Political Studies Association | BJPIR

Article

The British Journal of Politics and International Relations
1–22

DOI: 10.1177/1369148116632181
bpi.sagepub.com
SAGE

The elasticity of reality and British support for the war in Afghanistan

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Research Highlights and Abstract

Building on recent efforts to bridge the elites/events dichotomy in the wartime opinion literature, we test the explanatory power of, and offer a theoretical extension to, the elasticity of reality hypothesis using the case of British support for the war in Afghanistan from 2001 through 2010. Marshaling an array of aggregate, individual-level and experimental survey data, as well as an original database of 2677 content-coded newspaper articles, we find evidence that the unshaken elite consensus behind the Afghan campaign failed to sustain strong support for war, even among the most politically engaged segments of the British public. However, we do find evidence that elites retained a measure of influence over citizens' prospective attitudes about the war's future conduct, even as they were unable to influence more general and retrospective assessments of Britain's involvement in the conflict.

In stark contrast to theories of elite opinion leadership, a cross-partisan elite consensus failed to maintain strong public support among Britons for the war in Afghanistan.

We argue that elites are better able to influence the public's prospective policy preferences for war, even when they cannot shape the public's retrospective assessments.

Analyses of aggregate and individual-level public opinion data are consistent with our argument.

An original survey experiment confirms the capacity of British elites to influence public's willingness to stay the course in Afghanistan.

Keywords

elites, public opinion, United Kingdom, war

One of the most important theoretical claims of wartime opinion scholarship is that elite consensus bolsters public support for war, while elite dissension erodes it (Berinsky, 2007, 2009; Brody, 1991; Larson, 1996; Lian and Oneal, 1993; Powlick and Katz, 1998; Zaller, 1992). Changes in the balance of elite cues transmitted to the mass public can explain major shifts in popular support for war over time. For example, Zaller's (1992) analysis of US opinion dynamics during the Vietnam War shows that during the period of bipartisan consensus before the Tet offensive, war support remained high in the face of mounting costs, and little gap emerged between party identifiers. By contrast, after Tet when elites began to diverge in their assessments of the conflict, war support diminished

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as the public divided along partisan and ideological lines following the cues of trusted elites. Berinsky (2007) observes similar splits in American public opinion in the early stages of World War II; however, this gap disappeared first when the Republicans nominated the interventionist candidate Wendell Wilkie in 1940 and then again for good after elites of all parties rallied around the war effort following Pearl Harbor. This elite consensus, Berinsky argues, explains the remarkably high levels of public support throughout the war, despite the massive number of American casualties sustained. Other scholarship argues that the balance of elite cues explains dynamics in public support for other major American wars, including the Korean Conflict, the 1990–1991 Persian Gulf War, and the war in Iraq (Berinsky, 2009; Larson, 1996; Larson and Savych, 2005; Voeten and Brewer, 2006; Zaller, 1994). Although the theoretical logic at the core of elite opinion leadership theory should hold generally in any democratic nation with a free press and institutionalized opposition parties, virtually all of the empirical support for this perspective is limited to the United States.[1]

One highly salient case that, at first blush, seems orthogonal to the American experience is British support for the war in Afghanistan. In the immediate aftermath of the terrorist attacks of 9/11, which also claimed the lives of 67 British citizens, leaders of all three major British parties rallied around the government's decision to join the American-led coalition against Al Qaeda and the Taliban in Afghanistan. This cross-partisan leadership consensus on the justness of the cause and the need to stay the course through to victory remained unshaken over time. And yet, while public support for the Afghan War among Britons was initially high, by the fall of 2006, after the reemergence of heavy fighting against Taliban insurgents, support for the war among Britons had plunged below the 50% mark. As we will show, war support remained relatively low for the next 4 years, despite the resurgence of widespread media coverage of pro-war elite cues from across the political spectrum. What are the implications of this case for the larger wartime opinion formation literature?

Several recent studies (e.g. Drury et al., 2010; Kriner and Shen, 2014) endeavors to integrate elite opinion leadership theories with another branch of wartime opinion scholarship emphasizing the critical importance of unmediated conflict events to driving opinion (inter alia Eichenberg, 2005; Gartner and Segura, 1998; Gelpi et al., 2009; Mueller, 1973). An important argument advanced by Baum and Groeling (2010; see also Baum and Potter, 2008) is that the relative influence of elites and events on opinion formation changes over time. The capacity of elites to shape public opinion independent of actual conditions on the ground—what they term the 'elasticity of reality'—wanes over the course of a conflict. Baum and Groeling (2010) offers empirical support for this perspective through an analysis of American public opinion concerning the Iraq War from 2003 to 2007.

We build on this foundation in two ways. Theoretically, we reexamine the underpinnings of the elasticity of reality theory and argue that while events may ultimately erode elites' capacity to significantly influence citizens' more retrospective and general assessments of whether a war was right or wrong, elites may retain greater influence over citizens' prospective judgments of the best policy course moving forward. If correct, this theoretical refinement has major implications for political elites' capacity to sustain support for the continuation of costly military conflicts.

Empirically, we test the explanatory power of the elasticity of reality theory, and of our proposed refinement, in an important case with non-US data. Data limitations often hamper efforts to expand the scope of wartime opinion analysis and test dynamic theories of opinion formation with data from other countries (e.g. Glantz and Mader, 2015). As a result, scholars have lost an important opportunity to assess the generalizability of theories of wartime opinion formation to different political and social contexts. Moreover, the

case of British support for the war in Afghanistan is a more demanding test case for the elasticity of reality perspective than is American support for the war in Iraq. In the Iraq War, President Bush and congressional Democrats frequently transmitted diametrically opposite signals to the public about the war and its conduct. In the Afghan War, however, British party leaders remained united and thus the British example provides the opportunity to examine whether the unfolding of events over time in the media eventually undermines the ability even of elite consensus to bolster public support for war.

We marshal a wide range of public opinion data on British support for the war in Afghanistan that enables us to explore and contrast the impact of events and elite opinion. We look for evidence consistent with the elasticity of reality theory at both the aggregate and individual level. We create an original data set of 2677 content-coded articles in *The Telegraph* and *The Guardian* from the war's beginning in October 2001 through the General Election in May 2010 to provide data on the elite discourse and coverage of battlefield events to which the British public was exposed. The main part of our analysis ends before the formation of the Coalition government of 2010–2015 during which the clear accountability of a single party for major policy decisions for which the British system is famous was absent. We then merge these measures with available aggregate-level opinion data. At the individual level, we look for evidence of mainstream patterns (Zaller, 1992) across two dimensions of Britons' attitudes toward the Afghan War using data from the British Election Study. Finally, we complement the analysis of observational data with an original survey experiment to assess the influence of different elite cues on different partisan publics' support for continuing the British military commitment in Afghanistan in the post-2010 election era of the Coalition Government.

The elasticity of reality and prospective assessments

In articulating the foundations of the elasticity of reality theory, Baum and Groeling (2010) begin with the top-of-the-head model of opinion formation articulated by Zaller and Feldman (1992). When asked to express an opinion or judgment about a war, citizens draw on a range of salient considerations at the top of their head at the moment of the survey response. At the outset of a conflict the public is largely a *tabula rasa* as Almond and Lippmann argued decades ago (Almond, 1950; Lippmann, 1992). Most citizens are ill-attuned to the minutiae of international politics and at a conflict's outset have little information on which to draw. As a result, they logically look to political elites for cues on which they base their wartime opinions and assessments. As a result, the more heavily the balance of elite rhetoric is tilted in favor of the war, the more likely the public is to strongly back the war effort.

However, as a conflict unfolds the information environment, so favorable to elites at a war's outset, changes. Citizens gain access to a greater range and volume of information about the situation on the ground from reports in the mass media (Entman 2004). The informational asymmetries that elites exploit at the outset of a major military action attenuate. The range of considerations on which citizens draw when forming their policy assessments is no longer dominated by elite cues. Rather, information about a conflict's costs, combat casualties, whether progress is being made or setbacks suffered—or at least the media's perception and reporting of it—dilute the potential for elite cues to be decisive in opinion formation.

