

**The Flipside of Flip-Flopping:
Citizen Preferences, Leader Inconsistency and the War in Iraq**

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1.0 Introduction

Although politicians have accused one another of flip-flopping for decades¹, the term achieved a new prominence in the American political lexicon during George W. Bush's campaign for re-election in 2004. Throughout the campaign, Bush and other Republicans made a point of underscoring John Kerry's varied positions on the Iraq war. The Bush campaign employed this strategy with two goals in mind. The first was to call into question Kerry's sense of conviction, which, they argued was a key attribute for a commander in chief to have. For example in the second debate, Bush stated that he did not see how Kerry "could lead this country in a time of war, in a time of uncertainty, if [Kerry] changed his mind because of politics." A country at war, he argued, "required a president who is steadfast and strong and determined."²

The second goal was to raise doubt in Kerry's ability to appear credibly committed to the larger war on terror in the eyes of foreign observers. Kerry's waffling, they argued, made him appear weak and, therefore, unfit for the job of leading an international coalition. In the first debate, for instance, Bush asserted that world leaders were "not going to follow somebody whose core convictions keep changing because of politics in America."³

¹For example, Naughton (1976), Wicker (1990) and Broder (1999). For a general review of the term's usage, see Rutenberg (2007).

² Second Presidential Debate, 2004. Then-Vice President Cheney echoed this sentiment in his debate with Kerry's running mate, Senator John Edwards, by saying, "The problem we have is that, if you look at his [John Kerry's] record, he doesn't display the qualities of someone who has conviction... We have not seen the consistency tat a commander in chief has to have in order to be a leader in wartime." (Vice Presidential Debate, 2004).

³ First Presidential Debate, 2004.

Given the multifaceted nature of national elections, it difficult to tell whether the steady chorus of “flip-flopper” cost Kerry the presidency. If recent trends are any indication, politicians certainly see some value in the tactic. For example, in the years following the 2004 campaign, politicians and pundits alike have invoked the flip-flopper label in a variety of contexts beyond foreign policy, including stem cells⁴, energy policy⁵ and campaign finance reform⁶. The frequency with which this tactic is employed, however, does not necessarily imply that *citizens* subscribe to logic behind it. Flip-flopping politicians may serve as ripe targets for their opponents, but, to date, there has been no empirical investigation of how citizens incorporate policy consistency into their evaluations of their leaders.

In this paper I address this lacuna through the use of a national survey experiment designed to explore how citizens respond to a senator who has reversed his stance on a major foreign policy issue, the war in Iraq. Returning to the topic that led to the resurgence of the flip-flopper label allows me to explore the efficacy of the two criticisms the Bush campaign leveled at Kerry. Namely, that a leader who changes his mind is a fundamentally flawed candidate in the eyes of citizens, and that wavering on the Iraq war would cause international allies to doubt a leader’s resolve in the overall war on terror. In doing so, it also speaks to the growing literatures in American politics and international relations where scholars have made similar claims about the negative consequences of a leader renegeing on public statements.

⁴ Luo (2007).

⁵ The New York Times Editorial Board (2007).

⁶ Collins (2008).

In this paper I posit that a citizen's reaction to a flip-flopping senator is more complex than either the conventional or scholarly wisdom would suggest. More specifically, I argue that the degree to which a senator's inconsistency will matter to a citizen should be conditional on both the citizen's own opinion of the conflict *and* the popularity of the conflict among the general population. Citizens who support the war should favor senators who have consistently voted for it, but they should also reward a senator who began supporting the war only recently. The willingness of the latter senator to defy the current anti-war majority should appeal to war supporters who will likely view the switch as a principled change instead an opportunistic move. The converse should be true for citizens who oppose the war. For this group, any senator who is against the war in the current period is better than one who supports it, but a recent move to oppose the war may come across as disingenuous since it reflects the majority's opinion.

The degree to which citizens express concern about a senator's policy reversal tarnishing his international reputation should also hinge upon the citizen's opinion of the conflict. Citizens who view the war as an important component of American foreign policy will associate senators who are willing to support it despite its unpopularity with higher levels of international resolve. War opponents, by contrast, should not make any connections between a senator's position on the current conflict and his broader image with foreign audiences. Because the war is of little value to them, a senator's position and consistency regarding it should be of little consequence to the senator's international reputation more broadly. My findings clearly support these theoretical expectations. A citizen's reaction to the different types of senators is contingent on the citizen's own opinion of the war in Iraq. Importantly, this pattern holds for both the willingness of the citizen to vote for the senator and her opinion of the senator's international reputation.

This paper offers at least four important contributions. First, the findings of the survey experiment challenge the notion that that people will respond to flip-floppers in a uniform way. As I discuss in more detail below, existing work on consistency assumes *all* citizens will disapprove of politicians who change their positions. This assumption is overly simplistic. If the politician's reversal brings him closer to the citizen's ideal point, the citizen should reward the leader, not punish him. This incentive to forgive the leader should be especially pronounced if the leader's new position is unpopular with the larger population. Although leaders who have consistently held the citizen's favored position may have a slight advantage over more recent supporters, we should not expect citizens to dismiss the latter group completely. The direction of the switch and amount of political capital it required the leader to spend should matter to citizens.

Second, because the survey design allows me to determine how citizens react to senators who remain consistent as well as those that change their position, I avoid the selection bias inherent in other studies of policy reversals. As Schultz notes, because politicians behave strategically, we should rarely observe them selecting themselves into situations where their likelihood of having to back down later and is high. Leaders reversing course in the face of public outcry, in other words, should be "off the equilibrium path" because leaders will generally only make statements they think they can continue to stand behind for a long time.⁷ Empirically, this means that the only leaders we are likely to observe backing down are those who think the consequences of doing so will be mild. The survey experiment allows me to circumvent this problem since the treatments include all leader types, including those that would be unlikely to back down in reality (e.g., a Republican who initially supported the war).

⁷ Schultz (2001: 33).

A third and related contribution is my ability to consider all possible policy reversals leaders could undertake. This constitutes an important step forward for the empirical study of audience costs since existing work only considers situations where a leader assumes an assertive posture (e.g., a threat of force) and then backs down. Although this is certainly one way in which a leader could change his position, it is not the only way. Theoretically, if it is the *inconsistency* of the leader that matters, we should also explore what citizens think of a leader who changes from a passive stance to a more aggressive one. While it is fair to say that the act of backing down from a threat carries a higher likelihood of humiliation for the leader, leaders who jump on the pro-war bandwagon late in the game risk of being labeled opportunists or wishy-washy. The notion that one type of change is more costly than the other remains an open empirical question.

