS) Gallup Europe (2003) conducted a comparative opinion poll in thirty European countries, covering 15,080 people aged fifteen years and older.[2] The poll contains extensive evidence regarding European public opinion about the potential war. We look first at the war's salience among European populations and then at war support.

Salience was measured somewhat awkwardly. The respondents were confronted with six pending international problems and were tasked which of these most urgently needed to be solved. Apart from the imminent war on Iraq, the respondents could choose among the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Indian-Pakistani tensions, international terrorism, the Chechnyan war, and the North Korean nuclear crisis. Hence, issue saliency was not measured via the traditional open "Most Important Problem" question. But since we are interested in differences between countries and not in absolute levels, this is not too problematic.[3] In Figure 3.2 the white bars illustrate the responses of the EU states, with Switzerland added.

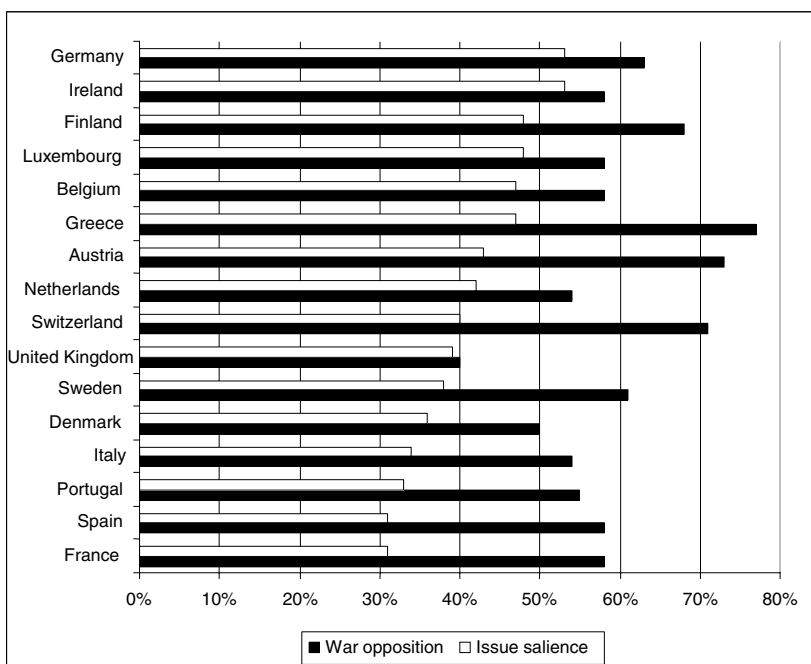In all sixteen nations, except for Spain, public opinion considered a war

Figure 3.2. Percentages of European nations' populations that found Iraq War most important issue and that opposed it

in Iraq as the single most important international problem. Yet, there are large intercountry differences. Our eight countries nicely cover the whole range of opinions. The German population was most (53 percent) concerned with the Iraq War, followed by the Belgian (47 percent). The Dutch, Swiss and British populations each scored around 40 percent, while both the people of Spain and Italy seemed to have cared considerably less about Iraq (both around 30 percent); the Spanish people, especially, did not perceive the possibility of war as the most important international problem. Probably because of their domestic terrorism problems, Spaniards, mention international terrorism as top priority (35 percent). Italians also had severe domestic terrorism in the past and, likely consequently, attributed great priority to terrorism (27 percent) but also to solving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (19 percent). Both the Italians and Spaniards considered the risk of terrorism in their own country significantly higher than did the residents of the other European countries, and both considered the United States as best capable of effectively fighting international terrorism.

Issue salience is only half the story. The Gallup Poll also elicited people's opinion on several statements regarding the Iraq conflict. We combined seven statements about Iraq into one simple war opposition scale.[4] The results are shown in the dark bars in Figure 3.2. Again our eight countries span the whole spectrum of public opinion vis-à-vis the war. UK citizens, clearly, are far least opposed to war; on average, only 40 percent of them agreed with antiwar propositions. Of that in all European countries, public opinion in the United Kingdom is most divided. In the Netherlands, Italy, Spain, and Belgium (large) majorities oppose war. The most war-rejecting populations are found in Germany and Switzerland. Only Greece and Austria, countries not covered in this book, beat the Swiss in antiwar feelings. Saliency and opinion direction seem only weakly related. A country like Spain, for example, scored particularly low on saliency but contains a fair amount of war opposers. The correlation between saliency and war opposition is positive, but modest (r = 0.36).