A second dynamic undermining the ability of both elite rhetoric and changing conditions on the ground to influence public opinion is that over time the public becomes less responsive to new information of any sort. As public attitudes toward a war calcify, more

and more information inconsistent with public predispositions is needed to move levels of popular war support appreciably. As citizens have a larger and larger store of considerations on which to draw, new information is unlikely to alter the balance of considerations in their heads. As a result, over time public support for war will become 'almost wholly unresponsive' to changes in the course of the war or to changes in the patterns of elite rhetoric (Baum and Groeling, 2010: 445).

We make a novel contribution by differentiating between the formation of prospective assessments of what policies the government should pursue moving forward and more retrospective or general judgments of war approval. Existing theory does not distinguish between the public's assessments along these two dimensions. We argue there are strong reasons to expect the elasticity of reality to be 'more open' and for elite rhetoric to be more influential with respect to the formation of citizens' prospective policy preferences, even in the face of sustained negative media coverage of conditions on the ground.

The public may find reports from the media about casualties and adverse events on the ground less informative when answering questions about what future policy the nation should adopt in a conflict than when answering more straightforward questions, such as whether the war was a mistake or whether they support or oppose it. General approval questions and retrospective judgments are easier for most citizens to make. If the dominant media narrative is one of the war's costs and lack of significant progress, then many may rationally conclude that the war was a mistake and that they do not approve of it and the government's prosecution of the conflict, regardless of the valence of the cues transmitted by political elites.

However, questions about the war's future conduct—such as should troops be withdrawn, and if so when —are more complex. For example, the spontaneous emergence of public repatriation ceremonies of fallen soldiers at Wootton-Bassett, which quickly attracted extensive media coverage, transmitted to the public highly visible images of flag-draped caskets in hearses that serve as a stark reminder of the war's human toll. Logically, these and other reminders of a war's costs may lead many to conclude that the conflict was a mistake. However, how this information should be processed and translated into a policy preference for the war's future conduct is more ambiguous. Do high levels of casualties constitute a reason to withdraw? Or might casualties be construed as a reason to stay so that the fallen will not have died in vain. The implications of information about conditions on the ground for such questions are more mixed. As a result, we argue political elites may retain more influence over the formation of public prospective policy preferences by providing context to information about conditions on the ground and by helping citizens translate these considerations into policy preferences for the conflict's future conduct.

If our hypothesis is correct, we should find evidence that exposure to elite cues supportive of the Afghan War should be more successful in depressing public demands for withdrawal than in building support for the war more generally or retrospectively for the initial decision to intervene militarily.

Theoretical expectations

Testing the elasticity of reality theory as articulated by Baum and Groeling, and our theoretical refinement, requires over time measures of the balance of elite rhetoric and wartime information to which the British public was exposed concerning the war in Afghanistan. At key moments throughout the Afghan War, British political leaders of all three major parties publicly proclaimed the justness of the coalition cause in Afghanistan

and the need to stay the course through to victory. However, a significant literature reminds us that the media is the key mechanism through which elite cues are transmitted to the public, and media outlets routinely deem some elite cues more newsworthy than others (e.g. Aday, 2010; Baum and Groeling, 2009; Baum and Potter, 2008; Entman 2004). Indeed, Groeling and Baum (2008) argue that professional incentives and journalistic norms encourage media outlets to give disproportionate coverage to politically costly elite cues and those that inject conflict into the public debate rather than consensus.

To generate measures of the wartime information to which the British public was exposed, we first content-coded 1378 front-page articles addressing the war in Afghanistan in two newspapers with different ideological orientations, *The Telegraph* and *The Guardian*, from the onset of the war in October 2001 up until the British General Election in May 2010. Coders scanned each article to identify all statements regarding the war by a Member of Parliament (MP). Each elite cue was then coded along two dimensions: whether it expressed a judgment that the United Kingdom was or was not right to have used force in Afghanistan, and whether the United Kingdom should stay the course in Afghanistan or begin withdrawing its forces from the region.[2] Quarterly counts of each type of elite cue are summarized in Figure 1.

As shown in the top panel of Figure 1, in the immediate aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, *The Guardian* and *The Telegraph* gave disproportionate attention to the small number of dissenting parliamentary voices arguing against British military involvement in Afghanistan. However, media coverage of elite criticism of the decision to use force quickly waned. The relative paucity of elite cues concerning the Afghan War between mid-2002 and mid-2006 reflects the overall scant coverage devoted to the war by the media during this period. However, as the fighting heated up from 2006 through 2010, the content analysis data shows that the intensity of public expressions of support for the mission also increased.[3] Indeed, from 2006 onward virtually all of the elite cues reported on the front page were supportive of the decision to intervene.

Moreover, as seen in the bottom panel of Figure 1, the balance of elite cues transmitted to the public concerning whether British troops should remain in Afghanistan or withdraw was even more consistently positive. Even at the height of the debate over the coalition troop surge in 2009, expressions of elite support for continuing the mission exceeded calls for withdrawal.

We focus on front-page war coverage because we believe it best reflects the balance of elite rhetoric that most British citizens receive. However, because some cue-givers may have more weight in public opinion formation than others, we also coded every statement concerning the war in Afghanistan by each party leader, as well as the Foreign and Defence Secretaries, and their respective shadow ministers in each of the three main parties. To do this, we searched all coverage in *The Telegraph* and *The Guardian*, not just front-page articles.[4] Each relevant statement was then coded using the same criteria above. Parallel figures of patterns in leader rhetoric on both dimensions are presented in the Supporting Information. The trends are very similar; indeed, the only difference is that the cues transmitted by partisan leaders were almost uniformly positive along both dimensions. Throughout the entire period, the leadership of all three main parties was virtually unanimous in publicly proclaiming that the United Kingdom was right to send troops to Afghanistan and that Britain must not withdraw its forces prematurely. In no instance, did we identify a partisan leader cue that questioned the justness of the decision to use force in Afghanistan. Similarly, throughout the entire time period, the number of leader cues backing the mission's continuation dwarfed those advocating withdrawal.[5]

