DOUGLAS L. KRINER
Boston University
FRANCIS X. SHEN
Harvard University

Iraq Casualties and the 2006 Senate Elections

Prior scholarship on the effects of war casualties on U.S. elections has focused on large-scale conflicts. For this article, we examined whether or not the much-smaller casualty totals incurred in Iraq had a similar influence on the 2006 Senate contests. We found that the change in vote share from 2000 to 2006 for Republican Senate candidates at both the state and county level was significantly and negatively related to local casualty tallies and rates. These results provide compelling evidence for the existence of a democratic brake on military adventurism, even in small-scale wars, but one that is strongest in communities that have disproportionately shouldered a war's costs.

In the immediate aftermath of the Democrats' sweeping victory in the 2006 midterm elections, many political pundits—like modern-day augurs divining auspices from exit-polling data—were quick to pronounce the elections a resounding referendum on the Bush administration's conduct of military operations in Iraq. While the Iraq war's electoral consequences appear obvious to mainstream news outlets, a fervent debate continues among political scientists about whether or not foreign affairs—even major wars—have significant effects on federal elections (Aldrich, Sullivan, and Borgida 1989; Gelpi, Reifler, and Feaver 2007; Hess and Nelson 1985; Nincic and Hinckley 1991).

This debate is particularly important to revisit within the context of the current Iraq war because this conflict has involved considerably smaller casualty totals than other major American wars. Scholarship to date on the relationship between war casualties and congressional electoral fates rests on data from the Civil War and Vietnam (Carson et al. 2001; Gartner, Segura, and Barratt 2004). Yet Vietnam involved 17 times more casualties than Iraq, and the Civil War an astounding 170 times the Iraq tally.[1] Both the Civil War and Vietnam also involved

conscription and significant draft resistance escalating to violence (Foley 2003; Schecter 2005). The relatively low number of casualties sustained in Iraq, coupled with the absence of large-scale resistance on par with the draft riots of earlier eras, raises questions about scale. Does a threshold exist below which casualties will not affect senators' electoral fates? Has the casualty count in Iraq reached that threshold? We confront both questions in this article.

In addition to Iraq's critical importance in the off-year elections, the 2006 midterms were also marked by an unusually high percentage of Americans responding that national, not local concerns were the motive forces behind their congressional votes. The growing nationalization of congressional elections since Tip O'Neil coined his aphorism "all politics are local" is well documented (Brady, Cogan, and Fiorina 2000; Jacobson 2004). For this study, however, we investigated the possibility that even the most national of issues—the war in Iraq—may have a strong local component. Previous studies have demonstrated the influence of local casualties on public opinion (Gartner and Segura 1998; Gartner, Segura, and Wilkening 1997), but there is scant evidence that local casualties at lower levels of aggregation than the state or congressional district influence electoral outcomes. We correct this deficit by exploring how the Iraq war's influence on voting returns was critically mediated by local casualty rates at both the state and county levels.

We begin our discussion by examining the influence of a state's share of Iraq casualties on the change in that state's Republican senatorial vote share from the 2000 to the 2006 elections.[2] We then shift to the county level, where there is considerably greater variance in wartime experiences, to examine the relationship between local casualties and changes in Republican electoral fortunes at a lower level of geographic aggregation. Finally, we narrow our focus to the effect of local casualties on the 14 Republican incumbent senators seeking reelection in 2006, all but two of whom voted to authorize military action against Iraq in 2002.[3] We show that Republican senatorial candidates lost ground from their 2000 performance in states and counties hit hard by the war in Iraq but generally fared no worse in states and counties that had thus far emerged from the war relatively unscathed. Our findings suggest a remarkable degree of casualty sensitivity among the American electorate. The historically modest number of casualties suffered in the Iraq war has not spurred riots in the streets, but it has produced significant negative reactions in the voting booth.

Theory

Aside from 9/11, the most frequently repeated number in American politics today is the number of American soldiers slain in Iraq. There are many metrics on which the public might evaluate the war and its conduct, from dollars spent to strategies employed to Iraqi civilian lives lost. The number of American casualties, however, is the most concrete and publicly visible measure of the war's costs and consequences. Indeed, war casualties lie at the heart of political science theories in multiple subfields. In international relations research, the adverse reaction of the public to combat casualties is central to many institutionally based theories of the Democratic peace (Maoz and Russett 1992; Ray 1995; Reiter and Stam 2002; Russett and O'Neal 2001; Siverson 1995).

Similarly, a lengthy literature in American politics examines the impact of foreign policy in general, and wartime casualties in particular, on presidential approval (Eichenberg, Stoll, and Lebo 2006; Hurwitz and Peffley 1987; Mueller 1973; Nickelsburg and Norpoth 2000). Scholars of public opinion have also examined the effect of casualties and casualty framing on support for the military campaign (Berinsky and Druckman 2007; Boettcher and Cobb 2006; Feaver and Gelpi 2005; Gartner and Segura 1998; Gelpi, Feaver, and Reifler 2005; Larson 1996). Other research has demonstrated casualties' influence on more tangible political outcomes, specifically on presidential election results (Cotton 1986; Gelpi, Reifler, and Feaver 2007; Karol and Miguel 2007).

Whether in international relations or American politics, the casualties hypothesis—that casualties may have significant bearing on political outcomes—involves a question of scale. Starting with Mueller's (1973) consideration of cumulative casualty counts, scholars have discussed the possibility of a casualty threshold: casualties may affect opinion and elections more once these deaths rise past a certain level. Indeed, the scholarly debate in *International Security* between Klarevas, Gelpi, and Reifler (2006) focused in large part on Feaver and Gelpi's (1999) claim that the American public's casualty threshold for Iraq was "not just hundreds but thousands" (B3)**.** The casualty threshold debate has, for the most part, surfaced only in the context of battle deaths' influence on public opinion, and not on electoral outcomes. The comparatively few scholars who have examined the influence of casualties on congressional elections have yet to adequately address the scale question. Carson et al. (2001) found a strong relationship between district-level casualties in the Civil War and voting patterns in the House midterm elections of 1862–1863. Gartner, Segura,

and Barratt (2004) found that state-level casualties in Vietnam negatively affected incumbent senators' vote shares in the 1966–1972 elections.