Finally, the results presented here represent the first investigation of the proposed link between a leader's actions and a citizen's assessment of how members of the international audience will perceive the leader. International relations scholars often assert that citizens value politicians who have a reputation for strong resolve in the eyes of other leaders. This claim, while logical, lacks empirical verification. The survey experiment used here asks citizens about the possible, broader consequences for the leader's international reputation directly, and, in doing so, represents the first attempt to corroborate empirically the causal link others have posited.

The rest of this paper proceeds in four sections. Section 2 provides a brief overview of the existing work on the value of policy consistency from the American and international relations literatures. Section 3 discusses the theory I advance here in more detail, while Section 4 presents the accompanying hypotheses. The hypotheses center on two dependent variables: the citizen's willingness to vote for the senator and her perception of the senator's

international reputation for resolve in fighting the war on terror. Section 5, describes the survey experiment in more detail, while Section 6 presents the results. Section 7 concludes.

2.0 The Value of Consistency

Within both the American politics and international relations literatures, scholars make the claim that citizens should value consistency on the part of their leaders. In their study of what attributes define a “prototypical president” for American citizens, for instance, Kinder and his colleagues found that nearly 40% of respondents selected “sticks to his word” as one of the most important traits for a president to have.⁸ McGraw and her co-authors reached a similar conclusion in their study of attributes citizens associate with politicians they either like or dislike. When selecting traits they would use to describe a politician they approved of, more than half of the respondents (54%) chose “committed” as a leader quality that was very important to them. Likewise, when asked about a politician they had an unfavorable opinion of, several picked “indecisive”, “dishonest”, “weak” and “unsure” as key negative characteristics.⁹

Given these findings, it is hardly surprising that scholars have posited a link between inconsistency and poor electoral performance. As Bernhardt and Ingberman observed, “candidates who make rapid changes in their announced platforms tend to lose badly.”¹⁰ Although the authors acknowledge that politicians may be pressed to shift positions to capture more votes, such moves, they feel, are best made with caution. As they argue, the

⁸ Kinder et al., (1980: 319).

⁹ McGraw et al., (1996: 269).

¹⁰ Bernhardt and Ingberman (1985: 47). See also Poole (2007).

politician's "best strategy is to approach the median voter's position gradually over several elections to avoid appearing too inconsistent in his views."¹¹

Pressures to remain firm on one's earlier promises continue to haunt politicians off the campaign trail as well. Once a politician has publicly commented on an issue, retreating from that position is difficult. As Stimpson notes in his discussion of "issue evolution", politicians who publicly stake themselves on the opposite side of an issue from their party face a hard choice. For leaders in this position, "the cost of opposition is estrangement from their party...[but] it is not costless to join their party's position. They might appear inconsistent and unprincipled and might alienate voters they count on for support."¹² For Stimpson and other scholars who subscribe to this notion of political "lock in", the primary means by which parties can see real changes in the make up of the opinions of its political elites is through old members leaving office and new members (with new opinions) taking their places.¹³

The idea that reneging on public statements entails risks for politicians has not been lost on international relations scholars. Building on the earlier works of Martin¹⁴ and

¹¹ Ibid (58). See also Poole and Rosenthal (1997).

¹² Stimpson (2004: 65). As Poole (2007: 448) notes, a politician who finds himself at odds with a new set of constituents after a redistricting may be better off *retiring* than changing their positions to reflect their new political reality.

¹³ Ibid (66). Importantly, these authors are defining consistency based on a politician's voting patterns over many years (e.g., examining whether a senator generally votes pro-life or pro-choice on a large number of abortion-related bills over a 30 year career). The present study examines the leader's consistency on a particular issue over a much shorter time period.

¹⁴ Martin (1993).

Fearon¹⁵, students of crisis bargaining have written extensively about the concept of “audience costs” and how they affect leader behavior.¹⁶ Simply put, leaders generate audience costs when they “engage the national honor” by issuing a public threat or ultimatum against an international adversary.¹⁷ If the leader fails to follow through on the threat, the public will force the leader to “pay” the audience costs by removing him from office. The possibility of punishment from the domestic audience encourages the leader to stand firm and carry out his threat.

Scholars have offered several reasons for why citizens should want to punish leaders who waffle on their foreign policy stances. Some have argued that citizens will interpret the act of renegeing as a sign of a lack of foresight or basic foreign policy competence on the part of the leader.¹⁸ Because citizens will have a preference for leaders who are capable of making sound choices, they will want to remove a politician who has to change his mind to correct his course of action. For this interpretation of the audience costs argument, the audience is entirely domestic; citizens monitor, evaluate and remove the leader if they are displeased with him.

As the audience costs literature developed, however, the relevant, theoretical audience began to grow beyond the domestic sphere. A leader’s own citizens still delivered the punishment, but their basis for removing the leader depended on their perceptions of how the leader appeared on the world stage to other leaders. If a leader retreated from a public statement on a foreign policy issue, scholars argued, citizens would assume foreign

¹⁵ Fearon (1994).

¹⁶ For a concise review, see Ramsay (2004: 461-2).

¹⁷ Fearon (1994: 579).

¹⁸ Smith (1998)

observers would see the leader as lacking resolve.¹⁹ Because this perception on the part of the international audience may invite future challenges against the state, citizens will want to remove a leader who reneges and replace him with one who has not sullied her reputation for standing firm on foreign policy matters.

Regardless of the particular rationale for why citizens should want to remove the leader, however, international relations scholars are in broad agreement with their American politics colleagues on the point that politicians who change their positions will fare poorly come election time.

3.0 Citizen-Contingent Audience Costs

Although the theories of why consistency should matter to citizens have made important contributions to our understanding of the relationship between leader action and citizen reaction, room for theoretical development still exists. As I mentioned above, the role of a *citizen's* position on a given issue is absent from discussions of how she should respond when her leader changes his. Instead, scholars assume all citizens will be displeased with the leader when he reverses his policy stance. This trend is unfortunate because it precludes the possibility that the flip-flop might bring the politician's position more in line with the citizen's. If this is the case, the citizen may fault the leader for the tardiness of his revelation, but should generally be pleased that the leader has come around to the "correct" position.