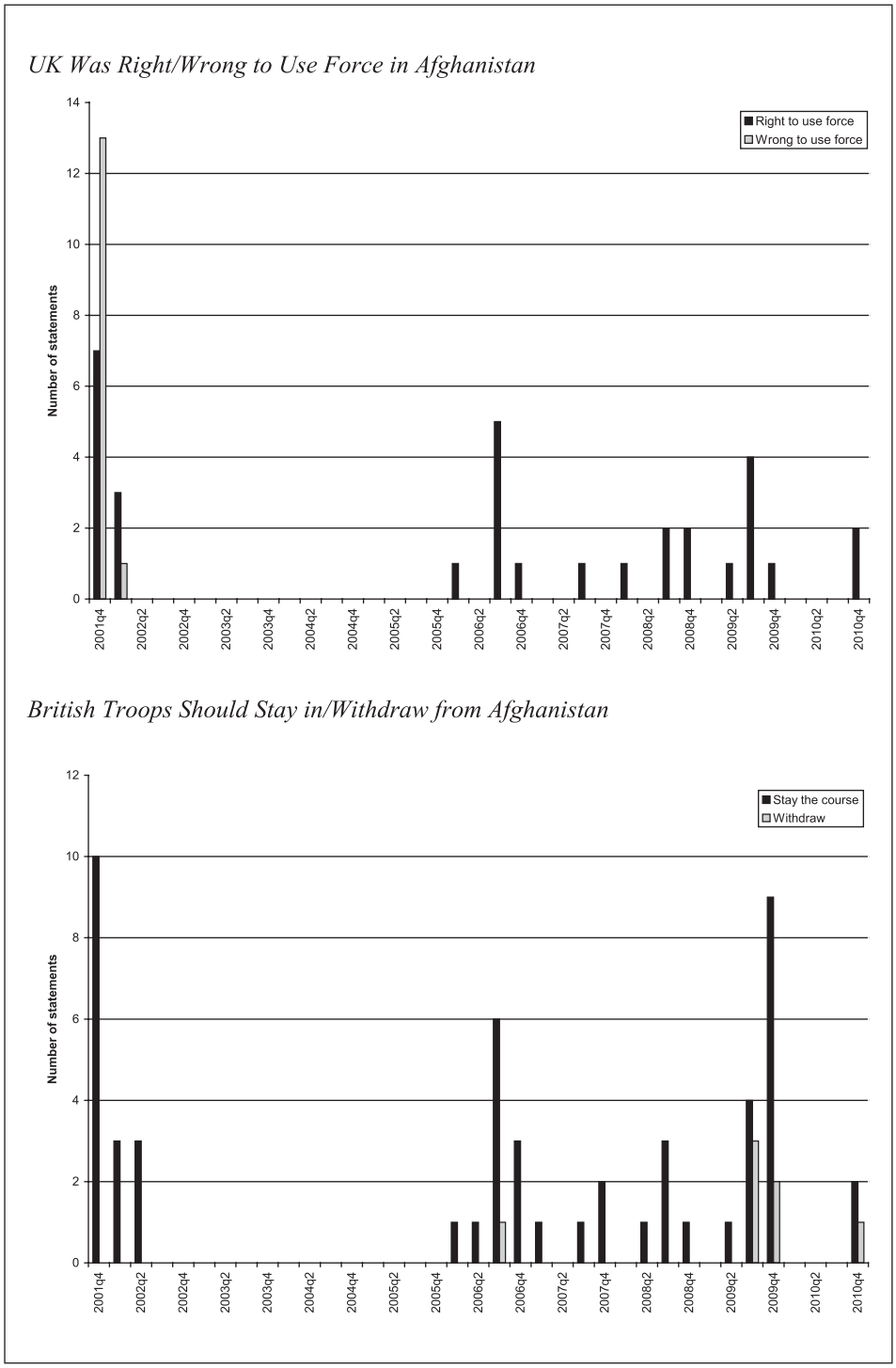

Figure 1. Elite cues reported in front page of *The Telegraph* and *The Guardian*, October 2001–April 2010.

The data unequivocally show that the British political elite united behind the Afghan War early and that this elite consensus remained unshaken. In stark contrast to the demonstrations and backbench revolts that helped undermine British support for the Iraq War (Clarke et al., 2009), significant elite opposition never materialized against the war in Afghanistan, and the public received a near continuous stream of elite cues supporting the conflict from 2001 through the 2010 elections.

The elasticity of reality theory posits that the capacity of this elite consensus to influence public opinion is conditional on the British public not receiving information about adverse trends in the war. As British casualties mount and news coverage of adverse conditions on the ground accumulate, the sway of elite cues on Britons' opinions should wane. As media interpretations of events might also be partial, or biased, we constructed measures of both objective conflict events and content-coded media coverage of the Afghan War.

Given the central place accorded to casualties in much of the event response wartime opinion formation literature (Eichenberg et al., 2006; Gartner, 2008; Gartner and Segura, 1998; Mueller, 1973), we first constructed tallies of British casualties over time. The top left panel of Figure 2 presents both the number of British casualties sustained in Afghanistan in each month and the cumulative death total for British forces throughout the 9-year course of the war. The first real spikes in British casualties occurred in August and September of 2006. This corresponds with the beginning of Operation Mountain Fury, which was designed to clear Taliban insurgents out of their strongholds in the eastern provinces of the country. After this turning point, monthly casualty counts are considerably larger, though there is significant variance. By extension, the cumulative death toll begins to rise during this period, and it accelerates with the heavy fighting of 2008 and 2009.

Of course, most citizens learn of casualties and other conflict events indirectly through the mass media. To generate additional measures of the wartime information to which the British public was exposed through the mass media, we content-coded every front-page article in *The Telegraph* and *The Guardian* from October 2001 through the General Election in May 2010. While we coded for a large number of conflict developments, all largely followed the same trend. As shown in the top right panel of Figure 2, trends in press attention to both the human and financial costs of war largely mirror the objective measure of casualties in the top left panel of Figure 2. Neither paper gave much attention to the costs of war until mid-2006 and the dispatch of British troops to Helmand; from that point, coverage of these costs remained high for the next 4 years with a peak in 2009.[6]

Coders were also asked to identify articles that explicitly described the situation in Afghanistan as improving or deteriorating; trends in articles meeting these criteria are presented in the lower left panel of Figure 2. From the middle of 2006 onward, media coverage emphasizing setbacks on the ground consistently surpassed that detailing progress by coalition forces. Finally, for every front-page article addressing the war, coders were asked to make a summary judgment of whether the article painted the situation in Afghanistan in a positive or negative light. On this metric (lower right quadrant), too, we see that media attention to the Afghan War began to increase in the middle of 2006 and that in only a single quarter from 2006 to 2010 did the volume of positive front-page coverage outweigh negative coverage.[7]

Armed with this data, we construct a series of testable hypotheses at both the aggregate and individual levels. First, if elite opinion leadership theories are correct, the consensus of British political elites in support of the Afghan War should produce strong and stable support for British participation in it at the aggregate level. At the individual level,

