The dynamics of presidential support during international conflict situations: The Iranian hostage crisis

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Public opinion data concerning President Carter’s handling of the Iranian hostage crisis are used to analyze (1) the factors that facilitate support for the President’s handling of international conflict situations, and (2) the factors that influence the persistence of such support. Analysis reveals that support for the President’s performance is enhanced if one holds a favorable personal image of the President, if one’s own policy preferences are congruent with the President’s actions, and if one belongs to the President’s party. Over time, the impact of these factors grows, reflecting the fact that those who hold unfavorable images of the President, who disagree with the policies he is pursuing, and who belong to the opposition party fall out of the support coalition at an unusually high rate.

It is a well-established principle that threats from outside a system promote cohesion within the system. One familiar manifestation of this principle is the tendency of the American people to rally in support of the President when the nation becomes enmeshed in international conflict. This tendency has been noted in public responses to a wide range of situations, including some for which the President himself has been largely at fault, such as the U-2 incident and the Bay of Pigs invasion. Because it is so pervasive, this “rally-around-the-flag” mentality has often been seen as a key to understanding the dynamics of public opinion concerning the President (Mueller, 1973; Lee, 1977) and American foreign policy (Hughes, 1978; Levering, 1978).

But crisis-bred outpourings of public support do not last. Once the crisis has passed, support typically subsides to its precrisis level (Mueller, 1973;
Sorrentino and Vidmar, 1974). Moreover, should an international conflict situation become stalemated and drag on longer than had been anticipated, as happened during the wars in Korea and Vietnam, the impact on public support for the President can be devastating. Most recently, this pattern of surge and subsidence has been evident in public evaluations of President Carter's handling of the Iranian situation. After the Iranian takeover of the American embassy and seizure of American hostages on November 4, 1979, Carter's standing in the polls shot up dramatically. Even in late December, almost two months after the embassy takeover, the nationwide level of approval of his handling of the situation stood at 69 percent. As the situation wore on, however, support for the President began to erode (see Figure 1): By late January evaluations of his handling of the situation were down to a 55 percent approval level, by March only 47 percent approved, and by late October Carter's support had dropped all the way down to 36 percent.¹

Although support for the President follows a fairly predictable course during international conflict situations, very little is known about the individual-level basis of these aggregate opinion trends. This paper uses opinion data collected one month, three months, and a year after the onset of the Iranian hostage crisis to address two such issues. First, is it possible, even at the peak of a support surge, to identify any factors that facilitate support for or opposition to the President? Or is the rally-around-the-flag psychology so pervasive that it overrides factors that would help shape evaluations of the President in more normal circumstances? Second, can we isolate any factors that influence the persistence of support for the President during an international conflict situation? Or does support for the President subside in an across-the-board manner, affecting various types of people more or less indistinguishably?

HYPOTHESES

Because public support for the President is most often studied at the aggregate level, very little is known about the individual-level mechanisms by which the surge-and-subsidence phenomena operate. However, the literature does contain a small number of studies in which appraisals of the President's handling of international conflict or, more generally, of the role of the President during a crisis period have been disaggregated (Kernell, 1976, 1980; Mueller, 1973; Sigelman, 1980). These studies guide our analysis of opinions about President Carter's handling of the Iranian situation.