

GEORGE BUSH, THE RALLY EFFECT, AND THE PARTISAN POPULAR PRESS

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The attacks of September 11, 2001 were the defining moment of the Bush presidency. They, and the president's initial response to them, pushed his approval rating to record highs, transformed his public image, and forged a political consensus throughout the country that had been absent for decades—a textbook example of the “rally ‘round the flag effect.” This rally, however, was remarkable for both its strength and its length. In early October Bush's approval rating stood at 90 per cent—the highest ever recorded by Gallup. And, although his public approval soon began to slide as controversy over his policies reemerged, his numbers did not fall back to the pre-9/11 level until two years after the attacks. In this paper, we will use content analysis to examine the response of some of the most well-known political opinion magazines—which we will refer to as the “partisan popular press”—to this remarkable period in the political history of the United States. Did these publications “rally” to the president's side? Was he treated more positively by them as his popularity grew? Were his policies more likely to be endorsed, or at least tacitly accepted?

These questions should be of more than casual interest. The partisan popular press represents the print component of an increasingly important arena of political debate and conflict that includes talk radio, political television programming, and a

rapidly growing list of Internet sites. While all of these are worthy of examination, there are several reasons for focusing on political opinion magazines. First, we could find little in the literature that examines these publications specifically. Second, because their content is pure commentary and opinion they represent a form of political communication different from the typical object of study for political scientists, the mainstream print media, whose primary function is to report and interpret political events. Finally, because it is reasonable to assume that their readers are among the most politically interested and active people in the country, they potentially have influence far beyond that which their circulation figures would indicate.¹

We will use Richard Brody's (1991) explanation of trends and variations in presidential approval as the theoretical framework for our analysis. We begin, therefore, by outlining his argument and his application of it to the Bush presidency. Then, using Brody as a point of departure, we will return to our questions.

The Rally Effect and the Media

Since the 1930s, the Gallup organization has been asking Americans, "Do you approve or disapprove of the way [NAME OF THE INCUMBENT] is handling his job as president?" By the 1960s, political scientists recognized that presidential approval increased in times of national crisis. It was not until the 1970s, however, that John Mueller (1970; 1985 [1973]) gave this phenomenon a name—the "rally-'round-the-flag" effect—defined it operationally,² and used it to explain temporary spikes in presidential approval as measured by responses to Gallup's question. Mueller's path-breaking work

¹ It is worth noting that each of these publications maintains an Internet site, which considerably expands its readership.

² "In general, a rally point must be associated with an event which (1) is international and (2) involves the United States and particularly the president directly; and it must be (3) specific, dramatic, and sharply focused" (1985 [1973]): 209. Using these criteria, the 9/11 attacks certainly qualify.

inspired a number of scholars to refine and extend his analysis. In a recent review and analysis of this literature, Gronke and Newman estimate there are “over 70 books, articles, and chapters that attempt to explain approval ratings” (2003: 501).³

The mass media are given a more important role as this body of work developed. Mueller uses the rally effect as an independent variable, and does not attempt to explain it. In his model, the media’s role is simply to report the events that produce the rally. Once the crisis passes, the media and the public turn to other things and the rally subsides. For Mueller, rallies are a result of “patriotic fervor,” and the public reacts to the event rather than the media’s reporting of it.

In his critique of Muller’s work, Kernell (1978) attributes the strength and duration of rally effects to “media priming.” The public, in this view, assumes events are important if the media covers them. They are thought to be more important if there is more coverage, and that coverage lasts longer. When the event is no longer “news,” in the public’s mind the crisis has passed and the president’s approval drops accordingly.

Brody (1991) gives the media a more complex role in the public’s assessment of the president—that of conveying the views of “opinion leaders” to the public. For Brody, it is not the amount, but the *content* of the coverage of an event that affects presidential approval. He summarizes his argument as follows:

The central claim . . . is that the American people form and revise their impressions of the quality of presidential performance on evidence contained in reports of politics and policy outcomes—political news—in the news media. Since the public is not always certain what news implies about the success or failure of policy, it often takes its guidance on the meaning of the news from political opinion leaders. The president, other elected officials, respected members of the press, and a handful of other commentators who have earned the trust of at least a segment of the public

³ It is not our purpose to review all of this literature here. Interested readers will find Gronke and Newman’s essay an excellent place to start.

affect opinion by interpreting events that are unclear in their political meaning. The news carries these interpretations to the public along with the details of the events themselves.

This process . . . is not innocent of politics. The interpretations placed on political events by opinion leaders are politically motivated. The reactions of members of the public to the events and to the interpreters of events are guided by predispositions such as partisanship, ideology, and political attitudes such as cynicism, respect, and trust. In a word, the process of opinion formation is “politicized.” (4)

Applying this approach to rally events, Brody argues that when a crisis occurs, the president’s usual opponents are generally supportive or silent. This leads the public to conclude that the president’s actions are worthy of support, and this feeling is reflected in their responses to Gallup’s approval question. Once dissenters begin to re-emerge, the public takes notice and the approval rating drops.