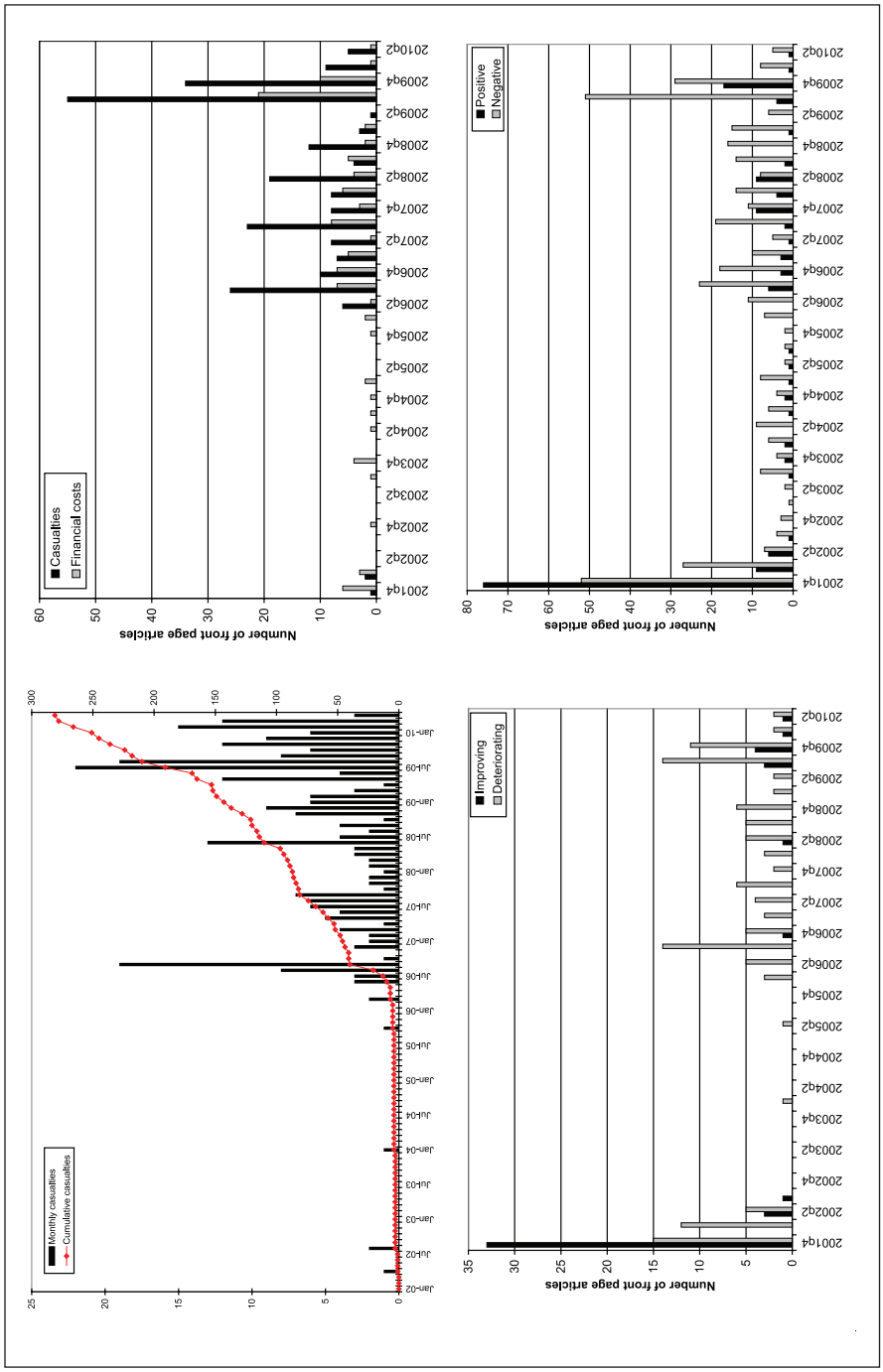

Figure 2. Casualties and media reports of conflict events in Afghanistan, October 2001–April 2010.

the cross-partisan elite consensus suggests that we should observe what Zaller termed a 'mainstream pattern' in public support for war. That is, as political awareness increases, respondents of all three major parties should become more likely to support the war because they are increasingly exposed to elite cues championing the need to stay the course.

By contrast, the elasticity of reality theory predicts that the significant volume of news coverage exposing Britons to reports of British casualties, insurgent attacks, and other setbacks on the ground from 2006 onward should significantly erode and all but eliminate the influence of elite cues on public support for war. Beginning in 2006, media coverage of the war was overwhelmingly negative and emphasized the costs and setbacks plaguing the coalition mission. As a result, at the aggregate level this perspective predicts no significant correlation between elite rhetoric and support for war. At the individual level, it predicts no evidence of a mainstream pattern. The probability of a citizen supporting the war should not increase as his or her attention to politics increases because reality has all but eroded the influence of elite cues on public opinion.

Finally, our proposed refinement to the elasticity of reality theory suggests that elite cues will have more influence on the public's prospective policy preferences than on its retrospective or more general wartime assessments. A united political elite may be able to shape public opinion choices for *current and future* action even while it has lost the capacity to shape opinion on the wisdom of past policies. Thus at the aggregate level, we expect to find correlations between elite rhetoric and support for staying the course in Afghanistan, but not between elite rhetoric and other dimensions of public support for the war. Similarly, at the individual level, we expect to see evidence of a mainstream pattern in models of prospective support for staying the course in Afghanistan. However, we do not expect to see evidence of a mainstream pattern in models of more general war support attitudes.

Aggregate-level analysis

Data limitations are a major reason that the bulk of the wartime opinion literature has focused on cases involving the United States. A host of polls taken in the months immediately following 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks show strong support among the British public for the United Kingdom's military action in Afghanistan. Across 16 polls with different question wordings conducted between September and December 2001, an average of more than two-thirds of Britons backed the war. However, after the initial apparent victory over Taliban forces in 2002, the war in Afghanistan all but disappeared from major media outlets, and there is virtually no polling data until the fighting escalated significantly with Operation Mountain Fury in the summer of 2006.[8]

However, from August 2007 through the British General Election in May 2010, we are able to pool surveys from across firms to create a reasonable time series estimate of patterns in British support for the Afghan War.[9] Following Jacobson (2006) and Baum and Groeling (2010), we pooled data from multiple survey outlets that used very different question wordings to collect as much data as possible. Because of the highly varied and inconsistent question wordings, we interpret all of our results with considerable caution and reiterate that the strength of our conclusions is limited by the reliability of the available data. However, on the whole the available aggregate-level evidence is at least consistent with our theoretical expectations.

The top left panel of Figure 3 presents data from all 64 polling questions regarding the Afghan War identified between 2007 and the 2010 General Election. While there is

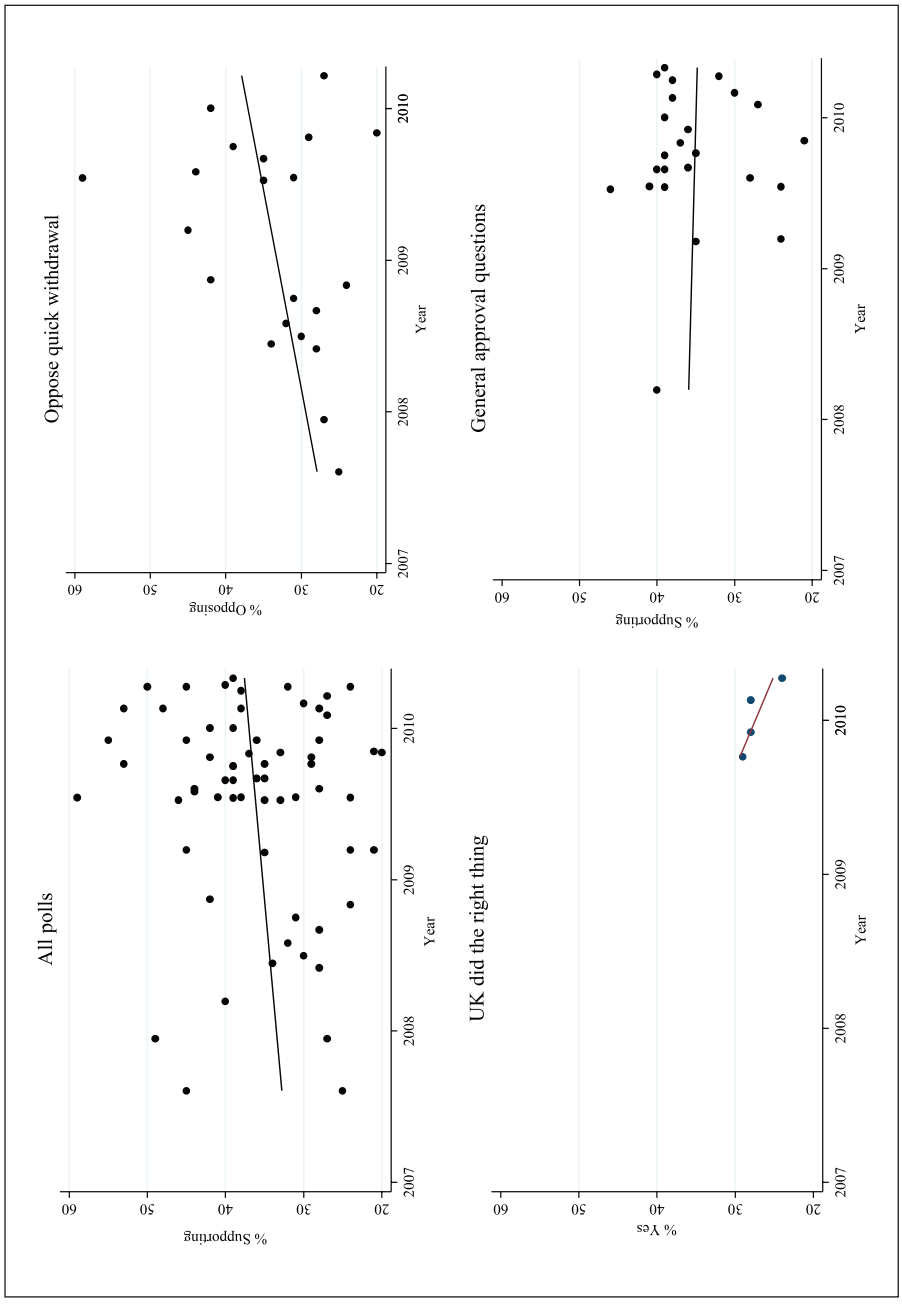

Figure 3. British support for the war in Afghanistan on several dimensions, 2007–2010.

considerable variance across polls, which undoubtedly reflects differences in question wordings and sometimes long temporal gaps between polls, two facts stand out. First, the strikingly low levels of support observed across questions stand in direct contrast to expectations derived from elite opinion leadership theories. Elite consensus failed to sustain robust levels of support for the Afghan War among the British public. Second, a simple best fit time trend line on the scatter plot including all relevant polls suggests a slight gradual increase over time (albeit with high variance about the trend). This, too, is surprising given that casualties continued to mount and bad news systematically outweighed pro-war media coverage throughout the period.