Our study, with its focus on the Iraq war, extends the literature by testing theories of casualties' political import in a conflict with considerably smaller casualty totals. With the number of casualties in Iraq almost 20 times lower in 2006 than the number of U.S. casualties sustained in Vietnam, it is not clear, *a priori*, that casualties should necessarily have a sizeable effect on incumbent Republicans' vote shares in the 2006 elections. Our study asks if the same dynamics between local casualty rates and electoral behavior that were present in prior high-casualty conflicts continue to operate in the context of the war in Iraq.

In addition to addressing this question of scale, we also explore whether or not the wartime experiences of local communities—not only states—affect voting behavior. Prior research from the Vietnam era suggests that, at both the individual and aggregate levels, public opinion on the war was highly responsive to variations in county-level casualties (Gartner and Segura 1998, 2000**;** Gartner, Segura, and Wilkening 1997). To explain how local casualties might influence political attitudes and behavior, scholars have posited at least three plausible mechanisms. The first stresses direct personal contact with the costs of war. Voters from high-casualty communities have a greater probability of direct personal contact with the human costs of war through their social networks (Moody 2006). The second posited mechanism is casualties' indirect influence on the public, through their influence on political elites (Berinsky N.d.; Brody 1991; Larson 1996; Zaller 1994). Local elites may respond to casualties within their constituencies and, in turn, influence mass opinion and behavior. A third mechanism emphasizes the role of local media coverage, from which the majority of Americans obtain their news (Gilliam and Iyengar 2000). If local news outlets adjust the scope and tone of their war coverage to fit the wartime experience of the local community, then individuals from high-casualty communities may be exposed to a greater volume of negative coverage of the war and its human costs than individuals from low-casualty communities (Gartner 2004).

All three of these mechanisms offer reasons why voters may respond to casualties sustained at the state level; but they all also suggest that casualties suffered at the community or county level may affect electoral outcomes. Prior studies have only demonstrated the influence of variance in casualty figures on voting behavior at higher levels of aggregation (Carson et al. 2001; Gartner, Segura, and Barratt 2004).

The one study that has examined the influence of county-level casualties on election outcomes, Karol and Miguel's (2007) analysis of the 2004 election, found a strong negative relationship between state-level Iraq casualties and the change in George W. Bush's vote share, but no relationship between county casualties and electoral support for the president.

Nevertheless, there are strong reasons to believe that the consequences of casualties were significantly different in 2006 than two years earlier, at the time of Karol and Miguel's study. By 2006, American casualties in Iraq had mounted and conditions on the ground worsened. Through the end of 2004, the United States had suffered 1,334 casualties in Iraq; in 2005 and 2006, the United States suffered an additional 1,670 fatalities. By the midterm elections, there were also increasing calls from both inside and outside of Washington for significant changes in military strategy. Moreover, because levels of public information are considerably lower, on average, in midterm than in presidential elections, the simple retrospective frame of whether the situation in Iraq had improved or worsened may have been even more powerful in 2006 than it was in 2004.

We conducted a new test of whether or not both state- and county-level casualties can affect congressional electoral outcomes, specifically Republican senatorial fortunes in the 2006 midterms. We expected that voters in those localities that had suffered the largest numbers and highest rates of casualties in Iraq would punish Republican senatorial candidates the most, particularly incumbents who voted for the war and continued to support the president.

2006 Midterm Elections

Iraq was the centerpiece of virtually all U.S. Senate elections in 2006. Casualties, which had been 1,334 at the end of 2004 but had more than doubled to nearly 3,000 by the midterms, were necessarily a part of the debates. NBC host Tim Russert stated the issue clearly in his first question during a nationally televised debate between Maryland's Senate candidates: "Voters in Maryland, all across the country, say the big issue for them this year is Iraq."[4] In another nationally televised debate, this time between Missouri's Senate candidates, Russert brought the casualties issue center stage when he said to Senator Jim Talent: "Here's the headline in today's paper: 'U.S. Casualties in Iraq Rise Sharply.' The number of people, American troops being killed and attacked every 15 minutes, and you're saying it's going well?"[5] Similar questions were asked of candidates across the country.

Consistent with Jacobson and Kernell's (1981) theory of strategic challengers, Democrats challenging Republicans tried to link the sitting politicians with the growing body count. In the Missouri Senate debate, the Democratic challenger Claire McCaskill described the Iraq war as "a failed policy where we're mired in a civil war, where we are losing lives every day and innocent Iraqi lives."[6] In Ohio, Democratic challenger Sherrod Brown made similar strategic moves to connect the policy of his opponent, sitting Republican senator Mike DeWine, to Ohio casualties. As part of a press release to back up the facts of a television advertisement attacking DeWine on Iraq, Brown's campaign wrote, "FACT: Mike DeWine Still Supports 'Stay the Course' in Iraq" and followed that with the number of fatalities, casualties, and Ohio fatalities.[7] Brown's mention of the 123 Ohio fatalities that had occurred up to that time (September 29, 2006) is evidence that the Brown campaign believed that local casualty counts would play to voter sympathies more than aggregate national figures. The ad itself, which featured a local woman whose son was in Iraq without proper body armor, reinforced the theme: the choices senators make about international conflicts have local consequences.