A citizen's opinion on the war should also matter in terms of how citizens think about the consequences of the switch for the leader's international reputation. If the war is important to the citizen, she will assume it is a major part of current US foreign policy and, therefore, of interest to foreign leaders. It is also likely that this type of citizen will see a

¹⁹ McGillivray and Smith (2008) .

direct connection between the war in Iraq and the war on terror, since this link has been invoked several times by pro-war political elites.²⁰ Taken together, we should expect citizens who favor the war to be much more concerned about how a leader's actions on policy towards Iraq affect his international reputation more generally. The opposite should be true for respondents who are not in favor of the war. For this group, the war does not serve a larger foreign policy purpose, and is not connected to the war on terror. Consequently, they should see little reason for any leader's voting history on the Iraq war to affect his broader reputation for resolve.

Also missing from existing theories is an appreciation for the larger political context in which the leader switches positions. The only costs of changing one's position that scholars discuss are the audience costs associated with renegeing in general. This omission is consequential since it prohibits the possibility that some flip-flops may require more political capital to make than others. Flipping to the position held by the majority of the electorate, for instance, is relatively costless in terms of political capital, while moving to the minority position is much more costly.

Understanding this is important because the cost of the switch for the politician will resonate differently among certain groups of citizens. Citizens who hold the majority opinion, for instance, should regard a switch to their camp as suspect since the move is a politically advantageous one. The politician's change of heart could be entirely sincere, but

²⁰ A bivariate logistic regression, with "pro-war respondent" as the independent variable and "success in the war in Iraq is either very important or important to the war on terror" as the dependent variable confirms this. Pro-war respondents are 33% more likely to make a connection between the two issues than anti-war respondents.

opponents who have held the position for longer will be quick to label the change as either disingenuous or opportunistic, especially if an election is approaching.

A similar story exists for citizens in the minority opinion. For this group, a new convert to the cause will be a welcome development. Because the switch moves the politician out of sync with the majority of the population and the general trend of opinion, the leader must sacrifice political capital to make the change. The willingness to do this should win the leader favor with citizens who hold the minority view. The probable electoral cost of switching should also increase the perceived sincerity of the change. Instead of accusing the leader of opportunism, citizens in this group should admire the leader for his willingness to “stand up and be counted” or “doing what’s right, instead of what’s popular.”

4.0 Hypotheses

Given these theoretical expectations, I now specify several hypotheses for how a respondent’s own opinion will influence her evaluation of different types of senators described in the treatment groups (I discuss the experimental design in more detail in the next section). As the preceding discussion indicated, I am interested in two aspects of the citizen’s assessment. The first is her overall approval of the senator, which I measure using the respondent’s willingness to vote for the senator. The second is the citizen’s perception of how the international audience will view the leader in terms of his resolve in the war on terror.

I will begin with my predictions for how respondents with opposing positions on the war will respond to the different types of senators. As I said in the preceding section, respondents must weigh two attributes of the senator in their assessment: 1. The proximity of the senator’s *current* position to their own and, 2. If the senator’s position has changed, the costs of making the change given the current, domestic political environment. Taken

together, these two considerations suggest four different senator types--consistent supporter (CS), recent supporter (RS), consistent opposer (CO) and recent opposer (RO). If the logic I outlined above is correct, respondents who are for the war and respondents who are against it should have very different preference orderings for these four types.

First, for war supporters, senators who currently support the war should be favored over senators who currently oppose it. Moreover, because a move to supporting the war represents a move against the trend in public opinion at the time of the survey (May of 2008), war supporters should be indifferent between a senator who has been long-time supporter of the war and senator who has only recently supported it. The following inequality captures the preference ordering of the four senator types for respondents who are in favor of the war:

$$CS = RS > CO = RO$$

The inequality suggests two hypotheses about the war supporters' willingness to vote for the different senator types:

Hypothesis 1: Respondents who support the war will more likely to vote for senators who currently support the war than senators who currently oppose the war.

Hypothesis 2: Respondents who support the war will be equally likely to vote for senators who are currently for the war, regardless of the senators' voting histories.

Respondents who are against the war, naturally will have a different preference ordering over the various senator types. Members of this group should generally prefer to vote for senators who oppose the war instead of senators who support it, with one important caveat. Because the treatments have the senators flipping to oppose the war at the time when the war was growing increasingly unpopular in an election year, respondents who support the war may see their policy reversal as an attempt to win more votes. This suggests

the following preference inequality for the four senator types among respondents who are opposed to the war:

$$CO > RO > CS = RS$$

The inequality suggests two hypotheses about the war supporters' willingness to vote for the different senator types:

Hypothesis 3: Respondents who oppose the war will be more likely to vote for senators currently oppose the war than senators who currently support it.

Hypothesis 4: Respondents who oppose the war will be more likely to vote for senators who have consistently opposed the war than senators who have only recently opposed it.

The logic I presented in Section 3 also offered predictions about how the respondent's opinion of the war would affect her expectations of how world leaders would perceive the different senator types. Simply put, if a respondent supports the war, she more likely to view the conflict as a key component in the war on terror. Because of this worldview, she should hold senators who currently support the war in higher esteem than those who oppose it, and would expect world leaders to do the same. Moreover, as with the previous set of hypotheses, the consistency with which the senator supported the war should be unimportant among this group of respondents.²¹ This suggests the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 5: Respondents who support the war are more likely to assign senators who currently support the war a stronger reputation for resolve in the war on terror than senators who currently oppose the war.

²¹The inequality representing the perception of strength of the reputations of the different senator types for this group would be identical to the preference ordering for their vote choice: $CS = RS > CO = RO$.

Hypothesis 6: Respondents who support the war will assign senators who currently support the war equally strong reputations for resolve in the war on terror, regardless of the senators' voting histories

Finally, if a respondent is against the war, she is unlikely to see any connection between the history of the leader's position on the war and his broader international reputation. Therefore, in the eyes of this group of respondents, all senators should be indistinguishable from one another in terms of the perceived strength of their international reputation. This suggests the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 7: Respondents who oppose the war will assign all senators similar reputations for resolve in the war on terror.

5.0 Experimental Design

To test these hypotheses, I conducted a survey experiment in the spring of 2008 on a nationally representative sample of 1,021 respondents. Knowledge Networks, a survey research firm that maintains a large, national panel of respondents, administered the survey via WebTV. Respondents were randomly assigned to one of eight treatment groups, each of which represented a possible senator type.²² (See Figure 1).

FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE

I excluded a control group for two reasons. First, the relevant comparisons are between the different senator types, not between any one type and a “neutral” baseline category. Second,

²² As a test for successful randomization, I regressed several respondent attributes (e.g., age, income, gender, position on the war) on treatment group assignment. None of the attributes was a significant predictor of treatment group assignment, which indicates that the randomization worked.

it is hard to imagine what such a baseline might look like. Stating the senator abstained from voting is a possibility, but abstaining is not an neutral act; respondents would likely suspect the senator secretly opposed the war. Moreover, abstentions on major, war-related bills were rare in both houses of Congress. Taken together, this suggests that any such control condition would likely be unbelievable to respondents, rendering it meaningless as a comparison group

Although I initially specified the hypotheses without respect to the senator's party, I included such information in the treatment for two reasons. First, doing so makes the treatment more believable; members of the media rarely discuss politicians without mentioning, at least in passing, the politician's partisan affiliation. Second, including the senator's party allows me to test for any interactive effects between it and a respondent's views on the war (e.g., anti-war respondents may react differently to a Republican senator than a Democratic one).

Respondents were asked to read a press release from a fictional senator, Michael Williams.²³ Using a fictional senator instead of eight actual senators who each possess the combination of attributes required by a particular treatment group, has two key advantages. First, it allows me to keep the treatments as similar as possible across the groups. Because the only factors that change are the senator's party, his position on the war when it began and his position on the war now, any difference in treatment effect must be due to these manipulations.²⁴ Second, using a fictional senator with a generic-sounding name eliminates the possibility of introducing any irrelevant and completely immeasurable opinions

²³ I debriefed the respondents of the fact that both the press release and senator were entirely fictitious after they completed the survey.

²⁴ This outcome is also dependent on successful randomization of the treatment groups.

respondents might have about an actual senator, which might influence their responses. For example, using Senator Carl Levin (D-MI) as a senator who voted against the war and who remains opposed may trigger displeasure from a Michigan voter who is upset about Levin's position on education. This existing opinion of Levin, which is wholly unrelated to the treatment, might affect the respondent's answers in the post-treatment phase of the experiment.

The text of the treatment is as follows—italicized portions are the experimental manipulations:

Senator Michael Williams, a *Democrat* who is a senior member of the Committee on Foreign Affairs and who *voted against the war* when it began in 2003, has just released the following statement: “Careful analysis of the current situation in Iraq has led me to conclude that the *fine efforts of our armed forces will allow us to achieve the goals set in 2003 and that our continued presence will likely make an already improving situation even better.* Given this assessment, it is my opinion that *all U.S. forces should remain in Iraq.*”²⁵

I gave Senator Williams a senior position on the Foreign Affairs Committee to bolster the impression that his opinion on the war carries political weight.

After reading the treatment, respondents were asked a series of questions about the senator and the war, with their two answers serving as the dependent variables.²⁶ The first question asked the respondent to indicate how likely they were to vote for the senator in the

²⁵ I include the full text of all the treatments in Appendix 1.

²⁶ The survey included questions about the respondent's views on the war, their general attitudes about the use of force and other questions beyond those relevant to the current study. I include the full text of the survey in Appendix 2.

upcoming election based on what they now knew about him. The response for this question was a binary outcome: yes or no. The second question asked the respondent to think about what leaders in other countries would think of Senator Williams' commitment to the war on terror after having heard his statement. Following this prompt, the respondent was asked to rank the strength of the senator's resolve as perceived by the international audience on a scale of 1 to 4, with 1 representing "very weak" and 4 representing "very strong".

6.0 Results

First, as dictated by the hypotheses, I separated respondents into groups based on their opinion on the war. I considered respondents who either "strongly approved" or "approved" of the decision to use military force against Iraq as war supporters, and those who were "strongly opposed" or "opposed" as war opposers.

6.1 Results—Respondent Vote Choice

I begin by examining whether the different treatments had an effect on a respondent's likelihood to vote for the senator. The specific question wording was as follows: Senator Williams is running for re-election in 2008. Based on what you have just learned about his earlier position on the war and what he thinks we should do now, would you vote for him if you could in the upcoming election? Because the dependent variable is binary, I estimated the models using a logistic regression. I report two models for each subgroup of respondents: one with the four senator types (i.e., estimating one coefficient for Republican and Democratic Senators who had identical voting records) and one with all eight treatment groups (e.g., estimating separate coefficients for the "Democrat, recent opposer" and "Republican, recent opposer" treatments).

Importantly, I excluded different treatment groups for the two groups of respondents since each type has a different relevant baseline. For war opposers, I compared their reactions to all other senator types to the senator type this group is most likely to vote for: a consistent opponent of the war in the first model and a Democratic senator who consistently opposed the war in the second. Likewise, for respondents who are in favor of the war, I used the senator who consistently supported the war as the baseline for the first model and a Republican senator who consistently supported the war in the second. I present these results in Tables 1 and 2.

TABLES 1 and 2 ABOUT HERE

The results strong support the expectations suggested by Hypotheses 1 through 4. Consistent with Hypothesis 1, pro-war respondents are significantly less likely to vote for senators who currently oppose the war than senators who currently support it.²⁷ Importantly, as Model 1 indicates, pro-war respondents are *indifferent*, both substantively and statistically, between a senator who has consistently supported the war and one has only done so recently. The bars to the left of the dashed line in the top graph of Figure 2 demonstrate this graphically.

FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE

The confidence interval surrounding the estimated difference between a recent supporter and the baseline (consistent supporter) includes zero, which suggests the possibility of no difference at all. By contrast, both senator types that currently opposes the war are

²⁷ The respondent's reactions to the two senators who oppose the war are essentially identical. When "Consistent Opposer" is substituted as the baseline category, the p-value for the "Recent Opposer" coefficient is 0.941. This suggests the two senator types are indistinguishable in terms of their likelihood of receiving a vote from a war supporter.

significantly less likely than the baseline to win the vote of a war supporter. This suggests, as Hypothesis 2 predicted, that the consistency of the senator’s support for the war does not play a large role in the minds of war supporters. Instead, both senator types are equally likely to secure votes from respondents who are in favor of the war.²⁸

A similar result can be found in Model 3 of Table 2. Here, I break out the treatment groups to determine if respondents react differently to leaders who have the same voting history but who are from different parties. As the bars to the right of the dashed line in the top graph of Figure 2 indicate, no such effect exists. Instead, as above, the voting preferences of pro-war respondents align precisely with the senator’s *current* position on the war. Any senator who currently supports the war—Republican or Democrat—is statistically indistinguishable from the Model 3’s baseline—a Republican senator who has consistently supported the war. This finding, while offering further confirmation of the small role played by a leader’s consistency, also suggests that pro-war respondents will welcome any war supporting political elite into the fold. This result holds even for member of the party associated with war opposition—the coefficient for the “Democrat, Recent Supporter” treatment is negative, but is completely insignificant. This finding is consistent with the logic presented above, which predicted that respondents who held a minority view would appreciate senators who were willing to spend the political capital by making the “tough choice” to support a war waning in popularity, even if doing so tests their (probable) partisan leanings.