Both patterns may be consistent with the elasticity of reality perspective. Elite consensus could no longer sustain strong public support for war in an information environment dominated by voluminous coverage of war costs and setbacks on the ground. And with so much information already digested, new information about adverse events also lost its power to depress war support even further (though the slight upward trend, if reliable, remains surprising).

However, our theoretical extension to the elasticity of reality theory suggests the need to disaggregate the data. We predicted that elite cues—which were overwhelmingly positive throughout the period—should increase support for staying the course in Afghanistan instead of an immediate withdrawal. However, even strong elite support should have little impact on other dimensions of war support.

The top right panel of Figure 3 plots data from 21 polls querying support for or opposition to an expeditious withdrawal. Consistent with our hypothesis, the polling data on Britons' prospective policy preferences for the Afghan War shows evidence of a fairly strong upward trend over time. During this period, the balance of elite cues reported in major news outlets was overwhelmingly positive, and opposition to an expeditious withdrawal from Afghanistan appears to have increased.

By contrast, along other dimensions of wartime opinion we see no evidence of an increase in war support over time. A series of polls in late 2009 and early 2010 asked Britons for a purely retrospective judgment (lower left quadrant): 'Do you think the UK made a mistake or did the right thing in sending military forces to Afghanistan?' Pro-war elite cues had little influence in rallying support for the initial decision to go to war in Afghanistan. In no poll did more than 30% of Britons say becoming involved in Afghanistan was 'the right thing'. Moreover, the data shows no evidence that such retrospective judgments became more positive over time. Similarly, when looking at polls that asked more general questions about whether Britons supported or approved of the war (lower right quadrant), there is no evidence of an increase over time. If anything, the slope of the simple time trend line is again slightly negative. Thus, consistent with our hypothesis, during a period in which elite rhetoric was overwhelmingly positive despite increasing costs and few signs of progress on the ground, opposition to an expeditious withdrawal from Afghanistan increased substantially, while more retrospective or general measures of war support showed little evidence of systematic change over the period.

For a more formal test, we estimate a pair of simple time series regressions patterned on those conducted by Baum and Groeling (2010) on American support for the Iraq War 2003–2007. The first regression examines the relationship between elite cues supporting staying the course in Afghanistan and public opposition to an expeditious withdrawal of British forces. We first constructed a monthly time series of British opposition to immediate withdrawal from August 2008 through April 2010.[10] Missing values were interpolated using Kalman smoothing (Green et al., 1999). Then, following Baum and Groeling (2010:

Table 1. Elite cues and change in support for war.

	Oppose withdrawal	Approve of war
Net stay the course rhetoric$_{t-1}$	1.44*** (.52)	.26 (1.03)
Net right to use force rhetoric$_{t-1}$	–	.21 (.51)
Casualties$_{t-1}$	−.14 (.13)	.10 (.11)
Net negative media coverage$_{t-1}$	−.16 (.14)	−.08 (.14)
Constant	1.02 (.98)	−.73 (.82)
Observations	32	32
R^2	.29	.07

Ordinary least squares (OLS) regressions of factors influencing change in war support from the preceding to the current month. Standard errors in parentheses. All significance tests are two-tailed.
*p < .10; **p < .05; and ***p < .01.

456), we operationalized our dependent variable as the change in opposition to withdrawal from the preceding to the current month. Our independent variable of interest is the net balance of elite cues supporting or opposing the early withdrawal of British forces. We operationalized this variable as the number of front-page elite cues supporting staying the course in Afghanistan minus the number of front-page elite cues advocating withdrawal in the preceding month.[11] Finally, given the limited number of observations, the model includes only two additional control variables. To account for conflict events, the model includes both the number of casualties in the preceding month and the net valence of front-page media coverage in the preceding month measured as the number of negative stories minus the number of positive stories (in only 2 months did positive coverage outweigh negative news coverage).[12]

The second regression examines the relationship between elite cues and more general public approval of the Afghan War. Toward this end, we constructed a second time series using all other polling data from the lower right quadrant of Figure 3. Missing data again were interpolated using Kalman smoothing. The dependent variable is the change in general approval of the Afghan War over the last month. Both types of elite cues—retrospective support for the decision to intervene militarily and prospective assessments that British troops should remain in Afghanistan—could influence general approval of the war. As a result, this regression included both the net balance of front-page elite cues asserting that the war was just and supporting keeping British troops in Afghanistan. This second regression also controlled for casualties and the net balance of front-page media coverage of the war in the preceding month. Results are presented in Table 1.

Consistent with the elasticity of reality theory, the coefficients for both measures of recent elite cues in the general approval model are substantively small and statistically insignificant. Indeed, both coefficients are smaller than their standard errors. This is consistent with Baum and Groeling's argument that as citizens' wartime assessments calcify, new information about both elites and events will fail to move public opinion significantly.

However, consistent with our theoretical extension, in the model of the British public's prospective policy preferences—opposition to an immediate withdrawal from Afghanistan—the coefficient for elite rhetoric asserting the need to keep British troops in Afghanistan is positive and statistically significant. A 1 standard deviation increase in net positive elite rhetoric is associated with an estimated 1.5% increase in opposition to immediate withdrawal. To be sure, this is a modest effect compared with traditional arguments about the power of elite consensus. However, it does suggest that consistent,

overwhelmingly positive signaling from political elites can bolster support for staying the course, even when coverage of conflict events on the ground is overwhelmingly negative.[13] The coefficients for both events variables, while negative, are statistically insignificant.[14]

Limited data availability, gaps in time series requiring interpolation, and variations in question wordings all necessitate the exercise of caution when interpreting these results. However, the results in Table 1 are at least consistent with our theoretical claims. It is important to remember that a clear majority of Britons continued to oppose the war in Afghanistan and to support the expeditious withdrawal of British troops from the region. Consistent with Baum and Groeling (2010), no amount of public elite support for the mission was able to completely overcome the troubling situation on the ground in the mind of the public. However, the aggregate opinion data is also consistent with our hypothesis that the elasticity of reality is less of a constraint on elite influence over prospective policy preferences. While unwaveringly supportive elite cues seem to have done little to rally general support for the Afghan War or retrospective assessments that joining the United States in Central Asia was the right thing to do, the overwhelmingly pro-war tenor of elite rhetoric in the mass media may be responsible for the observed increase in the British public's willingness to stay the course, and not withdraw immediately.

Individual-level analysis

If elite rhetoric was truly the driving force behind the modest increase in Britons' opposition to immediate withdrawal from 2007 through early 2010, then we should also see evidence of it at the individual level. Accordingly, we now turn to an analysis of individual-level opinion data from the British Election Study.