Democrats also tried to paint Republicans as being politically motivated in ignoring the casualty count. In New Jersey, incumbent Democratic senator Robert Menendez argued that his Republican opponent and President George W. Bush were "living in an alternative reality where intelligence findings don't matter, mounting casualties don't count, and rhetoric about the war on terror is more important than results."[8] The Senate race in neighboring Pennsylvania saw a similar theme emerge. Criticizing Republican senator Rick Santorum's record on Iraq, the Democratic challenger Bob Casey, Jr. attacked Santorum's silence amidst growing Pennsylvania casualties: "He represents the state that has the biggest National Guard contingent over there, the state that ranks fourth in the number of casualties. Yet he hasn't been able to muster one word of criticism. Maybe he doesn't have the independence to ask the tough questions."[9]

In all of these races, the Democratic candidates attempted to bring the casualty question—with a particular focus on the losses suffered by their respective states—closer to the foreground. The fact that casualties were an issue so central to these campaigns lends credence to our theory that local casualties are likely to be a significant factor in explaining Republican losses in 2006.

With both strategies, the message these candidates were sending to voters was clear: if you vote for my Republican opponent, we're going to experience more casualties than if you vote for me. Each of

these four Democratic Senate candidates eventually won their races. Whether or not local casualties were part of the reason for these victories is the focus of our empirical analysis.

Data and Methods

While the Iraq war has certainly affected public opinion and political conditions nationwide, the most direct cost of the war—its human toll—has been borne unequally across society. As of November 2006, Wyoming had suffered the fewest casualties, seven, and California had suffered the most, 298. In terms of casualty rates, through November 2006 the average state had suffered just under 11 casualties per one million people, but there was also considerable variance around that mean. As of the 2006 midterms, Vermont had paid the highest price per capita, with a casualty rate of almost 30 deaths per million residents. Conversely, New Jersey had the lowest casualty rate at just over 5 deaths per million. At the county level, the disparities were even more dramatic. More than half of all counties had not suffered any casualties in Iraq, while Los Angeles County had suffered 74. Even after one controls for population differences across counties, the disparities remain extreme. More than 70% of counties had experienced death rates in Iraq of less than 1 per 100,000 residents. But 13% of counties had suffered casualty rates of more than 3 per 100,000, and more than 70 counties had suffered casualty rates of greater than 10 per 100,000.

To examine the effects of this uneven geographic distribution of the Iraq war's costs on the 2006 midterm elections, we constructed models of the change in vote share of Republican senatorial candidates from 2000 to 2006 at both the state and county level. Iraq casualties might have affected the calculus of American voters at least two ways. First, the total number of combat fatalities suffered in Iraq might have encouraged voters to abandon the Republicans, who, despite some internal divisions within both parties, remained the most steadfast supporters of the president's course in the Middle East. If this were the only mechanism by which the war affected the election outcomes, then Iraq's adverse effect on Republican vote shares should have been felt nationwide, with little or no geographic variance. In such a world, we would find no evidence that Republican candidates did any better or worse on average in high-casualty states/counties than in low-casualty states/counties.

Alternately, although sensitivity to American casualties as a whole undoubtedly influenced voting decisions, the public's perspectives on

the war might also have been moderated by the experience of their local communities.[10] If so, then residents of states and counties that suffered disproportionately high casualty totals or rates might also have felt the war's costs more acutely and punished the ruling Republicans disproportionately.

Because both mechanisms may have been operative, any evidence uncovered for state and local casualties' influence would be a conservative estimate of the war's total effect on the election, since the mounting costs of the conflict may have had an additional, uniform effect on voters as a whole. Still, evidence for the continued influence of state and local casualties above and beyond any national reaction to the casualty total would greatly strengthen the theoretical contention that Americans' attitudes toward war are critically mediated through the lens of their local communities. Even an issue as national as the war in Iraq may have a strong local component.

Our empirical analysis proceeds in three stages: the first discusses the casualties' effects on all senatorial election results at the state level; the second reveals the influence of casualties on every Senate contest at the county level; and the third focuses narrowly on casualties' effect on the county-level returns for the 14 Republican incumbents seeking reelection in 2006. In the first two stages, we included all states with senatorial contests except for Connecticut and Vermont. Because these contests were complicated by strong—indeed, *favored* third-party candidates—they were excluded from the analysis.[11]

At both the state and county levels, we modeled the change in Republican senatorial vote share as a function of state-level casualties and a number of political, economic, and demographic control variables drawn from prior research. An extensive literature has identified opponent quality (Green and Krasno 1988; Jacobson 2004; Squire 1992) and campaign spending (Abramowitz 1989; Gerber 1998; Jacobson 1978, 1990) as two of the most important predictors of a candidate's electoral fortunes.[12] To account for changes in opponent quality, we coded each Republican's opponent according to Green and Krasno's (1988) eight-point ordinal scale, and we calculated the change in this measure across the two electoral cycles. To control for the influence of campaign expenditures, we included the change in the percentage of total campaign expenditures spent by the Republican candidate from 2000 to 2006.[13]

In addition to factors specific to the Senate race at hand, scholars have long documented the connections between presidential performance and the success of his copartisans in presidential elections, even in midterm contests (Abramowitz and Segal 1986; Campbell 1991;

Campbell and Sumners 1990; Carsey and Wright 1998). To account for this relationship in the current context, we included a measure of President George W. Bush's share of the two-party vote in each state or county in the 2004 election.

Additionally, a number of previous studies have explored and debated the relative importance of economic conditions for congressional election outcomes (see Squire 1995 for a review). To control for economic factors, we included measures of the change in the state and county unemployment rates (obtained from the Bureau of Labor Statistics) over the year preceding the 2006 midterm elections. Voters in areas with increasing unemployment rates may be more likely to punish Republican candidates in this era of unified Republican control of Congress and the presidency.