But Brody considers only the news reports and the reactions of opinion leaders as reported in the mainstream media. While he does not mention the partisan popular press specifically, he does hint at its role in the process of assessing the president when he includes “other commentators” along with public officials and “respected” journalists among the opinion leaders (1991: 4). But later he comments that the syndicated columnists who appear on the op-ed pages appear to have no influence on the public’s assessment of the president during a rally event, although they are the one group of opinion leaders that almost always contains a few nay-sayers, no matter how popular he may be. Maybe, Brody says, they are not really influential at all, but he concludes by calling this “a puzzle” (76-77).

Bush's Rally

In a more recent article, Brody (2003) analyzes George W. Bush's approval ratings in the first two years of his presidency, and concludes that their pattern conforms nicely to his model of opinion formation. He demonstrates that Bush had a relatively brief "honeymoon" period (about seven weeks), followed by a gradual decline in his popularity prompted, he concludes, by events (the introduction of the president's first budget; the approval of his tax cuts; his "missile shield" proposal; Jim Jeffords's party switch, which made the Democrats the majority in the Senate) that sorted out his "hard" (mostly Republicans) and "soft" (mostly Democrats and independents) supporters. His approval ratings during this second period hovered between fifty and sixty per cent. The 9/11 attacks boosted the president's approval to an average of eighty-seven per cent in the seven polls taken in following two weeks. Using his interpretation of rally events, Brody argues that Bush's almost universal approval resulted from two things: the absence of dissenting voices, and the virtual monopoly on information and interpretation by the White House. By early October debate over the civil liberties implications of the administration's actions and proposals for dealing with the terrorist threat demonstrated that the consensus among opinion leaders had begun to crack (12-13).

The "9/11 crisis" rally was followed by the "war/policy" phase of Bush's first two years, where public's patriotic fervor and the elite consensus were replaced by assessments of the results of the military actions in Afghanistan and the anticipated invasion of Iraq. Now, Brody argues, the reports of the war in Afghanistan and the debate over the desirability of carrying it into Iraq shaped the public's view of the president. Over the final months of his first two years in office, Bush saw a slow but

steady erosion of his support, mainly among Democrats and independents. This was only accelerated by the Enron scandal and increasing criticism of the performance of the economy (13-18).

We believe that there is much to commend in Brody’s theoretical model and his analysis of George W. Bush’s first two years in office. But his “puzzle” over the impact of the “op-ed” pages on public opinion begs for an explanation. We hope to at least begin to provide one.

Data and Method of Analysis

Our analysis covers the two-year period from July 1, 2000 to June 30, 2002— from the 2000 presidential campaign to the establishment of an interim government in Afghanistan, but before the 2002 election campaign is in full swing and the debate over Iraq becomes widespread—although we will focus on the months preceding and following the 9/11 attacks. We examine four political opinion magazines, two from the left side of the political spectrum, and two from the right. For comparison’s sake, we also look at one weekly news magazine. The five publications we analyze are profiled in Table 1.

TABLE 1
PUBLICATIONS USED IN THE ANALYSIS

| | <i>THE NATION</i> | <i>THE NEW REPUBLIC</i> | <i>TIME</i> | <i>THE WEEKLY STANDARD</i> | <i>NATIONAL REVIEW</i> |
|-----------------|-------------------|-------------------------|-------------|----------------------------|------------------------|
| FOUNDING DATE | 1865 | 1914 | 1923 | 1995 | 1955 |
| CIRCULATION | 180,000 | 60,000 | 4,000,000 | 80,000 | 150,000 |
| POLITICAL SLANT | liberal | neoliberal | news weekly | neoconservative | conservative |

Some general impressions of how these magazines have treated George W. Bush can be gained by simply glancing at their content. Their positions are fairly easy to identify:

- *The Nation* was the most consistent in its opposition to Mr. Bush and his policies. There was a short internal squabble over the question of whether the United States was justified in attacking Afghanistan, but the magazine never wavered in opposing the invasion of Iraq.
- *The New Republic* was anti-Bush during the 2000 election campaign, but moderated its criticism of him after he became president. It was still negative until 9/11, after which it quickly advocated regime change in Iraq as an essential element of the War on Terrorism. Its editorial position was that Bush's *domestic* policies could be criticized and debated, but the country needed to unite behind the president's attempts to protect the United States from terrorists.
- *Time*, as a news magazine, offered more balanced coverage of Mr. Bush. Many of its articles included quotations from both supporters and opponents after the election, and there seemed to be a more positive take after 9/11.
- *The Weekly Standard* was the most consistently positive publication during the period. It openly supported Mr. Bush in the election, and was generally approving of his policies once he took office. It was very supportive of the military action in Afghanistan, and it pushed for an invasion of Iraq. It is said to be popular in the Bush White House.
- *National Review*, the favorite of the Reagan administration, was more guarded in its assessment of Mr. Bush. Always somewhat suspicious because it was disappointed in his father's White House record, it was never as enthusiastic about him as *The Weekly Standard* except during the 2000 election, when he was considered to be far less objectionable than Al Gore.