²⁸ This result, and all the findings for the models of a respondent’s vote choice, remains consistent even in the presence of control variables that capture whether the respondent was from the same party as the senator and other respondent-level attributes, such as gender, income and level of education.

The findings for the war opposer sub-sample lend further credence to this argument. First, as Model 2 indicates, and as Hypothesis 3 predicted, anti-war respondents are far less likely to vote for senators who currently support the war than the baseline category, a consistent opposer. What is perhaps more interesting, however, is this sub-group's reaction to a senator who has only recently begun to oppose the war. Though statistically smaller than the coefficients for war supporters²⁹, the effect is negative and significant.³⁰ This finding confirms the predictions of the second inequality and the logic behind Hypothesis 4—respondents who share the opinion of the majority of the broader population can afford to be choosier in their voting preferences. Politicians who have only recently “seen the light” must work harder to convince this group of citizens that their change of heart is sincere and not a shallow tactic aimed at securing votes in the upcoming election.

The story becomes even more interesting as we turn to Model 4 in Table 2, which examines the individual effects of all eight treatment groups among war opposers. As with war supporters, the results in the larger model generally mirror those from the smaller one. In this case, war opposers regard all senators who currently support the war with equal disdain, regardless of the consistency of this position or the senator's party. The findings become more nuanced, however, when we consider this group's reaction to the senators who have recently switched to the anti-war camp. A Democrat who makes the change (“D-RO” in the bottom graph of Figure 2) is just as likely to receive a vote from a respondent in

²⁹When “Recent Opposer” is substituted as the baseline category, the p-values for the “Recent Supporter” and “Consistent Supporter” coefficients are both 0.000.

³⁰Note the bars to the left of the dashed line in the bottom graph in Figure 2; the confidence interval for the estimated effect of a recent supporter does *not* include zero, indicating that it is triggering a different response from the baseline

this subgroup as the baseline category—a Democrat who has consistently opposed the war. A Republican with the same inconsistent voting record (“R-RO”), however, does not fare nearly as well. Although, from a statistical standpoint, he has an advantage over his war-supporting counterparts³¹, he is significantly less likely to receive an anti-war citizen’s vote than either Democratic senator who currently opposes it (“D-CO” or “D-RO”).³²

This finding further corroborates the notion that citizens in the majority opinion will feel free to be more selective in their vote choice. Member of this group can afford to distinguish between a Republican senator who moves to oppose the war and a Democratic one who does the same since their preferred policy is not in political jeopardy.³³ This adds a further wrinkle to the simple logic outlined by proponents of the “consistency matters” argument. If citizens truly valued consistency, they should be equally displeased with politicians with flip-flopping pasts, regardless of the politician’s partisan affiliations. This uniform reaction, however, is not evident in the results. Instead, the reactions of citizens are more complex.

³¹ The coefficients of senators who currently support the war are all negative and the p-values are all 0.000 when “Republican, Recent Opposer” is the baseline.

³² Both coefficients are positive and significant when “Republican, Recent Opposer” is the baseline

³³ Although I conducted this experiment before the 2008 elections, which gave the party associated with ending the war (Democrats) control of both the White House and Congress, the earlier wins by anti-war Democrats in the midterm elections of 2006 clearly indicated that the pro-war position was waning in support.

6.2 Results—International Reputation

I now turn to the results of the models that examined whether respondents would feel the international audience would perceive certain senator types as having a weaker commitment to the war on terror than others. The specific question wording was as follows—the italicized portion changed depending on which treatment the respondent was assigned:

We'd like you to think about how leaders in other countries think about Senator Williams' commitment to the War on Terror. If international leaders hear about Senator Williams' plan to *withdraw US forces/Keep US forces in Iraq*, do you think they will perceive Senator Williams' commitment to fighting the War on Terror as being very strong, somewhat strong, somewhat weak or very weak?

I estimated the models using an ordered logistic regression. Importantly, and in contrast to the models of a respondent's vote choice, I used the same baseline category for all respondents, regardless of their opinion on the war. For the four treatment group models, the baseline group is "Consistent Supporter"; for the eight treatment group models, the baseline is "Republican, Consistent Supporter".³⁴ I present the ordered logit results in Tables 3 and 4; the predicted probabilities of a respondent assigning the different senator types a "very strong international reputation" relative to the baseline are presented in Figure 3.

TABLES 3 AND 4 ABOUT HERE

³⁴ These baselines are reasonable for both groups of respondents since it is plausible that most citizens, *ceteris paribus*, would associate someone who consistently supports the war with the strongest international reputation when compared to the other possible types.

FIGURE 3 ABOUT HERE

As above, a respondent's reaction to the different treatments is contingent upon her opinion of the war. Turning first to the war-supporters subgroup, I find strong support for Hypotheses 5 and 6. As Model 5 indicates, when the treatment groups are collapsed on the senator's voting record, the senator who is a recent supporter is statistically indistinguishable from the baseline, a consistent supporter. Senators who currently oppose the war, by contrast, are, in the eyes of pro-war respondents, far less likely to have a very strong reputation for the war on terror with the international audience.

A similar effect emerges when we consider the different senator types by party and voting record simultaneously (Model 7, Table 4). As with the voting results, we see no party effect among pro-war respondents. Instead, this group associates all senators who currently oppose the war with weak international reputations and all senators who currently support it with strong ones. This pattern is clearly evident in the dark bars to the right of the dashed line in Figure 3: the treatment effects for the war opposers are all large and negative, while the effects for senators who currently support the war are all much smaller and have confidence intervals that include zero.³⁵

These findings contradict the conventional wisdom that citizens will be concerned about the international audience's perceptions of political elites who waffle on foreign policy issues. If consistency mattered to citizens, senators who have never wavered in their support for the war should fare much better than senators who have. Instead, we see that, as with the

³⁵ The treatment effect for the Democrat who only recently began supporting the war is larger than the same effect of a Republican with the same voting record, but both are still indistinguishable from the baseline.

models of vote choice, the strongest predictor of a citizen's assessment of a leader's international reputation is the leader's current position.