Finally, our models also controlled for two important demographic constituency characteristics that might be correlated with considerable change in Republican electoral fortunes from the peacetime election of 2000 to the wartime 2006 contest: the percentage of residents aged 18 to 64 serving in the military, and the percentage of all residents who were veterans of the armed forces. We constructed the demographic controls from the U.S. Census Bureau's summary files (sf3) for the 2000 Census. Conventional wisdom suggests that military communities have largely rallied around the president and the president's policies; if so, then Republican candidates may have performed better relative to their 2000 baseline in these areas than in otherwise comparable communities. Additionally, an extensive literature regarding political elites has examined the different perspective that veterans bring to questions of military policy (see, for example, Feaver and Gelpi 2005). Yet expectations for electoral behavior in states or counties with large veteran contingents at the mass level are less clear. Communities with large contingents of veterans, like those with high percentages of active-duty personnel and their families, may have rallied around the president and the Republicans in the 2006 midterms, or they may have viewed the war and the administration's military policies through a distinctly different and more critical lens and adjusted their voting behavior accordingly. We tested these competing hypotheses.

As for the explanatory variable of interest, Iraq casualty data, we obtained information on each soldier's home state and county of record from the Statistical Information Analysis Division of the Department of Defense.[14] Because geographic data is frequently unavailable for soldiers wounded in Iraq, we limited our definition of casualties to those killed in action.[15] For both the state- and county-level analyses, we employed two operationalizations of a locale's war losses: the raw

casualty count and the casualty rate per one million and per 10,000 residents for states and counties, respectively.[16]

We estimated all models with ordinary least squares (OLS) regressions and Hubert-White heteroskedasticity-consistent standard errors (White 1980) according to the following specification:

$$
\begin{aligned}
(\text{GOP Senate Vote 2006})_i &- (\text{GOP Senate Vote 2000})_i \\
= \alpha &+ \beta_1\,(\text{Iraq Casualties})_i + \beta_2\,(\Delta\text{Opponent Quality})_i \\
&+ \beta_3\,(\Delta\%\ \text{GOP Campaign Expenditures})_i \\
&+ \beta_4\,(\text{Bush Vote 2004})_i + \beta_5\,(\Delta\text{Unemployment Rate})_i \\
&+ \beta_6\,(\%\ 18\text{--}64\ \text{in Armed Forces})_i + \beta_7\,(\%\ \text{Veterans})_i + \varepsilon_i
\end{aligned}
$$

Results and Discussion

State Level

At first blush, there is considerable evidence that local casualties had a significant negative effect on Republican electoral fortunes in the 2006 Senate races. The scatterplot in Figure 1 suggests a strong negative relationship between a state's casualty rate and the Republican senatorial candidate's electoral fortunes.[17] This simple bivariate analysis indicates that an increase in a state's casualty rate of five casualties per million residents (approximately one standard deviation) cost the Republican candidate about five percentage points at the ballot box.

The negative relationship also appears robust at the county level. Consider the following numbers. By November 2006, 10% of counties had suffered two or more casualties in Iraq since the war began in March 2003. Republican senatorial candidates captured 55% of the vote in these counties in 2000. A year and a half into the war, in 2004, President Bush secured 54% of the two-party vote in these locales. But a mere two years later, Republicans won only 48% of the vote in the Senate contests. Contrast this precipitous decline with the performance of Republican candidates in the counties that experienced no casualties in Iraq prior to the election. In these counties, the Republican candidate won 57% of the vote in 2000. President Bush won handily in these areas in 2004, garnering 62% of the vote. And in 2006, Republican candidates continued to do well, earning 55% of the two-party vote share. Limiting the analysis to the 993 counties in which 14 incumbent senators ran for reelection in 2006 reveals a seven percentage point decrease from their 2000 totals in the two-or-more casualty counties. In counties that experienced no casualties in Iraq, the

FIGURE 1
Scatterplot of State-Level Casualty Rates
and Change in GOP Senate Vote Share
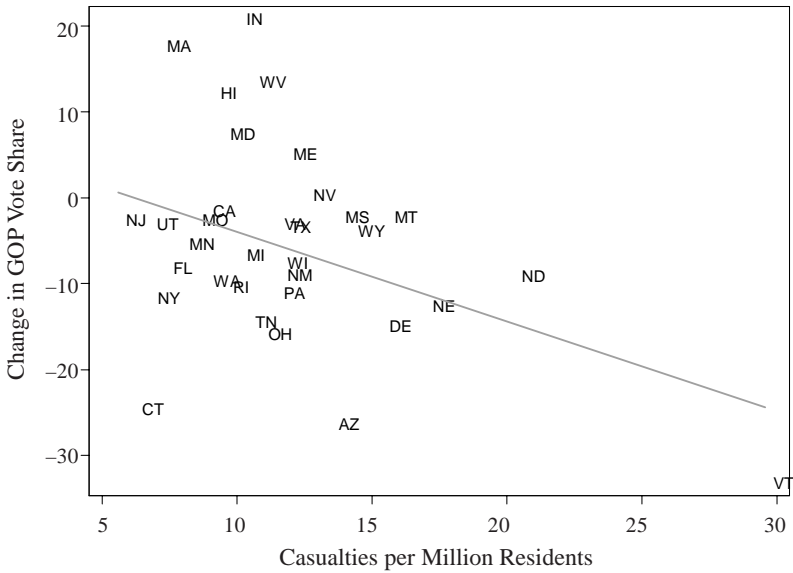
Republican candidates gained 65% of the vote, on average, in both the 2000 and the 2006 elections. Certainly, something seems afoot.

To explore casualties' effects on the midterm elections more systematically, we examined a series of models for both the state and county levels. Results for the change in GOP vote share at the state level appear in the first two data columns in Table 1.