Our content analysis was designed to test and quantify these general impressions.

We analyzed and coded 1952 articles in the five publications. The articles were collected by searching two data bases: *Academic Search Premier* and (in the case of *The Weekly Standard*) *LexisNexis Academic*. In order to be included in the analysis, an article had to include the search term "Bush" at least twice, in reference to the current president. We therefore consciously excluded articles that included only the words "president," "administration," or "White House." Only articles were coded. Editorials, letters to the

editor, book reviews, and short items one or two paragraphs in length, such as those in the “Notebook” section of *Time*, or “On the Right” in *National Review*, were excluded.

Articles were weighted to reflect their significance by assigning a score to each based on the following criteria: (1) length, (2) placement, and (3) illustrations. Additional weight was given to articles longer than 1500 words, cover stories, illustrations of Bush on the cover, and illustrations of Bush with the article (a rare occurrence in all of the publications except *Time*). Articles that met one of the criteria were given a weight of 2; those that satisfied more than one were weighted 3. All others were assigned a weight of 1. Weighting produced a larger total N of 3173. Word counts are provided in *Academic Search Premier* and *LexisNexis*. Bound volumes of *Time*, *National Review*, *The New Republic*, and *The Nation* in the Centre College library were used to locate illustrations. Issue covers of *The Weekly Standard*, which is not in the Centre College library collection, were obtained from the publication’s web site archive, and the online version of the articles in *LexisNexis* included brief descriptions of any accompanying illustrations. In some instances, more than one article was coded as a cover story. This occurred when two stories were given equal emphasis on the cover, or when the article appeared on the cover as one of a series on a single subject (the 2000 election, for example). Only pictures of, or drawings clearly depicting the president were scored; one point was added for a cover picture, and one for a picture with the article, regardless of size. If there was more than one picture with an article, it still received only one point. After a weight was applied to each article, its treatment of the president was classified as positive, neutral/mixed, or negative.

Articles were also classified according to subject matter—personal or political articles about Bush, articles about domestic policy, or articles about foreign policy. Articles were coded in only one category. If an article contained material in more than one classification, it was placed in the category in which the bulk of the material fit. Each article, therefore, was categorized according to its subject (personal/political, domestic policy, foreign policy), and its content (positive, neutral/mixed, negative), and then weighted.⁴

We will use the data to address three general questions. First, to what extent did these publications “rally” in a general way, that is, was their coverage of the president more favorable on the whole after 9/11, and, if so, how much? Second, how was President Bush treated as a politician and a human being? Before 9/11, he was often thought of as honest and friendly (“the kind of a guy you’d like to have a beer with”), but not particularly intelligent, inquisitive, or articulate (“a dim bulb”). One of his campaign slogans in 2004 was “strong, principled leadership.” Clearly, some sort of transformation had taken place in the public’s collective mind. To what extent was this reflected in these publications? Finally, how did the president’s popularity influence the views expressed about his policies? In the face of substantial public support for the president, how did these publications deal with his policy proposals and decisions? We will look at both domestic and foreign policy to determine whether there were any differences in the way they were treated.

⁴ Each of the authors coded articles in all of the publications in an attempt to reduce systematic bias. An examination of a ten per cent sample of articles produced an agreement rate of 91 per cent on the content categories and 85 per cent on the treatment of the president. Differences occurred most frequently between the policy and personal/political content categories and the positive and neutral/mixed or negative and neutral/mixed treatment categories. We believe that the overall distribution of articles on these two variables was not systematically affected by the coding procedure.

Did the Partisan Popular Press Rally?

After sliding to 51 per cent in early September 2001, the president's approval rating climbed to 86 and then 90 per cent in the two weeks after 9/11, eclipsing the previous high of 89 per cent recorded by his father after the Gulf War in 1991. It did not drop below 80 for good until March 2002, and did not return to its pre-9/11 level until September 2003, two full years after the attacks.

During this period—particularly in its early stages—much concern was expressed about the lack of criticism coming from public officials, interest groups, and the media at home or abroad. Congress, at the president's request, overwhelmingly passed a resolution approving the use of force to combat terrorism. The *Washington Post* noted that the Senate passed the measure “without a single dissent—indeed, without debate” (Von Drehle, 2001). Foreign correspondents reported that there was “no room for dissent” in America (Engel 2001), and that Americans “are in no mood to tolerate criticism” (Haupt 2001). There were some widely reported incidents involving reporters or other well-known figures who were the targets of public outrage for their critical comments,⁵ and presidential press secretary Ari Fleischer remarked that “people have to watch what they say and watch what they do” (Carter and Berringer 2001). The *New York Times* noted that most of the criticism of the United States from abroad had been “muted” (Pollack 2001), and as late as December reported that Democrats were still trying to work out a strategy for criticizing George Bush's policies without attacking

⁵ In the most talked-about of these incidents, host Bill Maher of the television talk show “Politically Incorrect” was attacked for challenging the president's statement that the hijackers who flew into the World Trade Center and the Pentagon were cowards. He said that those who launch cruise missiles on targets miles away are cowardly, not people who fly into buildings. Several sponsors pulled their advertising from the show. Maher later apologized, but his network contract was not renewed. Fleischer specifically mentioned the incident when he made his remark at a press briefing. Newspaper reporters in Texas and Oregon were fired after criticizing the president for not flying directly to Washington after he was informed that the attacks had taken place. Several other examples are cited by Carter and Berringer.