The findings for the anti-war respondents paint a different picture. For this group, as Hypothesis 7 predicted, there is essentially no difference in treatment effects across the various senator types (Model 6, Table 3 and Model 8, Table 4). As the light bars in Figure 3 make clear, *none* of the senators trigger a significantly different response from the baseline; all of the confidence intervals include zero. This finding supports the logic I presented in Section 4. Citizens who do not see any value in the war in Iraq are unlikely to draw any links between it and the larger war on terror. A senator's position on it, therefore, should not play a large role in this type of citizen's perception of how the leader is viewed internationally.

Some slight variations within the treatment effects are worth noting. The treatment effects for "Recent Supporter" in the Model 6 and "Democratic, Recent Supporter" in Model 8 are both the largest in their respective models. The effect for the former falls just outside the traditional standard for statistical significance, but the "Democratic, Recent Supporter" does produce a different effect than the baseline, "Republican, Consistent Supporter" in Model 8. Again, while the effect is not very strong, especially when compared to the negative reactions of pro-war respondents to current war opposers in Model 7, it does suggest that a slight party effect might exist among anti-war respondents. It could be, for instance, that anti-war respondents hold Democratic senators to a different standard than Republican ones due to the general alignment of the parties on the war. Because Democrats have increasingly identified themselves with opposing the war, a Democratic senator who flips his position in the *opposite* direction might strike the respondent as particularly unworthy of a strong international reputation.

7.0 Conclusion

In both the American and international relations literatures, scholars argue that citizens value consistency on the part of their leaders. Citizens, they posit, should regard politicians who waffle as weak or untrustworthy. Moreover, politicians who change their position on foreign policy issues risk of damaging their reputation for resolve in the eyes of the international audience. Taken together, these two insights have led scholars to expect that citizens should uniformly favor politicians who do not alter their position on a given policy.

The findings from the survey experiment presented here challenge the notion that all citizens should react in the same way to a politician who changes his mind. Indeed, contrary to the expectations of the existing literature, I found that citizens are rarely put off by a leader's change of heart provided the politician's switch moves him closer to their preferred policy. The role of inconsistency is moderated further by the popularity of the position among the general population. Citizens who share the opinion of the majority, for instance, will prefer politicians who agree with them in the current term to those who do not, but will regard recent switchers with some degree of suspect since the move will likely win the politician more votes. Citizens in the minority, on the other hand, will make no distinctions between politicians based on their voting history. Instead, they will be equally approving of all politicians who currently support their chosen position. Within this group, recent switchers are welcomed since the change brings with it an electoral disadvantage within the larger population.

The findings also contradicted scholars' expectations for how a leader's history on a given position will affect his reputation within the international community. Once again, instead of responding to inconsistent politicians in a similar way, respondents' reactions were conditional on their own opinions of the war. Moreover, consistency's role in determining

their assessment of the senator's reputation was minimal. Pro-war respondents predicted that senators who were currently for the war would have stronger international reputations, while current opposers would be seen as weak in the war on terror. Anti-war respondents, by contrast, saw no relationship between a senator's voting history on Iraq and his international reputation for resolve.

Taken together, these findings undermine the simple "consistency matters" story as told by the existing literature. This insight is consequential for the audience costs argument, which turns on the idea that all citizens will be equally displeased with any leader who retreats from a threat. Because a citizen's reaction to a flip-flop is conditional on her own opinion, we should not expect all policy reversals to be met with ire from the entire populous. Instead, the only people who will be angered are those citizens who preferred the politician's previous position. Theoretically, this raises the possibility that some leaders will be able to back down with minimal political repercussions. The only segment of the population he risks alienating completely are those that are still in favor of the war.

TABLES AND FIGURES

Figure 1: Experimental Design

	Supported the War When It Began		Against the War When It Began	
	Currently Against the War	Currently For the War	Currently Against the War	Currently For the War
Republican	R-RO	R-CS	R-CO	R-RS
Democrat	D-RO	D-CS	D-CO	D-RS

Table 1: Vote Choice: Four Senator Types (Collapsed on Voting Record)

Treatment	Model 1 Pro-War Respondents Baseline: Consistent Supporter			Model 2 Anti-War Respondents Baseline: Consistent Opposer		
	Beta	S.E.	P-value	Beta	S.E.	P-value
Consistent Supporter	-	-	-	-4.29	0.560	0.000
Consistent Opposer	-2.48	0.380	0.000	-	-	-
Recent Opposer	-2.45	0.373	0.000	-0.96	0.304	0.001
Recent Supporter	-0.18	0.333	0.597	-3.51	0.417	0.000
Constant	1.14	0.245	0.000	1.29	0.226	0.000
N	336			390		
Log Likelihood	-183.74			-172.62		

Table 2: Vote Choice: Eight Senator Types

	Model 3			Model 4		
	Pro-War Respondents Baseline: Republican, CS			Anti-War Respondents Baseline: Democrat, CO		
Treatment	Beta	S.E.	P-value	Beta	S.E.	P-value
Republican, RO	-2.45	0.559	0.000	-1.56	0.429	0.000
Democrat, RO	-2.37	0.525	0.000	-0.40	0.459	0.379
Republican, CS	-	-	-	-4.43	0.792	0.000
Democrat, CS	0.080	0.492	0.871	-4.28	0.795	0.000
Republican, CO	-2.41	0.561	0.000	-0.15	0.452	0.747
Democrat, CO	-2.45	0.539	0.000	-	-	-
Republican, RS	0.288	0.508	0.571	-3.54	0.572	0.000
Democrat, RS	-0.498	0.473	0.293	-3.64	0.616	0.000
Constant	1.09	0.365	0.003	1.36	0.323	0.000
N	336			390		
Log Likelihood	-182.25			-168.75		

**Table 3: International Reputation: Four Senator Types (Collapsed on Voting Record)
Baseline: Consistent Supporter**

Treatment	Model 5 Pro-War Respondents			Model 6 Anti-War Respondents		
	Beta	S.E.	P-value	Beta	S.E.	P-value
Consistent Supporter	-	-	-	-0.05	0.265	0.853
Consistent Opposer	-3.71	0.369	0.000	-	-	-
Recent Opposer	-3.66	0.360	0.000	-0.18	0.269	0.503
Recent Supporter	-0.23	0.278	0.400	-0.45	0.278	0.106
N	339			396		
Log Likelihood	-356.74			-522.53		