Even after controlling for the political, economic, and demographic factors already discussed, we found the coefficients for both the state's casualty tally and rate to be negative, as expected, although only the coefficient for the casualty rate per one million residents is statistically significant. More importantly, the empirical model indicates that the substantive size of a state casualty rate's effect on the change in GOP vote share is considerable, a finding consistent with the bivariate relationship illustrated in Figure 1. A one standard deviation increase of 4.6 casualties per million residents cost the Republican candidate, on average, over seven and one-half percentage points at the polls. The size and robustness of this result strongly suggest that, as they did in the Vietnam years (Gartner, Segura, and Barratt 2004), state-level casualties strongly influenced Senate electoral dynamics in 2006.

TABLE 1
The Effect of State and County Casualties
on the Change in GOP Senate Vote Share, 2000–2006
(standard errors in parentheses)

	State	State	County	County	GOP Inc	GOP Inc
Iraq State Count	–0.01 (0.02)					
Iraq State Rate		–1.46** (.59)				
Iraq County Count			–0.23* (0.13)		–0.41** (0.17)	
Iraq County Rate				–0.06 (0.59)		–0.99** (0.47)
Change in Opponent Quality	–0.69 (0.54)	–0.30 (0.58)	–1.82*** (0.11)	–1.82*** (0.11)	0.19* (0.11)	0.20* (0.11)
Change in % GOP Spending	.25 (.18)	.33** (.14)	.03 (.03)	.03 (.03)	.73*** (.06)	.75*** (.06)
% Bush 2004	0.44 (0.42)	0.78** (0.37)	0.11*** (0.02)	0.12*** (0.03)	0.21*** (0.03)	0.23*** (0.03)
Change in Unemployment	9.71 (5.94)	10.01* (5.07)	–0.14 (0.48)	–0.16 (0.48)	–0.16 (0.57)	–0.25 (0.57)
% in Military	3.06 (3.29)	4.43* (2.24)	–0.13 (0.14)	–0.18 (0.15)	0.21* (0.13)	0.16 (0.11)
% Veterans	–1.09 (1.05)	.28 (1.23)	–0.31*** (0.10)	–0.28*** (0.10)	–0.81*** (0.12)	–0.81*** (0.12)
Constant	1.70 (16.67)	–12.69 (13.70)	–6.38 (2.21)	–7.75 (2.31)	2.53 (2.57)	1.14 (2.57)
Observations	31	31	1856	1856	993	993
R^2	.29	.41	.15	.15	.21	.20

*$p < .10$; **$p < .05$; ***$p < .01$ (all significance tests are two-tailed).

From these strong results at the state level, we believe that voters demonstrated a remarkable degree of casualty sensitivity. The results suggest that the United States need not suffer 50,000 casualties or more before the public rises up and turns against those in power. Rather, even a war with comparatively modest levels of casualties can have a substantial effect on congressional elections, with ruling-party candidates from states that have suffered the heaviest losses bearing the brunt of the popular backlash.

Turning to the political control variables, we find that most of the relationships are in the expected direction and many are statistically significant. In both state-level models, strong support for President Bush in 2004 is positively correlated with increases in Republican senatorial vote share, and, in the second specification, the coefficient is statistically significant. Similarly, in both models, the coefficient for the change in the opponent quality variable is negative, as expected. Republican candidates tended to lose ground when they faced a tougher opponent in 2006 than in 2000; however, there is considerable uncertainty around the estimates of both coefficients. Also consistent with theoretical expectations and prior studies emphasizing the importance of campaign spending, both specifications detect a strong link between relative campaign expenditures and the change in Republican vote share. The second state-level model suggests that a one standard deviation increase in the percentage of total campaign expenditures spent by the Republican candidate produced a four percentage point increase, on average, in GOP vote share from 2000 to 2006.

Economics also appear to have had some influence on Republican electoral fortunes; yet, far from being punished electorally in areas of increasing unemployment as the party in power, the models suggest that Republicans actually performed better in these areas, on average, than they did in the 2000 contests. To explore this relationship further, we reestimated the two state-level models, disaggregating the change in unemployment measure by the partisanship of the incumbent. This additional step revealed that rising state-level unemployment only increased Republican vote share when the Republican faced an incumbent Democrat; the coefficients for the effect of changing unemployment on incumbent Republicans' electoral fortunes are negative, but statistically insignificant. All other results remained unchanged.

Finally, turning to the military-related demographic characteristics of the states themselves, we found some evidence of states with large active-duty military populations rallying around the Republican Party. In both models, the coefficient is positive, and, in the second specification, it is statistically significant. This model suggests that a one percentage point increase in the state's active-duty military population results in a 4% increase in GOP vote share from the peacetime 2000 contest to the 2006 election. Yet neither model finds an effect for the size of a state's veteran population on the change in GOP vote share.

County Level

The next set of models in Table 1 sharpens the scope of our analysis by demonstrating the influence of the geographic distribution of Iraq war casualties on Republican vote shares at the county level. The dependent variable here is the change in county-level vote share from 2000 to 2006 in all 1,856 counties from the 31 states with senatorial contests (excluding Vermont and Connecticut, where Bernie Sanders's and Joe Lieberman's Independent candidacies complicate cross-election comparisons). The results at this lower level of geographic aggregation also strongly suggest that local casualties influenced Republicans' electoral fates.

The first county-level model shows a strong negative relationship between the number of Iraq battle deaths for that county and the change in Republican vote share. Substantively, the size of the effect is modest yet still of political import: a two standard deviation increase in a county's casualty tally cost the Republican candidate, on average, more than one percentage point at the polls.