George Bush (Rosenbaum 2001). For Brody, this is a perfect example of why approval ratings remain high during a rally event.

But at the same time there *was* criticism. As early as September 17, the *Washington Post* was reporting that behind the outward support the president was receiving there was “muted dissent” among Democrats concerned about his response to the attacks (Harris 2001). Surprisingly, dissent also was being reported from conservative groups by early October (Roth 2001). Brody’s analysis of presidential approval would lead us to predict that the partisan popular press might join the rally in the face of such overwhelming presidential support, but his remarks about syndicated columnists points to a more enthusiastic response from the right than the left, as well as possible criticism from all sides.

To determine whether the president and his policies received better treatment after 9/11 and, if so, for how long, we first examined the data for all twenty-four months and divided it into time segments which after January 2001 roughly follow those identified by Brody. The first is the Campaign period, which runs from July through October 2000. The Election period—from November through December—follows. January through April 2001 is the “Honeymoon” period. Bush’s approval ratings are around 60 per cent during this four-month period. Brody ends the president’s “honeymoon” in early March, and then identifies a mini-rally in April resulting from the positive outcome of the captured spy plane incident with China. Gallup’s figures for presidential approval do not drop below 60 per cent, nor do the negative responses rise above 30 per cent, for good until May. Thus we treat April as part of the honeymoon period or, perhaps, a “second honeymoon.” The fourth period is the First Decline, which lasts from May until

September 10. During this period, approval ratings range between 57 and 51 per cent, with the lower figure that of the poll taken September 7-10, 2001. Then comes the fifth period, the Rally, which begins on September 11, after which Bush's approval jumps to as high as 90 per cent, and lasts until the end of February. After March 1, the president never again has two successive weeks in which his approval rating is as high as 80 per cent. As we explained above, Brody divides this period into a "9/11 crisis" phase, which ends during the week of October 11, and a "war/policy" phase, which has a different dynamic. For purposes of this analysis we do not make such a distinction. We do not have enough data from the month after 9/11 to allow a separate examination of Brody's first phase. We call the sixth and final period, from March through June 2002, the Second Decline, as the president's approval rating gradually drops from 80 per cent to 76 per cent. It would continue to decline until by the end of the year it had fallen to 61 per cent—about where it had been at the end of the Honeymoon period.

The results of our first sorting of the data for all five publications are presented in Table 2. Bush's highest positive comes during the Campaign period, although interestingly it is only about half as high as his negative percentage for that period. During the Election period, most of the content is neutral or mixed. The Honeymoon sends the numbers back almost to where they were during the Campaign, but the First Decline produces a much higher level of negativity. Then comes the Rally, and clearly the percentages reflect some movement in the direction of a more favorable treatment of the president after 9/11, both in the decline in negative content and the increase in positive. The Second Decline produces both the highest negative and lowest positive

percentages for the time periods we have, even though Bush's approval ratings remain relatively high.

TABLE 2
ALL PUBLICATIONS: CONTENT OVER TIME

| TIME PERIOD | CONTENT | | | Totals/ Relative PN |
|-----------------------|--------------------|--------------------|-------------------|--------------------------------------|
| | Negative | Neutral/Mixed | Positive | |
| Campaign | 38.6 (166) | 43.4 (192) | 19.0 (84) | 100.0 (442) - 19.6 |
| Election | 28.9 (118) | 54.5 (223) | 16.6 (68) | 100.0 (409) - 12.3 |
| Honeymoon | 38.1 (222) | 46.3 (270) | 15.6 (91) | 100.0 (583) - 22.5 |
| First Decline | 44.6 (243) | 39.6 (216) | 15.8 (86) | 100.0 (545) - 28.8 |
| Rally | 34.9 (252) | 46.7 (337) | 18.4 (133) | 100.0 (722) - 16.5 |
| Second Decline | 48.3 (228) | 42.2 (199) | 9.5 (45) | 100.0 (472) - 38.8 |
| Totals | 38.7 (1229) | 45.3 (1437) | 16.0 (507) | 100.0 (3173) - 22.7 |

Two general observations can be made about the data in Table 2. In the first place, although there was a noticeable change in the content of the five publications after 9/11, it was not as dramatic as might be expected. The numbers for the Rally are very similar to those of the Honeymoon. Second, at no time is Bush escaping criticism altogether. A relative positive-negative score (relative PN) was calculated for each time period by subtracting the negative percentage from the positive percentage. (This figure is found in the last column of the table under the totals for each row.) In every time period there is far more negative than positive coverage of Mr. Bush, although there is

more balance during the Rally period than at any other time during the first eighteen months of his presidency.