Prior tests of elite opinion leadership (e.g. Berinsky, 2007, 2009; Zaller, 1992) examine how support for war varies with an individual's level of political awareness and information. Individuals who are the most attentive to politics should be the most likely to embrace the policy preferences articulated by their party's leaders. For example, the first axiom of Zaller's (1992) 'Receive-Accept-Sample' (RAS) model is that for an elite cue to influence opinion—the hearer must receive the message. The likelihood of receiving policy cues transmitted by political elites is a function of the degree of attention a respondent pays to politics. Those who are more attentive to politics, thus, should mirror the patterns of elite discourse more than those who are inattentive.

In the current context, elites from all three major parties, Labour, Conservative, and Liberal Democrat, throughout the war transmitted cues to their co-partisans encouraging them to support the conflict and staying the course in Afghanistan. We have hypothesized that elite opinion leadership is more influential in shaping Britons' prospective war policy preferences than in influencing their more general assessments of a conflict. If correct, we should see evidence of what Zaller termed a 'mainstream pattern' in questions involving the future conduct of the Afghan War, but not in responses to questions about support for the war more generally.

The Continuous Monitoring Survey (CMS) component of the British Election Study included one question measuring Britons' policy preferences for the future of the Afghan War in surveys conducted between June and September of 2008. This question asked respondents for their level of agreement or disagreement with the following statement: 'All British troops in Afghanistan should be brought home immediately'. The pre-campaign internet panel survey from the 2010 British Election Study also asked respondents

Table 2. Ordered logit regressions of factors influencing UK support for Afghanistan.

	Oppose withdrawal	Approve of war
Tory	.389** (.198)	.450*** (.110)
Labour	.095 (.171)	.583*** (.110)
Liberal democrat	−.248 (.284)	.030 (.145)
Attention to politics	.049*** (.018)	.011 (.010)
Tory × attention	.002 (.028)	−010 (.016)
Labour × attention	.082*** (.025)	.054*** (.016)
LibDem × attention	.089** (.042)	.022 (.022)
Male	.710*** (.050)	.609*** (.031)
Age	−011*** (.002)	−.018*** (.001)
Education	.156*** (.018)	.011 (.011)
Union	.006 (.058)	.025 (.039)
Observations	5658	14888
Log-likelihood	−8415.227	−17770.301

Ordered logit regressions. Standard errors in parentheses. All significance tests are two-tailed.
*p < .10; **p < .05; and ***p < .01.

a more general question: whether they approved or disapproved of 'Britain's involvement in the war against the Taliban in Afghanistan'.[15]

The ordered logit regressions presented in Table 2 model war support on both dimensions as a function of a respondent's partisanship, attention to politics, the interaction of the two, and several demographic control variables.[16] If elite opinion leadership is taking place along a given dimension, we would expect the coefficients for all three party–attention interactions to be positive and statistically significant. As a partisan's attention to politics increases so, too, should his or her probability of receiving and incorporating trusted pro-war elite cues, increasing his or her probability of supporting the war accordingly.

In the model of opposition to withdrawal, the main effect coefficient on the political awareness measure is positive and statistically significant. This is suggestive of a sophistication effect; across all Britons, as political attention increased so too did opposition to withdrawal. However, strongly consistent with our hypothesis of elite opinion leadership, the coefficients for all three partisan–awareness interaction variables are also positive, and those for Labour and Liberal Democrat identifiers are statistically significant. Politically aware Labour and Liberal Democrat partisans receive more trusted, co-partisan elite cues backing the war and are more likely to oppose a precipitous withdrawal of British forces from Afghanistan than are other Britons with identical levels of political awareness. By contrast, in the model of general approval of the Afghan War, only one of the partisan–awareness interactions is statistically significant (for Labour identifiers) and the effect is smaller in magnitude. This suggests that elite opinion leadership was less influential in shaping more general attitudes toward the war in Afghanistan.

To illustrate the effects graphically, Figure 4 presents predicted probabilities, obtained from simulations, of war support for the median member of each partisan group as political attention increases while holding all other variables constant at their means or medians. The top panel plots opposition to withdrawal from Afghanistan, and the bottom panel plots approval of British involvement in the Afghan War.

Consistent with our hypothesis, Figure 4 shows clear evidence of elite influence and a mainstream pattern in public opposition to withdrawal but only modest evidence of elite

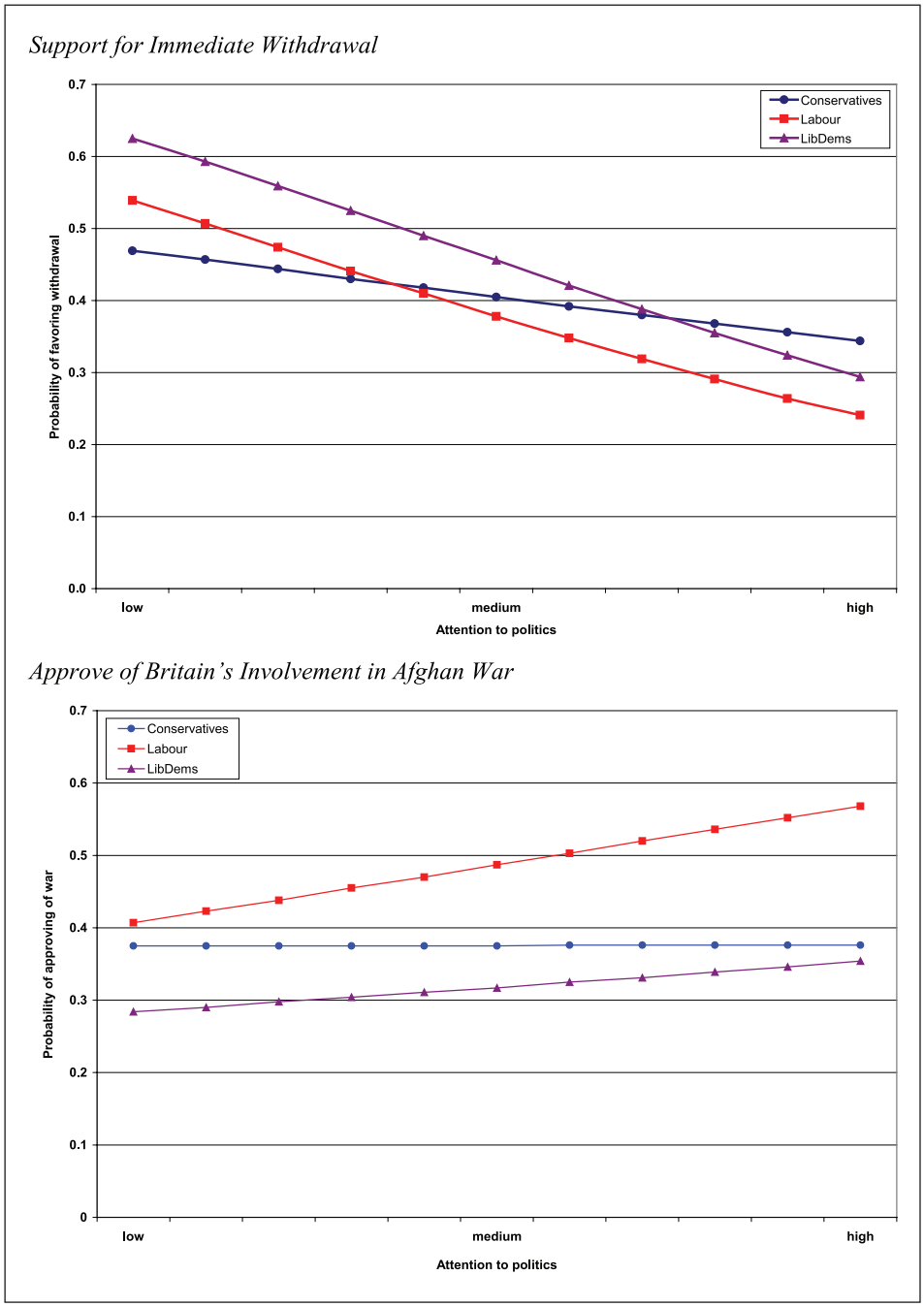

Figure 4. War support by attention to politics, individual-level analysis.

influence in the more general case of approval of the Afghan War. Identifiers of all three major parties became significantly less likely to support a quick withdrawal from Afghanistan as their levels of political information increased.[17] Increasing political

awareness from its minimum to its maximum value decreased the predicted probability of the median Labour or Liberal Democrat respondent supporting a quick withdrawal from Afghanistan by roughly 30%. This pattern is strongly consistent with elite opinion leadership. More politically aware partisans were more likely to hear and receive elite cues championing the need to stay the course in Afghanistan, and they responded accordingly.