Unlike the models at the state level, the second county model provides little evidence of a strong relationship between a county's casualty rate and GOP electoral fortunes. The coefficient is negative, as expected, but the correlation is not statistically significant. At the county level, the casualty rate may not be nearly as important as the simple fact of a casualty from the voters' local community. After all, a majority of counties as of November 2006 had not suffered a single battle death in Iraq. As a result, whether a community had suffered a disproportionate share of the burden in Iraq in terms of its casualty rate may have been considerably less important to many of its voters' electoral choices than whether voters had experienced the costs of war through the lens of their local community at all. Alternatively, as previously discussed, the considerable variance in county-level casualty rates, particularly the presence of low-population outlier communities that had suffered one or two casualties, may be skewing the results when we assume a linear relationship. To account for this possibility, we reestimated the model using the logged casualty rate. In this specification, the relevant coefficient is negative, as expected, and statistically significant: $p < .10$ on a one-tailed test. Although far from conclusive evidence, the logged casualty rate specification is at least suggestive of a relationship between county casualty rates and change in Republican vote share across all Senate contests. Nevertheless, the number of casualties incurred by a county appears to be the strongest correlate of changing GOP electoral fortunes at the county level.

In both county-level models, the political control variables closely follow theoretical expectations. The coefficient for increasing opponent quality is negative, as expected, and highly statistically significant. A one point increase in the caliber of the Republican opponent on the Green and Krasno scale decreased the Republican's vote share by almost two percentage points. Similarly, the coefficient for the share of campaign expenditures disbursed by the Republican is positive, although it fails to reach conventional levels of statistical significance in either specification. And finally, both models suggest that Republican senatorial candidates reaped modest gains over their 2000 showings in counties that strongly supported George W. Bush in the 2004 election contest.

In the economic realm, the coefficients for change in a county's unemployment rate are negative but statistically insignificant. Again, further analysis suggests that the relationship is contingent on the partisanship of the incumbent senator. Disaggregating the unemployment measure by partisanship shows that rising unemployment bolsters the Republican candidate's fortunes when he or she challenges a sitting Democrat but depresses the GOP vote share when the Republican is the incumbent.

Finally, turning to the two military demographic variables, we find no evidence at the county level of communities with large concentrations of active-duty military personnel rallying behind the Republican Party. In both specifications, however, the coefficients for the percentage of veterans in a county are negative and statistically significant. The models suggest that the Republican candidate fared almost two percentage points worse in counties with veteran populations that were two standard deviations above the mean in 2006 than they fared in 2000. Considered in conjunction with the state-level analyses, these results imply that communities with large veteran populations approached the 2006 midterms differently than did those with large active-duty military populations.[18]

Republican Incumbent Races at the County Level

The models of election results from all states and counties involved in the 2006 elections offer considerable evidence that the experience of voters' state and local communities in Iraq influenced their electoral calculations in the 2006 midterm elections. Because the first four models in Table 1 do not differentiate among electoral contests, however, it is possible that they underestimate local casualties' effects on the Senate races. For example, in the Tennessee Senate race

it is not clear that Bob Corker, the former Chattanooga mayor and Republican nominee, should have performed worse than the 2000 Republican candidate in counties that experienced higher casualties in Iraq. If anything, Harold Ford, who voted to authorize the war while in the House, might stand to bear the brunt of any voter dissatisfaction regarding Iraq. Corker acknowledged that mistakes had been made in Iraq and emphasized the need for a change in strategy to get the job done and bring the troops home. Because Corker was unsaddled by the baggage of voting for the authorization to use force against Iraq or the need to support the president's policies on the Senate floor, there is little reason to expect the effects of Iraq on his candidacy to have been as acute.

Taking this distinction into account, the third set of models in Table 1 focuses exclusively on the county-level election results for the 14 incumbent Republican senators—all but two of whom voted to authorize the war in Iraq—running for reelection in 2006. For this subset of elections, the dependent variable measuring the change in Republican vote share from the previous election is cleanest. Moreover, it is for these senators that the expectations of a strong effect for Iraq casualties on electoral success are most robust.[19]

In this critical test of the electoral import of local casualties, the models uncover a strong relationship between both the county casualty tally and rate and the change in vote share for the Republican incumbent. A two standard deviation increase in a county's casualty count cost the Republican incumbent more than two percentage points at the polls. Similarly, a two standard deviation increase in the county's casualty rate decreased the Republican incumbent's expected vote share by almost one percentage point from his or her 2000 performance. By some accounts, these effects are rather modest; still, a two- to four-point swing could have meant the difference in a number of contests in 2006, particularly in the hotly contested races in Montana, Missouri, Virginia, and Tennessee.

Moreover, the effect of county-level casualty tallies and rates is robust even after one controls for state-level casualty figures. Reestimating the models with both state- and county-level casualty tallies and rates reveals a strong relationship between county-level casualty measures and the change in GOP vote share.

The control variables, with one exception, again largely accord with theoretical expectations. For this subset of counties, the coefficient for change in opponent quality is now actually positive, although this anomaly is most likely due to idiosyncratic factors in the smaller number of Senate contests in the restricted sample. For example, the

largest change in Republican opponent quality was in Virginia, where George Allen ran against incumbent senator Charles Robb in 2000 and then against James Webb, who had never held elected office, in 2006. On the Green and Krasno scale, which fails to capture Webb's formidability as a candidate in the 2006 election cycle, Webb scores considerably lower than many candidates running for Senate. Yet the other controls follow expectations closely. The greater the change in the share of total campaign expenditures spent by the Republican, the better the Republican candidate performed. Incumbent senators were most likely to gain ground from their previous elections in counties where George W. Bush performed well in the 2004 presidential race. Finally, rising unemployment is negatively correlated with the change in Republican vote share, although the relationship is not statistically significant.