The aggregate numbers do not tell us about individual publications, or the difference between *Time* and the opinion magazines. To get a more detailed picture we broke down the aggregate data by publication. The results are presented in Tables 3, 4, and 5.

Table 3 displays the results for the two left-leaning publications, *The Nation* and *The New Republic*. As expected, both magazines are hard on George W. Bush. A majority of the content in both is negative, and the relative PNs range from -31.4 to -79.0. Somewhat surprisingly, however, both the amount of negative content and the relative PN actually *increase* during the Rally period in *The Nation*, while they decline only marginally for *The New Republic*. There was no rally here. Yet there are some differences between the two magazines. Their negative content and relative PNs during the Campaign period are almost identical, but in every other case *The Nation* is far more negative in both absolute and relative terms. During the Election period the difference in relative PNs is 40; it shrinks to 13.5 during the Honeymoon, but is more than 20 during the First Decline and Rally, almost 40 again during the Second Decline, and 22 for the entire two years. While we expected *The Nation* to be more critical of Bush, we did not expect the differences between them to be as large as they were despite the fact that they took very different positions on foreign policy.

TABLE 3
THE NATION: CONTENT OVER TIME

| TIME PERIOD | CONTENT | | | Totals/ Relative PN |
|-------------------------------|-------------------|-------------------|----------------|--------------------------------|
| | Negative | Neutral/Mixed | Positive | |
| Campaign | 70.8 (46) | 26.2 (17) | 3.1 (2) | 100.0 (65) - 67.7 |
| Election | 71.4 (35) | 28.6 (14) | 0.0 (0) | 100.0 (49) -71.4 |
| Honeymoon | 58.5 (72) | 41.5 (51) | 0.0 (0) | 100.0 (123) - 58.5 |
| 1st Decline | 64.2 (68) | 34.9 (37) | 0.9 (1) | 100.0 (106) - 63.3 |
| Rally | 65.6 (101) | 33.8 (52) | 0.6 (1) | 100.0 (154) - 65.0 |
| 2nd Decline | 79.0 (94) | 21.0 (25) | 0.0 (0) | 100.0 (119) -79.0 |
| Totals | 67.5 (416) | 31.8 (196) | 0.6 (4) | 100.0 (616) - 66.9 |

TABLE 3 (cont.)
THE NEW REPUBLIC: CONTENT OVER TIME

| TIME PERIOD | CONTENT | | | Totals/ Relative PN |
|-------------------------------|-------------------|-------------------|-----------------|--------------------------------|
| | Negative | Neutral/Mixed | Positive | |
| Campaign | 68.1 (64) | 29.8 (28) | 2.1 (2) | 100.0 (94) - 66.0 |
| Election | 41.8 (28) | 47.8 (32) | 10.4 (7) | 100.0 (67) -31.4 |
| Honeymoon | 55.7 (78) | 33.6 (47) | 10.7 (15) | 100.0 (140) - 45.0 |
| 1st Decline | 57.4 (62) | 27.8 (30) | 14.8 (16) | 100.0 (108) - 42.6 |
| Rally | 52.7 (77)) | 36.3 (53) | 11.0 (16) | 100.0 (146) - 41.7 |
| 2nd Decline | 48.5 (47) | 44.3 (43) | 7.2 (7) | 100.0 (97) -41.3 |
| Totals | 54.6 (356) | 35.7 (233) | 9.7 (63) | 100.0 (652) - 44.9 |

We turn to the right side of the political spectrum in Table 4. We expected *The Weekly Standard* and *National Review* to be more supportive of the president than either *The Nation* or *The New Republic* both before and after 9/11, and our data confirm that this is the case. Both have positive PNs for their total content over entire period and both curb their criticism significantly during the Rally. Also interesting is the fact that both have very high neutral/mixed content. This may represent a tendency to mix criticisms of Mr. Bush’s with words of support and encouragement. There seemed to be an “on the one hand . . . but on the other hand” tone in many of the articles—praising the president for his actions, and then pressing him to do more of the same. Once again interesting differences emerge. *The Weekly Standard* has positive PNs in each of the six periods; the *National Review* has negative PNs in every period after the Election except for the Rally. While *The Weekly Standard* has a relatively substantial +15.6 PN for the two-year period,

TABLE 4
THE WEEKLY STANDARD: CONTENT OVER TIME

| TIME PERIOD | CONTENT | | | Totals/ Relative PN |
|-------------------------------|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|-----------------------------------|
| | Negative | Neutral/Mixed | Positive | |
| Campaign | 13.6 (12) | 48.9 (43) | 37.5 (33) | 100.0 (88) 23.9 |
| Election | 7.4 (4) | 74.1 (40) | 18.5 (10) | 100.0 (54) 11.1 |
| Honeymoon | 15.9 (20) | 53.2 (67) | 31.0 (39) | 100.0 (126) 15.1 |
| 1st Decline | 27.7 (28) | 37.6 (38) | 34.7 (35) | 100.0 (101) 7.0 |
| Rally | 10.1 (17) | 53.3 (90) | 36.7 (62) | 100.0 (169) 26.6 |
| 2nd Decline | 22.4 (22) | 54.1 (53) | 23.5 (23) | 100.0 (98) 1.1 |
| Totals | 16.2 (103) | 52.0 (331) | 31.8 (202) | 100.0 (636) 15.6 |