However, in the model of individual responses to the general war approval question, we see little evidence of a mainstream pattern. Among Conservative and Liberal Democratic identifiers, approval of the war increases only very slightly as political awareness rises.[18] Among Labour identifiers, we see a stronger relationship that is consistent with Labour elites rallying the most politically attentive segment of their base in the mass public. However, the magnitude of this effect is roughly half that observed in the withdrawal model.

These results are consistent with our argument that the elasticity of reality may have a disproportionate impact on the capacity of elite cues to influence retrospective and more general dimensions of war support. Events may overwhelm even a supportive elite consensus in shaping the public's general assessments of a war. However, elites may retain greater influence over the formation of the public's prospective policy preferences.[19]

Experimental analysis

The observational evidence at both the aggregate and individual level suggests that British elites may have retained some influence over Britons' prospective preferences for the war, even as they failed to rally war support on other more retrospective or general dimensions. This led us to conduct one final round of analysis, this time with experimental data. While the patterns in the observational data are strongly consistent with the argument that elites retained some measure of influence over Briton's prospective policy preferences, the degree of control afforded by an experiment allows us to make more concrete causal claims.

To assess the potential of elite cues to shape the British public's prospective policy preferences for the war in Afghanistan in the era of the Coalition Government, we embedded an original experiment within an April 2011 YouGov survey with a nationally representative sample of roughly 1500 British adults. Respondents were randomly assigned to one of five experimental groups. All respondents received the following prompt: 'Prime Minister David Cameron argues that progress is being made in Afghanistan and that British troops should stay until Afghan forces are ready to assume security responsibilities. He anticipates that this will happen by 2015'. Respondents randomly assigned to the control group were told no additional information.

Subjects in the four treatment groups were randomly assigned to information about the views of Conservative and Labour Party MPs. Those in the first treatment group were informed that Conservative MPs backed the Prime Minister's position. These subjects were told,

> Some Conservative MPs support the PM's position. These Conservative MPs argue that British forces are stabilizing many parts of Afghanistan previously controlled by the Taliban. Withdrawing British troops prematurely would jeopardize these gains and undermine Britain's efforts to combat terrorism.

Subjects in the second treatment group, by contrast, were informed of dissension within the Conservative ranks. These subjects were told,

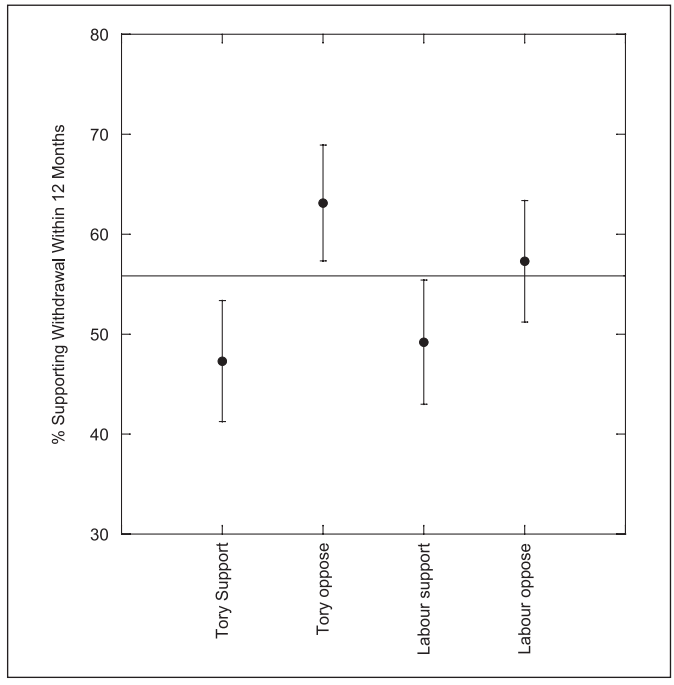

Figure 5. Support for withdrawal within 12 months, across treatment groups.
Solid line at 55.8% is the level of support for withdrawal observed in the control group. I-bars present 90% confidence intervals around each mean value.

> Some Conservative MPs oppose the PM's position and instead favor an earlier withdrawal of British troops from Afghanistan. These Conservative MPs argue that continued attacks by Taliban insurgents and the weakness of the Karzai government show that there is no UK military solution to Afghanistan's civil war.

Finally, subjects in the third and fourth read identically worded prompts that reported the position of Labour MPs either supporting or opposing the Prime Minister's plan to keep UK troops in Afghanistan through 2015.

All subjects were then asked the same question: 'Thinking about the British troops now in Afghanistan, do you think the Government should […]' followed by a number of options ranging from immediate withdrawal, regardless of conditions on the ground in Afghanistan, to withdrawing British forces only after Afghan troops are ready to assume security responsibilities, even if this does not occur until after 2015. To ease interpretation of the results, respondents were collapsed into two categories, those who supported withdrawal within the next 12 months, regardless of conditions on the ground, and those who did not. Because respondents were randomly assigned to either the control or elite support treatment group, the differences in means across groups are unbiased. The percentages supporting an expeditious withdrawal in each experimental group, along with 90% confidence intervals, are presented in Figure 5.

A majority of Britons in the control group, 56%, answered that they favored bringing British troops home from Afghanistan within the next 12 months. However, the experiment also suggests that British preferences for a quick withdrawal were malleable to

supportive or opposing cues from political elites. Both Conservative and Labour MP's cues backing the Prime Minister's decision to stay the course in Afghanistan for another 4 years significantly decreased support for withdrawal and to roughly equal degrees. The supporting cue from Conservative MPs decreased support for withdrawal by 9%, while an identical supportive cue attributed to Labour MPs reduced support for withdrawal by 7%. To be sure, even in the supportive elite cue treatment groups just under 50% of Britons supported an early withdrawal from Afghanistan, years before the Prime Minister's intended date. However, the increases in support for staying the course are both statistically and substantively significant.

Parliamentary opposition to the Prime Minister's position also significantly influenced support for withdrawal. Conservative MP's opposition to the Prime Minister's 2015 target increased support for a quick withdrawal by 7% from the figure observed in the control group. And the gap in support for withdrawal across the Conservative support and opposition treatments was a very large 16%. Opposition to the Prime Minister among Labour MPs had little effect on support for withdrawal; the figure (57%) is statistically indistinguishable from that observed in the control group. However the 8% difference across the Labour support and opposition treatments is again statistically significant and substantively meaningful.

Thus, the experiment shows that even in 2011, almost a decade since the 9/11 terror attacks, elite cues still held the power to shape Britons' prospective policy preferences for the war in Afghanistan in modest, but significant ways. Undoubtedly, the opinions of many had calcified over the intervening years following a steady flow of news reports emphasizing setbacks to coalition efforts. Yet, on the crucial question of whether British troops should stay or go, elite rhetoric was still able to sway the opinions of significant numbers of Britons.

Conclusion

We began by asking whether experience outside the United States supports the notion that unified elites can maintain support for a protracted war. Our conclusions might seem almost contradictory. The British political elite, though unified, could not maintain majority support for the Afghan War. However, across a range of data, we find evidence that British elites were able to rally modestly public support for the continuation of the conflict.

