

Public Opinion Watch

Week of March 10–16, 2003



By Ruy Teixeira

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Public Opinion on the Eve of War

Ipsos Public Affairs/Cook Political Report poll of 1,009 adults, released March 10, 2003 (conducted March 4-6, 2003)

CBS/*New York Times* poll of 1,010 adults, released March 11, 2003 (conducted March 7-9, 2003)

Gallup poll of 1,003 adults, released March 13, 2003 (conducted March 3-5, 2003)

Dana Milbank, "Bush's Political Future Hinges on Quick War," *Washington Post*, March 15, 2003

Charlie Cook, "As Bush Does Balancing Act, His Ratings Keep Slipping," *National Journal*, March 15, 2003

Gallup poll of 1,007 adults for CNN/*USA Today*, released March 16, 2003 (conducted March 14-15, 2003)

CBS News poll of 1,049 adults, released March 17, 2003 (conducted March 15-16, 2003)

No Security Council support, no problem! So says President Bush, and it's off to war we go. No doubt his more-or-less declaration of war will produce a spike in his approval ratings as well as in general support for going to war, and there will be a bigger spike once the bombs actually start falling and troops hit the ground. But *Public Opinion Watch* thinks it's useful to pause for a second and assess the general state of public opinion just prior to these events. This assessment can then be used as a benchmark to judge how much, and in what ways, public opinion changes as the war unfolds.

The assessment will be divided into three areas: general sentiment about presidential performance and the state of the country; domestic politics/economics; and Iraq/foreign policy.

General sentiment. The latest Ipsos/Cook Political Report (Ipsos/CPR) poll has just 34 percent of the public saying the country is headed in the right direction, while 54 percent say it is off on the wrong track. These kind of numbers, where "wrong track" responses considerably outnumber "right

direction” responses, are generally considered a very bad sign for the incumbent administration.

The first Gallup poll cited above has only 36 percent saying they are satisfied with the direction of the nation, compared with 61 percent who say they are dissatisfied. This is the lowest level of satisfaction Gallup has recorded in seven years.

The Ipsos/CPR poll records Bush’s approval rating at 51 percent, though Gallup has it higher, at 57 percent and 58 percent in the two polls cited above. The overall average of polls in this period is in the mid-50s, and, as Charlie Cook emphasizes in his article, what is interesting is what is common to all these polls: the steady decline in Bush’s approval rating over time. As he puts it: “The president’s once-spectacular approval numbers fell to mediocre levels and are now starting to trend toward the danger zone.” (For a graphic representation of this trend, that uses all available polling data, see Professor Pollkatz’s Pool of Polls at <http://www.pollkatz.homestead.com/>. *Public Opinion Watch* highly recommends this site.)

Finally, Bush’s “hard reelect” number, the percentage of voters who say they would definitely vote to reelect Bush and would not even consider voting for someone else, is straying into weak territory. Immediately after September 11, 54 percent said they’d definitely vote to reelect him. In the latest Ipsos/CPR poll, just 38 percent said they’d definitely vote for him, compared to 37 percent who’d definitely vote for someone else and 22 percent who would consider someone else.

Domestic politics/economics. According to Gallup, right now 78 percent think economic conditions are only fair or poor. And 67 percent think the economy is getting worse, compared to just 23 percent who think it is getting better. The ABC/*Money* magazine gauge of consumer confidence, reported in the Milbank article, has only 23 percent of Americans saying the economy is in good shape, the lowest level in more than nine years.

Bush’s approval rating on the economy is at 43 percent approval/51 percent disapproval in the Ipsos/CPR poll, 40 percent approval/52 percent disapproval and 38 percent approval/53 approval in the two CBS polls, and 44 percent approval/52 percent approval in the more recent Gallup poll. Pretty consistent and pretty consistently bad; as Cook points out, when a president’s ratings start being mostly “upside-down” (disapproval higher than approval), that’s a real problem for the incumbent.

A related indicator, rarely asked but historically a good predictor of incumbent party fates, is how well the president is handling keeping America prosperous. In the earlier Gallup poll cited above, 45 percent say Bush is doing a poor job in this area, compared to 44 percent who think he is doing a good job.

The Ipsos/CPR poll also regularly asks about the president’s handling of “domestic issues like health care, education, the environment and energy.” Here we have more upside-down ratings, with 44 percent approving of Bush’s performance in this area, while 49 percent disapprove. That’s down from an average rating of 61 percent approval and 36 percent disapproval in the first quarter of 2002.

Iraq/foreign policy. Bush’s ratings on handling foreign policy and the situation in Iraq tend to be higher than the domestic ratings but not dramatically so. In the more recent Gallup poll, Bush has a 53 percent approval rating in foreign affairs. That’s down a stunning 30 points from his rating in January of 2002. The more recent CBS poll reports a similar rating of 55 percent on foreign policy.

That same poll has Bush with the identical rating of 55 percent on the situation with Iraq. The Gallup poll is only slightly different, with a rating of 56 percent.

Turning to the issue of hour, invading Iraq, polling data from this period show an uptick in support for invading Iraq as the diplomatic endgame wound down. (Again, these data are prior to the president’s ultimatum speech of Monday, March 17.) In the earlier Gallup poll above, 59 percent said they supported invading with U.S. ground troops to remove Saddam Hussein from power; in the later

Gallup poll, the figure was 64 percent. A roughly similar question in the later CBS poll has support for military action to remove Hussein at 66 percent.

So about two-thirds of the public say they're generally on board with a move to invade Iraq. And the Gallup poll further finds--the first time it asked this question--that 58 percent say they would support an invasion of Iraq in the next week or two to remove Hussein. That poll also finds 57 percent saying the Bush administration has made a convincing case about the need for the United States to take military action against Iraq.

But it's striking how much of this support is soft, even at this late date in the process. For example, in the same Gallup poll that registered 64 percent general support for invading Iraq, support drops to 54 percent if the United States offers a resolution to the United Nations and the UN rejects it, and to 47 percent (with 50 percent opposed) if the United States decides not to offer a resolution and proceeds with military action without a UN vote. The latter course of action now appears to be happening, so the Bush administration is taking an evenly divided public down the last few steps to war. This suggests that, after a predictable spike in support with the initial phase of the war, dissension about the war and its rationale will never be far away.

The later CBS poll provides other indicators of this softness. This poll, taken right before Bush's ultimatum speech, has 49 percent saying that the United States should take military action against Iraq even if the UN opposes that action but 40 percent saying that military action should only be taken with UN support and 9 percent saying that military action should not be taken at all. The poll also shows a slight plurality (49 percent) saying the United States should wait and give weapons inspectors more time rather than taking military action fairly soon (46 percent). By only a 50 percent to 43 percent margin the public says removing Hussein is worth the potential loss of American lives and other costs from invading Iraq.

Finally, the later Gallup poll shows that the case for the immediacy of the Iraq threat has never been made. In this poll, also right before Bush's ultimatum speech, just 36 percent said Iraq is an immediate threat to the United States, compared to 54 percent who see it as only a long-term threat and 10 percent who say it is not a threat at all.

OK. That's our benchmark. Next week: The spike (part I) and how to understand it.

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Public Opinion Watch covers newly released polls, as well as key newspaper and magazine articles that make use of polling data. If you've ever wondered what to make of the blizzard of survey data covered in the newspapers--and whether the newspapers themselves know what they're talking about--you'll want to check out this feature on a regular basis. Each edition will combine noteworthy findings and trends from the latest polling data with analysis of the misinterpretations and misrepresentations to which polling data are so often subject.