Table 4: International Reputation: Eight Senator Types (Baseline: Republican, CS)

Treatment	Model 7			Model 8		
	Pro-War Respondents			Anti-War Respondents		
	Beta	S.E.	P-value	Beta	S.E.	P-value
Republican, RO	-3.38	0.482	0.000	-0.373	0.385	0.332
Democrat, RO	-3.89	0.476	0.000	-0.245	0.389	0.529
Democrat, CS	0.02	0.411	0.956	-0.248	0.411	0.546
Republican, CO	-3.57	0.486	0.000	-0.183	0.380	0.630
Democrat, CO	-3.86	0.499	0.000	-0.176	0.382	0.646
Republican, RS	-0.06	0.410	0.891	-0.439	0.392	0.263
Democrat, RS	-0.39	0.411	0.342	-0.745	0.407	0.067
N	339			396		
Log Likelihood	-355.4			-521.9		

Figure 2

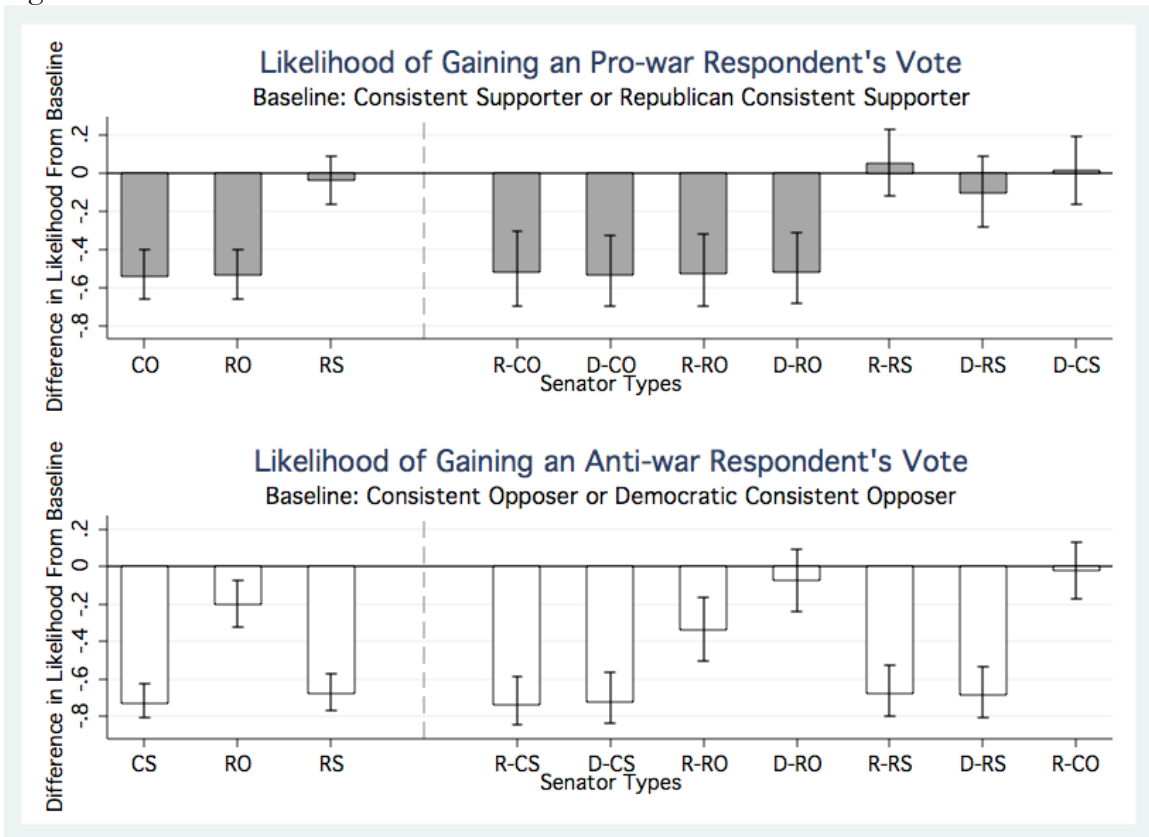
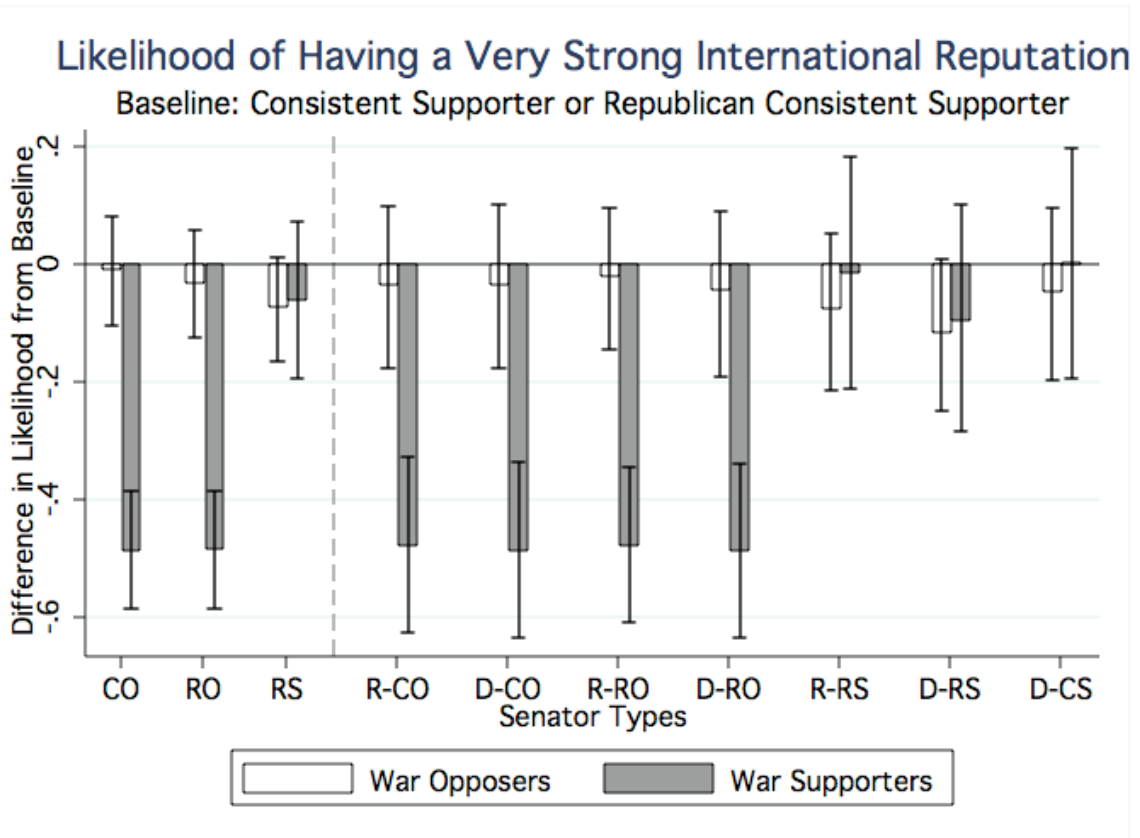