We find more evidence of differential voting behavior in areas with high concentrations of active-duty military personnel and veterans. As in the state models, the coefficient for active-duty military population is positive, and, in the first specification, it is statistically significant. Yet, as in the model of all county returns, the coefficient for the population's veteran percentage is negative and significant in both specifications. With all appropriate caveats about the dangers of ecological inference, we note that the evidence is at least suggestive that areas with large concentrations of active-duty soldiers and veterans viewed the Iraq war very differently. Counties with large shares of active-duty service members rallied slightly behind the GOP, whereas counties with strong veteran presences abandoned the Republicans.

In sum, at both the state and county levels, the models provide compelling evidence across a wide range of specifications that both state- and county-level Iraq casualties depressed voting for Republican senatorial candidates. The war was indeed a national issue of the greatest import, but its electoral consequences appear to have been, at least in part, a function of the distribution of the war's costs across the country.

Conclusion

This article has demonstrated that in the 2006 midterm elections, county- and state-level casualties from the Iraq war—despite their small numbers compared to previous major conflicts—had a significant and negative effect on the electoral fate of Republican candidates for U.S. Senate. When we isolate the incumbent Republican senators, the magnitude of the effects of local casualties becomes even larger. In

these races with a Republican incumbent, a two standard deviation increase in a county's casualty tally cost the incumbent more than 2%, on average, at the polls. A similar increase in the county casualty rate resulted in a one percentage point swing in Republican vote share.

These findings, which are consistent with the campaign strategy of 2006 Democratic Senate candidates, are an important contribution to the emerging literature on American wartime casualties and electoral outcomes beyond those for the commander in chief. Gartner, Segura, and Barratt's (2004) study of the negative effect of state-level Vietnam casualties on senators' vote shares from 1966 to 1972 left open the question of thresholds. At what threshold will voters respond to casualties? The current Iraq conflict, which so far has less than one-fifteenth of Vietnam's casualty total, provides an important test case. Our analysis suggests that voters are sensitive to casualties in their county and state even when average state casualty rates are 11 battle deaths per million residents.

Furthermore, consistent with theories of the importance of local casualties to public-opinion formation, our analysis also finds that county-level casualty tallies and rates influenced voting behavior in the 2006 midterms. In contrast to Karol and Miguel (2007), whose county-level analysis did not find a significant relationship between county-level casualties and President Bush's vote share in 2004, we found strong, negative relationships between a county's casualty tally and rate and the change in Republican vote share from the 2000 to the 2006 Senate races. What explains these divergent results?

One possible explanation is the change from 2004 to 2006 in dissatisfaction with the war in Iraq. In 2004, the country was roughly split in their opinion of President Bush's handling of Iraq. By 2006, less than 30% of the populace approved and over 60% disapproved.[20] Gelpi, Feaver, and Reifler (2005) have argued that public confidence in the success of a mission is directly related to casualty tolerance. When confidence is high, as it was for Bush in many segments of the country in 2004, they contend that casualties will have little effect on political outcomes. Our empirical analysis strongly suggests that the reverse is also true: when confidence in a military venture and its leaders is low, as it was for most Americans considering Iraq in 2006, casualties will have a significant, negative effect on the electoral fates of those public officials tied most directly to the war and its conduct.

In addition to its contribution to the existing literature on casualty sensitivity among the American electorate and the influence of local casualties on congressional elections, our research also has important implications for recent scholarship emphasizing congressional

importance in military affairs. A critical component of many theories proclaiming presidential dominance in foreign policy is the assumption that Congress—composed of 535 single-minded seekers of reelection (Mayhew 1974)—willingly and logically defers to the president in military matters (Gowa 1998; Meernik 1995; Peterson 1994; Wildavsky 1966). Yet a growing number of scholars have challenged this president-centered conception of foreign policy (Clark 2000; Howell and Kriner 2007; Howell and Pevehouse 2005, 2007; Johnson 2006). Implicit in their arguments is the understanding that, under certain conditions, members of Congress stand to reap political gains or insulate themselves from political fallout by challenging presidential discretion in military affairs. Our results offer considerable support for this perspective by documenting that senators do incur political costs from deferring to the president, even tacitly, in an unpopular war, even when casualty totals are orders of magnitude smaller than those sustained in Vietnam.

Finally, our study paves the way for a number of additional explorations. Two lines of future analysis seem most promising. First, qualitative work can be carried out to study further the mechanisms by which casualties affect electoral outcomes. News of casualties is filtered through the media, experienced through social networks, and framed (in contrasting ways) by partisan campaigns. It is important to know how these three streams interact to produce the casualty effect we have observed in our data. Recent work by Voeten and Brewer (2006) suggests that, at the presidential level, the connections between casualties and approval are not as direct as previous scholarship has concluded. At the congressional levels, too, it may be that there is complexity in the pathways through which casualties influence electoral outcomes. Second, as the Iraq conflict seems destined to carry on through the next election cycle, political scientists can monitor whether or not rising casualties lead to effects of larger magnitudes in 2008. It is not clear, with a Democratic House and Senate, how the public will allocate political blame for further casualties.

Douglas L. Kriner <dkriner@bu.edu> *is Assistant Professor of Political Science, Boston University, 232 Bay State Road, Boston, MA 02215. Francis X. Shen* <fxshen@fas.harvard.edu> *is a doctoral fellow in the Harvard Multidisciplinary Program in Inequality and Social Policy, 1737 Cambridge St., CGIS N-151, Cambridge, MA 02138.*

NOTES

1. This ratio is based on the May 2007 Iraq casualty count of 3,422, the estimate of Vietnam casualties of 58,219 from Department of Defense statistics, and the estimate of Civil War casualties of 620,000 (Beer 1983).

2. The dependent variable for all models is the change in Republican vote share from 2000 to 2006, with one exception. In 2002, James Talent defeated incumbent Democratic senator Jean Carnahan, who was appointed to the seat following her deceased husband's narrow victory over John Ashcroft in 2000. For Missouri, we examined the change in Republican vote share from 2002 to 2006 and used the appropriate controls. All of the model results remain the same if the 2000 to 2006 data is used.