Let us further specify the precise content of public opinion in the eight nations, since the above scale draws only a raw picture. We focus on four specific propositions: that Iraq poses a threat to world peace; that the respondents' country can take part in a war when justified by a UN resolution; that oil is the main motivation for the United States to invade Iraq; and that the United States should intervene militarily in Iraq, even unilaterally. We choose these because we presented the participants in the February 15 protests with exactly the same statements and, later, we will compare public opinion with

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that of the demonstrators. Figure 3.3 contains the results for the seven European nations in our sample.

Most European populations agreed that Iraq was a threat for world peace; this first diagnostic statement is not really causing much discord among Europeans. The same applies to their account of the third element, the United States' motivation to invade Iraq: a large majority concurs that a self-interest driven search for oil is the main incentive. A large majority, as well had the same response to the second proposition, rejecting the possibility of the United States' unilateral invasion of Iraq without UN backing, which is what eventually did happened. The real divisive issue is the fourth one, the justification of (the own country's partaking in) a potential invasion via the UN Security Council. Here, opinions differ strongly. In the United Kingdom, an overwhelming majority would approve war backed by such a resolution, while in Switzerland even a Security Council endorsement would not convince a majority of Swiss of the justness of war. No wonder Blair's UK government did everything within its power to get UN backing. This divisive statement goes to the heart of the debate about the war in Europe, especially the unilateral and even illegal character of a possible Iraq war.

For the main purpose of this book—explaining why demonstrators in eight nations differ—divergences among countries are most interesting. Again, the UK population endorses war the most by far, followed by the Dutch and Italian populaces, who moderately favor the war. German and Belgian people are more skeptical about invading Iraq, while Swiss and Spanish citizens seem absolutely opposed it. Put otherwise: while the United Kingdom's Tony Blair was more or less successful in at least sparking doubts about Iraq in the minds of the British people and while Italian prime minister Silvio Berlusconi was less convincing, Spanish prime minister José Maria Aznar completely failed to convince his population of the need to invade Iraq. Of course, the fact that a majority of Britons would have supported war with UN backing does not imply that they supported the actual war, which is being waged without UN support; UN approval was crucial for British public opinion. The fourth statement clearly shows that a majority of British citizens did not support the actual war. And Swiss, Belgian and German public opinion contested war, in line with their governments' positions.

Unfortunately, the EOS Gallup Poll is confined to Europe and contains no evidence on U.S. public opinion. Where would the U.S. public stand? U.S. polling evidence is widely available but not always comparable with European surveys. We choose to focus on a poll conducted by the same polling company around the same time as the European EOS Gallup Poll.[5] At this time, 56 percent of Americans would give the weapon inspectors more

	UK	SP	IT	NL	SW	BE	GE
"Iraq represents a threat to world peace." (disagree)	23	35	28	33	43	37	34
"Oil is the main motivation for which the United States wants to intervene militarily in Iraq." (agree)	60	79	73	74	75	72	72
"Do you consider that it would be justified or not that our country participates in a military intervention in Iraq if the UN Security Council decides on a military intervention in Iraq?" (unjustified)	15	43	33	29	66	40	52
"The United States should intervene militarily even if the United Nations does not give its formal agreement." (disagree)	68	77	79	80	86	78	87
N	507	502	500	515	500	501	500

Figure 3.3. Percent agreement or disagreement among opinion with statements on the war on Iraq.