Figure 3



Appendix 1: Treatment Text

Treatment R-RO

Senator Michael Williams, a Republican who is a senior member of the Committee on Foreign Affairs and who voted for the war when it began in 2003, has just released the following statement: “Despite the fine efforts of our armed forces, careful analysis of the current situation in Iraq has led me to conclude that our continued presence is unlikely to achieve the goals set in 2003 and will likely make an already bad situation even worse. Given this assessment, it is my opinion that all U.S. forces should be withdrawn from Iraq over the next six months.”

Treatment D-RO:

Senator Michael Williams, a Democrat who is a senior member of the Committee on Foreign Affairs and who voted for the war when it began in 2003, has just released the following statement: “Despite the fine efforts of our armed forces, careful analysis of the current situation in Iraq has led me to conclude that our continued presence is unlikely to achieve the goals set in 2003 and will likely make an already bad situation even worse. Given this assessment, it is my opinion that all U.S. forces should be withdrawn from Iraq over the next six months.”

Treatment R-CS:

Senator Michael Williams, a Republican who is a senior member of the Committee on Foreign Affairs and who voted for the war when it began in 2003, has just released the following statement: “Careful analysis of the current situation in Iraq has led me to conclude that the fine efforts of our armed forces will allow us to achieve the goals set in 2003 and that our continued presence will likely make an already improving situation even better. Given this assessment, it is my opinion that all U.S. forces should remain in Iraq.”

Treatment D-CS:

Senator Michael Williams, a Democrat who is a senior member of the Committee on Foreign Affairs and who voted for the war when it began in 2003, has just released the following statement: “Careful analysis of the current situation in Iraq has led me to conclude that the fine efforts of our armed forces will allow us to achieve the goals set in 2003 and that our continued presence will likely make an already improving situation even better. Given this assessment, it is my opinion that all U.S. forces should remain in Iraq.”

Treatment R-CO:

Senator Michael Williams, a Republican who is a senior member of the Committee on Foreign Affairs and who voted against the war when it began in 2003, has just released the following statement: “Despite the fine efforts of our armed forces, careful analysis of the current situation in Iraq has led me to conclude that our continued presence is unlikely to achieve the goals set in 2003 and will likely make an already bad situation even worse. Given this assessment, it is my opinion that all U.S. forces should be withdrawn from Iraq over the next six months.”

Treatment D-CO:

Senator Michael Williams, a Democrat who is a senior member of the Committee on Foreign Affairs and who voted against the war when it began in 2003, has just released the

following statement: “Despite the fine efforts of our armed forces, careful analysis of the current situation in Iraq has led me to conclude that our continued presence is unlikely to achieve the goals set in 2003 and will likely make an already bad situation even worse. Given this assessment, it is my opinion that all U.S. forces should be withdrawn from Iraq over the next six months.”

Treatment R-RS:

Senator Michael Williams, a Republican who is a senior member of the Committee on Foreign Affairs and who voted against the war when it began in 2003, has just released the following statement: “Careful analysis of the current situation in Iraq has led me to conclude that the fine efforts of our armed forces will allow us to achieve the goals set in 2003 and that our continued presence will likely make an already improving situation even better. Given this assessment, it is my opinion that all U.S. forces should remain in Iraq.”

Treatment D-RS:

Senator Michael Williams, a Democrat who is a senior member of the Committee on Foreign Affairs and who voted against the war when it began in 2003, has just released the following statement: “Careful analysis of the current situation in Iraq has led me to conclude that the fine efforts of our armed forces will allow us to achieve the goals set in 2003 and that our continued presence will likely make an already improving situation even better. Given this assessment, it is my opinion that all U.S. forces should remain in Iraq.”

Appendix 2: Full List of Questions

- Q1. In your opinion, how important is achieving a successful outcome in Iraq to the larger War on Terror?
 Very important
 Somewhat important
 A little important
 Not Important

Respondent views the treatment.

- Q2. We'd like you to think about Senator Williams as compared to other members of Congress.

On a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 meaning "not at all responsible" and 5 meaning "very responsible" where would you place Senator Williams in terms of responsibility for American involvement in Iraq as a whole?

Not at all responsible				Very responsible
1	2	3	4	5

- Q3. Senator Williams is running for re-election in 2008. Based on what you have just learned about his earlier position on the war and what he thinks we should do now, would you vote for him if you could in the upcoming election?
 Yes
 No
- Q4. We'd like you to think about how leaders in other countries think about Senator Williams' commitment to the War on Terror. If international leaders hear about Senator Williams' plan to **withdraw U.S. forces from / keep U.S. forces in Iraq**, do you think they will perceive Senator Williams' commitment to fighting the War on Terror as being very strong, somewhat strong, somewhat weak or very weak?
 Very strong
 Somewhat strong
 Somewhat weak
 Very weak
- Q5. Please explain your answer to the previous question in a few sentences.**
- Q6. How much attention have you been paying to what is going on in Iraq?
 A good deal

Some
Not much
None at all

Q7. Do you approve or disapprove of the decision to use military force against Iraq?

Strongly approve
Approve
Neither approve nor disapprove
Disapprove
Strongly disapprove

Q8. Some people believe the United States should solve international problems by using diplomacy and other forms of international pressure and use military force only if absolutely necessary. Suppose we put such people at 1 on this scale. Others believe diplomacy and pressure often fail and the U.S. must be ready to use military force. Suppose we put them at number 7. And of course others fall in positions in-between, at points 2, 3, 4, 5, and 6.

Where would you place yourself on this scale?

Diplomacy						Military Force
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

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