TABLE 4 (cont.)
NATIONAL REVIEW: CONTENT OVER TIME

| TIME PERIOD | CONTENT | | | Totals/ Relative PN |
|-------------------------------|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|--------------------------------|
| | Negative | Neutral/Mixed | Positive | |
| Campaign | 13.6 (11) | 50.6 (41) | 35.8 (29) | 100.0 (81) 22.2 |
| Election | 0.0 (0) | 55.7 (34) | 44.3 (27) | 100.0 (61) 44.3 |
| Honeymoon | 31.6 (24) | 42.1 (32) | 26.3 (20) | 100.0 (76) - 5.3 |
| 1st Decline | 37.2 (35) | 41.5 (39) | 21.3 (20) | 100.0 (94) - 15.9 |
| Rally | 16.0 (12) | 58.7 (44) | 25.3 (19) | 100.0 (75) 9.3 |
| 2nd Decline | 42.7 (32) | 45.3 (34) | 12.0 (9) | 100.0 (75) - 30.7 |
| Totals | 24.7 (114) | 48.5 (224) | 26.8 (124) | 100.0 (462) 2.1 |

National Review has a weak +2.1. That there are differences is not very surprising, but again the degree of difference was unexpected.

We turn now to our representative of the mainstream media, *Time* magazine. It has a different mission and a different audience, and the differences should be evident in the results we present in Table 5. A majority of *Time*'s content falls into the Neutral/Mixed category. At the same time, however, the PNs are negative for each period and for the overall content. *Time* leans toward the negative, although not nearly as much as the two magazines to its left. The Rally's effect on the magazine's content is also demonstrated, although there is still more negative than positive during the Rally period.

TABLE 5
TIME: CONTENT OVER TIME

| TIME PERIOD | CONTENT | | | Totals/ Relative PN |
|-------------------------------|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|--------------------------------|
| | Negative | Neutral/Mixed | Positive | |
| Campaign | 28.9 (33) | 55.3 (63) | 15.8 (18) | 100.0 (114) - 13.1 |
| Election | 28.7 (51) | 57.9 (103) | 13.5 (24) | 100.0 (178) - 15.2 |
| Honeymoon | 23.7 (28) | 61.9 (73) | 14.4 (17) | 100.0 (118) - 9.3 |
| 1st Decline | 36.8 (50) | 52.9 (72) | 10.3 (14) | 100.0 (136) - 26.5 |
| Rally | 25.3 (45) | 55.1 (98) | 19.7 (35) | 100.0 (178) - 5.6 |
| 2nd Decline | 39.8 (33) | 53.0 (44) | 7.2 (6) | 100.0 (83) - 32.6 |
| Totals | 29.7 (240) | 56.1 (453) | 14.1 (114) | 100.0 (807) - 15.6 |

On the whole, the five publications react to the 9/11 attacks more or less as would be expected. It is however somewhat surprising that there was not more of a rally, especially from *Time* and the two conservative magazines, and that there was as much variation among them as we found. *Clearly, Bush was being criticized throughout, and it seems obvious that the opinion magazines continued to apply their own ideological perspectives to the president's actions regardless of his public standing.* We now turn to some more specific questions to see if we can determine what kind of criticism he was getting.

Did Bush Get Better Treatment After 9/11?

At the same time Bush’s job approval rating jumped, his “favorability rating” improved,⁶ even though it had always been relatively high. In the August 3-5 national poll, 60 per cent of the respondents had a favorable opinion of the president. In the November 26-27 survey it was 87 per cent. The *Washington Post*-ABC News poll of July 2001 found that 55 per cent of the American people agreed that Bush was “a strong leader”; a year later the figure was 75 per cent. In order to see if this boost in his personal popularity was reflected in the partisan popular press, we looked specifically at the data from the articles classified as “personal/political.” The results are presented in Table 6. To simplify the presentation somewhat, only the relative positive-negative percentages are shown, along with the N for each cell.

TABLE 6
PERSONAL/POLITICAL CASES: RELATIVE CONTENT

| TIME PERIOD | NATION | NEW REPUBLIC | TIME | WEEKLY STANDARD | NATIONAL REVIEW |
|-------------------------------|---------------------|---------------------|---------------------|------------------------|------------------------|
| CAMPAIGN | - 62.0 (50) | - 64.4 (73) | - 8.8 (91) | 20.5 (78) | 22.2 (54) |
| ELECTION | - 68.9 (45) | - 26.2 (61) | - 14.7 (163) | 11.4 (53) | 42.1 (57) |
| HONEYMOON | - 60.5 (81) | - 44.7 (85) | - 5.6 (71) | 30.5 (69) | 0.0 (45) |
| 1ST DECLINE | - 53.8 (52) | - 43.8 (64) | - 26.9 (52) | 7.7 (39) | 19.1 (42) |
| RALLY | - 65.3 (75) | - 38.7 (62) | 2.9 (69) | 39.8 (78) | 30.3 (33) |
| 2ND DECLINE | - 65.9 (41) | - 29.4 (51) | - 50.0 (24) | 21.8 (32) | - 8.0 (25) |
| TOTALS | - 62.5 (344) | - 42.4 (396) | - 12.8 (470) | 24.1 (349) | 20.3 (256) |