time to conduct their inspections, versus 41 percent who believed that Iraq had already had enough time to prove that there were no such weapons. Relatedly, 39 percent of the surveyed answered that the U.S. should invade Iraq as soon as the Bush administration decided on it; 56 percent of the people could not favor an invasion without a new UN vote authorizing military action. This last figure is particularly relevant, since it can directly be compared with the European data. In Europe, between 68 and 87 percent rejected war without UN backing, while "only" 56 percent did in the United States. On the question "Which comes closer to your view? UN weapons inspectors alone can eliminate the threat Iraq poses to other nations. Or, military action is needed along with weapons inspections to eliminate the threat Iraq poses to other nations," 71 percent of the people agree with the latter proposition. Evidence from other polls at that time largely underpins the far more war-supportive attitude of the U.S. people before to the war: approval rate for the way the Bush administration handled the Iraq conflict was high, military action "to remove Saddam Hussein from power" was favored by a large majority, and more than half of the Americans said they would support war even if it was not approved by the Security Council, and more than 90 percent considered Iraq a threat to the United States. By and large, it is safe to consider the U.S. public opinion the most supportive of war of all the countries under study. A majority of the U.S. people believed in the necessity for military intervention. Of the governments in all war-supporting countries, the Bush administration was doubtlessly most successful in convincing its people of the need for war. However, this does not mean that the U.S. public was not divided about the issue: a considerable minority of U.S. citizens did oppose the war.

Conclusion

Political context, media coverage, and public opinion—the three relevant dimensions of societal context possibly determining the features of protesters in our eight countries—are not independent from one another. The direction of the possible causal chain connecting these three is not straightforward, yet we tend to believe that the government's initial stance on Iraq and the political opposition's reaction to this position are essential factors influencing the kind of media coverage and (subsequent) public opinion. Governments set the agenda of the media. And, as—at least in the West—war on Iraq is an unobtrusive issue not experienced directly by the people, but only intermediated by the media, we believe the media to impact public opinion. At the same time, the commercial forces most mass media are subject to also make them to cater to their public. Whatever the causal path, politics, media, and

	Politics	Media	Public opinion
United States	pro	pro	pro
United Kingdom	pro	pro	pro
Spain	pro	contra	contra
Italy	pro	contra	contra
Netherlands	pro	contra	contra
Switzerland	contra	contra	contra
Belgium	contra	contra	contra
Germany	contra	contra	contra

Figure 3.4. Summary of position of political actors, media, and public opinion regarding the Iraq War

public opinion are associated. Figure 3.4 summarizes our findings. It presents a very rough simplification of reality: government stance and public opinion are complex phenomena, and summarizing them in a single pro- or anti-war continuum cannot but oversimplify reality to some extent. The same goes to a possibly even larger extent for national media, certainly when one takes into account that they contain viewpoints from both broadsheets and tabloids and both left- and right-leaning news outlets. Nonetheless, the scale in the figure is very useful, as will be demonstrated later in this volume.

Figure 3.4 shows that the United States and United Kingdom, on the one hand, and the officially war-opposing countries, on the other, had a very clear and homogeneous position vis-à-vis the war: politics, media, and public opinion fostered and supported war in both countries. The opposite applied to Germany, Belgium, and Switzerland: all three agreed on their disapproval of war. In Spain, Italy, and the Netherlands, a far more mixed pattern appears, with the national government's war supporting position being challenged by both media and public opinion in all three countries. National leaders clearly lacked media support to convince their citizens of their Iraq policy.

Notes

1. For reasons of convention we will use the term "public opinion" for the aggregate of individual opinions usually measured in surveys. We are aware that these opinions are mostly not publicly expressed and do not target the public as media and protesters do and that, in the strict sense, these aggregated opinions are not "public opinion."

2. All public opinion data in this chapter are derived from this study, unless mentioned otherwise.

3. The exact wording of the statement was "The potential war in Iraq should be solved as first top priority." Agree (percent).

4. The scale was simply the mean (in percentage) of the aggregation of the war-opposing answers on the following statements: (1) Iraq represents a threat to world peace (disagree); (2) Oil is the main motivation for which the United States wants to intervene militarily in Iraq (agree); (3) The United States should intervene militarily in Iraq even if the United Nations does not give its formal agreement (disagree); Do you consider that it would be absolutely justified, rather justified, rather unjustified, or absolutely unjustified that our country participates in a military intervention in Iraq? (4) If the Iraqi regime does not cooperate with UN inspectors (unjustified)? (5) If the UN inspectors discover weapons of mass destruction in Iraq (unjustified)? (6) If the United States intervenes militarily in Iraq without a preliminary decision of the United Nations (unjustified)?

5. It concerns a CNN / USA Today / Gallup poll, which asked a sample of a thousand adults nationwide about their opinions on several Iraq-related propositions. The poll was conducted on January 23–25, 2003. Evidence can be read at www.pollingreport.com/iraq17.htm (we accessed the Web site December 7, 2009).

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