These results have important theoretical implications for scholarly understanding of wartime opinion dynamics as well as practical implications for policymakers. A range of observational and experimental data suggest that both elite rhetoric and conflict events affect public support for war but to varying degrees over time and across dimensions of wartime support. The British experience in Afghanistan reminds scholars that elite consensus cannot always maintain strong and stable mass public support for military action. Instead, consistent with the elasticity of reality theory, events can sometimes overtake elites and limit their capacity to rally popular support for war.

However, elites may retain more influence over some dimensions of wartime opinion formation than they do over others. Even when British elites were unable to influence Britons' retrospective assessments of the Afghan War, we found considerable evidence, both observational and experimental, that they retained some capacity to bolster Britons' support for staying the course in Afghanistan. Translating basic information about conditions on the ground into prospective policy preferences is more difficult

and ambiguous for citizens than using this information to form more retrospective or general wartime assessments. As a result, when elites stand united behind a war, our evidence suggests that elites may play an important role in shaping how some citizens process such information when deciding their preferences about the conflict's future conduct. Both event response and elite opinion leadership theories have considerable merit; however, the relative influence of each factor varies over the course of a conflict and across prospective and retrospective dimensions of war support.

Our findings also have important implications for policymakers and public policy outcomes. The differential capacity of elites to shape prospective policy preferences while having little influence over retrospective assessments helps explain how many highly unpopular wars can have smaller proportions of the public calling for their expeditious conclusion. For example, throughout 1967 and 1968 roughly 50% of Americans admitted that they believed the Vietnam War to have been a mistake. However, support for withdrawal lagged far below that figure, averaging in the mid 30s in most polls. Similarly, during the Iraq War as early as 2005 a majority of Americans judged the war a mistake. However, a much smaller percentage of the public favored a quick withdrawal from Iraq.[20] As a result, the democratic constraint on costly military adventures may not be as strong as sometimes posited. Mounting war costs may dominate citizens' retrospective wartime assessments, irrespective of the positions taken by political elites. However, even when the public appears to have made up its mind on the merits of the war generally, it may be more open to elite influence on questions of how best to proceed, particularly if there is bipartisan support for staying the course.

Finally, future research should investigate whether similar dynamics hold in other policy areas where public uncertainty over ultimate outcomes may allow elites continued influence over public opinion even when a policy, in the abstract, enjoys little support.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Notes

1. By contrast, several recent studies of British support for the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan downplay the influence of elite cues: Reifler et al. (2011, 2014). Jakobsen and Ringsmose (2014) argue that Danish elites were able to maintain strong support for Danish involvement in the war in Afghanistan by emphasizing not overall victory but the attainment of intermediate and more manageable policy goals. However, this elite consensus failed to produce even majority support for Denmark's involvement in the coalition for most of 2006–2009. Of course, there are many analyses of wartime opinion dynamics outside of the American case, including Lai and Reiter's (2005) and Tir and Singh's (2013) comparative analyses of rally around the flag effects and the extensive literature on the forces driving British public opinion during the Falklands war (inter alia Clarke et al., 1990; Norpoth, 1987; Sanders et al., 1987). However, most evidence for elite cue theory has relied on US data.
2. For full coding details, including a discussion of inter-coder reliability, see Supporting Information.
3. This is not to say that elites were never quoted in media coverage criticizing the war. However, the vast majority of such statements reflected criticisms of the Labour government and its prosecution of the war, not the justness or necessity of the war itself.
4. This entailed content-coding an additional 1299 articles (i.e. any article containing the word 'Afghanistan' and at least one of the last names of the relevant leaders). Of course, not all of these articles contained relevant elite cues about the war.
5. Conservative and Liberal Democrat leaders were occasionally critical of the Government's conduct of the war—at times, stridently so. However, in very rare instances did any leader openly advocate withdrawal.
6. Media coverage of insurgent attacks (available in the Supporting Information) also tracked more objective measures of battlefield developments.

7. An alternative visualization presenting the percentage of coverage that was negative in tone or that described the situation as deteriorating is presented in the Supporting Information.
8. After a November 2006 ICM poll, there is an almost 9-month gap until the next poll on Afghan War attitudes conducted in August 2007. For a complete time series of all available polling from 2001 through 2010, see Supporting Information.
9. The decision to end our analysis of aggregate-level polling data with the May 2010 election insures that a single partisan regime is in government for the entire period. Similarly, all of the individual-level data we analyze from the British Election Study (BES) is also from the Labour era. It is possible that opinion dynamics might change in the period of the Coalition Government. We do, however, use an experiment to test our main argument and finding: that elite support for staying the course erodes support for an early withdrawal, even during the Coalition Government.
10. This is the period for which we have the most consistent polling data with the shortest temporal gaps.
11. In the Supporting Information, we also explore whether elite cues concerning whether or not the United Kingdom was right or wrong to use force in Afghanistan also affect public opposition to withdrawal. We find little evidence that they do.
12. We operationalized our dependent variable as the change in public opinion and our independent variables as levels observed in the preceding month for three reasons. First, this strategy matches that employed by Baum and Groeling (2010), upon whose work we build. Second, using the change in opinion as the dependent variable eliminates concerns about stationarity that could complicate the analysis (Box-Steffensmeier and Smith 1996; DeBoef and Granato 1997). Third, theoretically we believe the level of elite cues—not changes in them—should affect shifts in approval. For example, we believe that consistently high levels of elite opposition to withdrawal (for which the change in elite rhetoric would be 0) will continue to erode public support for withdrawal over time.
13. While we believe that our measures of front-page elite cues best reflect the balance of elite rhetoric that was transmitted to the average Briton, as a robustness check, we re-estimated both models in Table 1 with measures of partisan leader rhetoric from anywhere within *The Telegraph* and *The Guardian*. Results are substantively similar and presented in the Supporting Information.
14. As a robustness check, following Baum and Groeling (2010), to control for potential autocorrelation we re-estimated both models with the lag of the dependent variable as a control. These results are substantively identical and presented in the Supporting Information.
15. The withdrawal question was measured on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree with a neutral middle option. The pre-campaign 2010 approval question was measured on a 4-point Likert scale with no neutral option. These are the only polls that included a measure of attention to politics for which individual-level data is available. Some measure of attention to politics is key to looking for evidence of a mainstream pattern.
16. Specific factual knowledge questions, such as those used in many other studies to create scales of respondents' level of political information (e.g. Delli Carpini and Keeter, 1997; Zaller, 1992), were not included in the BES Continuous Monitoring Surveys (CMSs). As a result, the analysis relies instead on a self-reported political attention measure on a 10-point scale. This item has a mean of 6.2 and a standard deviation of 2.5.
17. However, it is important to note that the effect for Conservatives is no greater than for non-partisan identifiers. Figure 4 also highlights the noteworthy fact that the most attentive Conservative supporters were the most likely of all highly attentive Britons to support immediate withdrawal.
18. We also find little evidence of a sophistication effect; the coefficient on the uninteracted political awareness variable is also small and statistically insignificant.
19. Unfortunately, the temporal gap between the withdrawal and approval questions raises the possibility that the diminished capacity for elite influence observed in the general approval model is due to the passage of more time, as opposed to evidence of a differential capacity across prospective and retrospective/general dimensions of war support. However, we would emphasize that when the withdrawal question was asked in the summer and fall of 2008, the information environment was already quite saturated after 7 years of war (2 years since British troops were dispatched to Helmand) and voluminous media coverage.
20. See, for example, Gallup Poll, 6–11 October 1967, USGALLUP.752.Q13A; Gallup Poll, 7–12 August 1967, USGALLUP.766.Q10; CNN/Gallup Poll, 16–18 December 2005, USGALLUP.05DEC16.R11; CNN/Gallup Poll, 30 November 2005, USAIPOCNUS2005-57; CNN/Gallup poll, 11–13 November 2005, USGALLUP.05NOV11.R20.

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