⁶ Gallup’s favorability rating is based on the following: “Next, we’d like to get your overall opinion of some people in the news. As I read each name, please say if you have a favorable or unfavorable opinion of this person—or if you have never heard of them. How about [George W. Bush]?”

Both left-leaning magazines have relatively high negative scores, although *The New Republic* becomes less negative with each successive time period after December 2000. By the summer of 2002, the difference in relative content scores between the two magazines has grown to 36.5. *The Nation* actually becomes more negative during the rally, while *The New Republic* is slightly less so. *Time* is also negative, but not as much so as the magazines on the left, and moves into the positive range during the Rally. Both of the more conservative publications are positive, both become more so during the Rally period, and only once is there a negative number on this side of the table: – 8.0 by *National Review* during the Second Decline. As we surmised on the basis of scanning the publications, *National Review* is generally less enthusiastic about Bush than *The Weekly Standard*. The one exception to this generalization is the Election period, when the magazine is unusually positive. Apparently the fear of Albert Gore sitting in the Oval Office overcame any questions about Mr. Bush's politics. In this case, *there is evidence of a rally by those publications most likely to do so*. The two liberal magazines do not change their tune.

Did Bush's Policies Get a Free Ride?

In the weeks following the 9/11 attacks, it seemed that George Bush was able to win acceptance for virtually anything he proposed. As noted above, it was not long after the attacks that concerns were being raised about the lack of opposition to the president. We have shown that criticism was very evident in the partisan popular press and, to a lesser extent, even in the news magazines. But how did 9/11 affect the policy debates in these publications? Tables 7 and 8 provide relative PNs for domestic and foreign policy content in the five publications. Because we are dealing with smaller subsets of the data,

some of the cell numbers are small. Relative PNs are not listed unless there were at least 20 cases on which to base them, although the number of cases is listed for these cells and are reflected in the totals and total percentages.

TABLE 7

DOMESTIC POLICY: RELATIVE CONTENT

| TIME PERIOD | NATION | NEW REPUBLIC | TIME | WEEKLY STANDARD | NATIONAL REVIEW |
|-------------------------------|---------------------|---------------------|---------------------|------------------------|------------------------|
| CAMPAIGN | (14) | (15) | - 23.8 (21) | (7) | 32.0 (25) |
| ELECTION | (4) | (3) | (15) | (1) | (2) |
| HONEYMOON | (18) | - 57.5 (40) | - 21.8 (23) | 4.6 (44) | - 4.6 (22) |
| 1ST DECLINE | - 75.0 (32) | - 66.7 (24) | - 28.3 (53) | 11.8 (34) | - 48.5 (35) |
| RALLY | - 91.3 (23) | - 60.7 (28) | - 26.7 (45) | 11.1 (27) | - 16.7 (24) |
| 2ND DECLINE | (18) | (13) | (7) | (13) | (14) |
| TOTALS | - 84.4 (109) | - 61.7 (123) | - 26.9 (164) | 11.9 (126) | - 14.7 (122) |

The first surprise is how little attention was paid to domestic policy by all of these magazines during the 2000 presidential campaign. There was even less during the subsequent Election period, but this is understandable given the circumstances: policy matters gave way to coverage of the ballot counting in Florida. During the Second Decline domestic policy disappears again, overcome by articles on terrorism and the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. In between, the content is negative in all of the magazines except for *The Weekly Standard*, which is reliably positive. *National Review* has a positive balance only during the Campaign period, when it has more coverage than any of the other publications. It also becomes less negative during the Rally period, but its total content is more negative than positive. The ranking of the publications from most to least

negative stays the same as it was for the personal/political articles, but the negativity is more pronounced. *Bush's domestic policies were being attacked from different directions, but they were being attacked—even during the rally.*

TABLE 8

FOREIGN POLICY: RELATIVE CONTENT

| TIME PERIOD | NATION | NEW REPUBLIC | TIME | WEEKLY STANDARD | NATIONAL REVIEW |
|-------------------------------|---------------------|---------------------|---------------------|------------------------|------------------------|
| CAMPAIGN | (1) | (6) | (2) | (3) | (2) |
| ELECTION | (0) | (3) | (0) | (0) | (2) |
| HONEYMOON | - 29.2 (24) | (15) | - 8.4 (24) | (13) | (9) |
| 1ST DECLINE | - 68.2 (22) | - 10.0 (20) | - 22.6 (31) | 0.0 (28) | (17) |
| RALLY | - 53.6 (56) | - 35.7 (56) | 0.0 (64) | 17.2 (64) | (18) |
| 2ND DECLINE | - 87.7 (60) | - 51.5 (33) | - 21.1 (52) | - 13.2 (53) | - 41.7 (36) |
| TOTALS | - 64.4 (163) | - 36.8 (133) | - 12.7 (173) | 0.0 (161) | - 28.5 (84) |