3. Senator Lincoln Chaffee voted against the authorization, and Senator James Talent of Missouri did not hold his seat at the time of the authorization vote. Replicating these models without Missouri and Rhode Island yields even stronger results for both casualty measures.

4. "Meet the Press" Transcript, October 29, 2006. http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/15473528/ (September 25, 2007).

5. "Meet the Press" Transcript, October 8, 2006. http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/15116699/page/2/ (September 25, 2007).

6. "Meet the Press" Transcript, October 8, 2006. http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/15116699/page/2/ (September 25, 2007).

7. Sherrod Brown, "Sherrod Brown 'Went to Bat' for Our Troops," press release, 29 September 2006. http://sherrodbrown.com/press/releases/675/ (September 25, 2007).

8. Jeff Whelan, "Menendez Renews His Iraq Attack on Kean," *New Jersey Star-Ledger*, 27 September 2006. http://operationhousecall.org/article.php?id=749 (September 25, 2007).

9. Bob Casey, Jr., Interview with *Philadelphia Jewish Voice*. 2005. http://www.pjvoice.com/v4/4800words.html (September 25, 2007).

10. Recent experimental research by Adam Berinsky (N.d.) also raises questions about the influence that casualty totals have on public opinion. Berinsky demonstrates that in 2004 most Americans held wildly varying estimates of how many casualties the United States had suffered in Iraq, with Republicans dramatically underestimating the true number and Democrats systematically overestimating the figure.

11. In Connecticut, political newcomer Ned Lamont ran against incumbent Joe Lieberman to protest Senator Lieberman's support for the Iraq war. Although Lamont won the primary, Lieberman successfully ran as an Independent and held his Senate seat by garnering 50% of the vote to Lamont's 40%. Vermont presents a more-difficult case: Independent candidate Bernie Sanders won the Democratic primary but declined the nomination. Sanders defeated his Republican rival, Richard Tarrant, for the seat vacated by Independent senator James Jeffords by securing 65% of the vote. To check the robustness of our results, we conducted additional analyses including these states, which yielded virtually identical results across specifications. In a similar vein, Indiana was an outlier, being the only race not contested in 2006 by both major parties. Excluding Indiana from the analysis also yields virtually identical results across specifications.

12. An additional political factor that may have influenced the change in GOP vote share is any change in the incumbency status of the Republican candidate from the 2000 to the 2006 campaigns. All models were reestimated with two dummy variables indicating if the GOP candidate went from being a challenger (either facing an incumbent

or vying for an open seat) to being an incumbent from 2000 to 2006, or vice versa. All of our results remained virtually identical in this expanded specification.

These augmented models show the expected negative relationship between a shift from incumbent to challenger status and GOP vote share at both the state and county levels. A complementary shift from challenger to incumbent status, however, had no effect at the state level and, contra expectations, a negative correlation with the change in GOP vote share at the county level. The relationship is almost certainly spurious. Only three states involved a Republican challenger from 2000 (2002 for James Talent) running in 2006 as an incumbent: Virginia, Nevada, and Missouri. In the Virginia race, George Allen lost to James Webb; in Nevada, John Ensign handily beat Jack Carter, but not by the same margins as he trounced his Democratic opponent who lacked a presidential name in 2000; and the Missouri races were decided by razor-thin margins in 2000, 2002, and 2006. A confluence of national trends and idiosyncratic factors—not any change in incumbency status—determined these three elections' end results.

13. Because Krasno and Green's scale was designed to measure challenger quality, it required one minor modification. If the Republican candidate faced an incumbent senator, we coded the opponent-quality score at its maximum value of 8. Prior studies have adopted varied operationalizations of relative campaign spending. To control for several outliers in Republican-opponent spending, we took the log of both major candidates' Federal Election Commission-reported expenditures and calculated the percentage of this total spent by the Republican. All of our results are robust across other operationalizations, such as the change in the percentage of unlogged total expenditures spent by the Republican candidate and the change in the ratio of Republican to Democratic spending. Following Jacobson, Green and Krasno, and others, we recoded the handful of missing expenditure data points as $1,000. All of these data points represent minor, dark-horse candidates who had little in the way of a formal campaign apparatus.

14. We downloaded all casualty data in November 2006 from http://siadapp.dmdc.osd.mil/personnel/CASUALTY/castop.htm.

15. This method is consistent with many other studies of casualties' (i.e., battle deaths') effects on electoral outcomes and public opinion (*inter alia* Eichenberg 2005; Feaver and Gelpi 2005; Gartner, Segura, and Barratt 2004).

16. Casualty figures, particularly at the county level, exhibited considerably more variance. For example, at the county level, the standard deviation for casualty rates per 10,000 residents was 3 times the mean value, and a small number of outlying counties, mostly in very sparsely populated areas, had casualty rates more than 50 times the mean value. To mitigate these extreme outliers, we replicated all of the models at both the state and county levels using logged tallies and logged casualty rates. In almost every specification, the observed relationships between casualties and change in Republican vote share were even stronger when we used the logged measures.

17. The bivariate relationship is statistically significant, $p < .05$ on a two-tailed test.

18. Veteran populations and large active-duty military populations are positively correlated, but the correlation is not high ($r = .16$).

19. As mentioned in note 3, Lincoln Chaffee and James Talent may not fit this mold. Replicating this final set of models at the county level without Rhode Island and Missouri yields even stronger results for both casualties measures.

20. Adam Nagourney and Megan Thee, "Bush's Public Approval at New Low Point," *New York Times*, 9 May 2006. http://www.nytimes.com/2006/05/09/washington/09cnd-poll.html (September 25, 2007).

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