As we turn to foreign policy, once again the lack of coverage during the Campaign and Election periods is surprising. Once Bush takes office the attention devoted to foreign affairs begins to pick up, but it is still not as prominent as domestic policy or personal and political coverage. After 9/11, of course, attention shifts dramatically, except for the *National Review*. Again the content is mostly negative. Even the president's old friend, *The Weekly Standard*, has turned negative by the summer of 2002, and *National Review* has become more negative than *Time*. *The Weekly Standard* and *Time* show some signs of rallying to support the president's foreign policy initiatives, but they quickly disappear. *The criticism continues, although once again Mr. Bush is being criticized both for doing too much and for doing too little.*

Discussion

According to Richard Brody, rally events are created and sustained by opinion leaders who provide cues to the public by withholding criticism of the president during times of crisis. We undertook this analysis to see if George Bush's high approval ratings and personal popularity were reflected in his treatment by the partisan popular press. Our expectation was that we would see some indication that the rally was taking place in the partisan commentary of these magazines. We found that, on the contrary, they reflected their own editorial policies and political biases. *Time*, the news magazine we used for comparison's sake, also acted in a perfectly understandable manner, with more neutral or mixed content. Moreover, the content of all of the publications except *The Weekly Standard* was much more negative than we would have predicted, especially in the weeks following 9/11, and even *The Weekly Standard* had more than a few critical comments to make. *Despite the fears of those who expressed concerns about a lack of opposition to the president, we found that George Bush was being criticized from both the left and the right before, during, and after the attacks. We must conclude, like Brody, that there is no apparent connection between public approval of the president and the opinions of political essayists; they seem to operate independently.*

But if the partisan popular press does not shape public opinion, what role, if any, does it have during a rally event? We must venture beyond our data here, but we can suggest some possibilities that could be the basis for further investigation. We can say with some certainty that the views expressed in the partisan popular press reflect those of the editors and staff of those publications. We can also say that it is reasonable to think that the people who read the magazines do so because they agree with all or most of the

opinions they encounter. The opinions of the readers may be sharpened or reinforced, but they are unlikely to be changed.⁷ A third assumption that seems reasonable is that the people who read these opinions are among the most politically interested and active members of the electorate, and are therefore potentially more influential. If all of these assumptions are true, some tentative conclusions about the importance of partisan popular press can be drawn.

First, the arguments made in the articles that appear in the partisan popular press typically strengthen opinions and make opinion change among their readers less likely. They provide proofs for those who want reinforcement and debating points if views are challenged. They shore up support and opposition alike. And, for those who are concerned about lack of criticism during a time of crisis, they ensure that dissenting voices will still be raised on all sides. It is likely that among the ten per cent of the public that never approved of Mr. Bush's performance there were some readers of *The Nation*, and that those who most steadfastly supported him found reasons for doing so in *The Weekly Standard*, as well as some constructive criticism.

Second, readers (including those in the government) can be alerted to issues and events highlighted in the magazines and mobilized to action. Telephone calls can be made. Letters can be written. Meetings can be arranged. While public approval is a very useful tool for the president, it is not the only thing that influences decisions in Washington.

Third, because its readers expect their views to be confirmed, the partisan popular press is limited in that it cannot depart too much from them. The example of *The New Republic* is instructive. As recently as 1999, the magazine had 100,000 subscribers.

⁷ This is, of course, the old concept of "selective attention."

After the 2000 election the subscription base began to shrink, and by 2002 it was 85, 000. When the United States invaded Iraq and the magazine supported the action subscriptions dropped to 60,000. At the same time, the circulation of *The Nation* was growing. In 1994 it was only 84,000. The election of George Bush and the invasion of Iraq helped to increase it to 180,000—many of whom, one might guess, were former readers of *The New Republic*. Because these are niche publications with a limited number of potential subscribers, they cannot wander too far away from the orthodoxy that initially brought its followers into the fold.

Finally, the partisan popular press may represent to the president and other officials messages from their most ardent supporters and their most confirmed opponents. Criticism from opponents provides a window to their strategies. When supporters complain, there is trouble brewing. In both cases, a response may be required. If the debate spills over into the mainstream media, a campaign may be required. The partisan popular press may be influential simply because it is assumed to be influential by the people who matter most in public life.

The partisan popular press, like the syndicated columnists on the op-ed pages, does not shape public opinion directly. It speaks to a largely self-selected audience of politically interested people whose opinions are often important, and to public officials who want to be prepared for the next battles they will have to fight. Their independent spirit and general contrariness keep rallies in check and lay the foundation for their demise by remaining critical, and also remind presidents and their associates who consult them that all glory is fleeting.

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