During the Vietnam War, the public became very weary of the administration. As the war persisted, public opinion of the war decreased. The reason for the decline (in trust of the government) has never been entirely clear, but has been argued that the tumultuous events of the 1960s, especially the unpopular war in Vietnam, the protests against it, and the black urban riots, were at the root of the phenomenon (Zaller, 300). When researching this decrease in public support for the war, it is possible that instances such as the launch of Operation Flaming Dart, the Vung Ro Bay Incident and the further deployment of U.S Navy troops spurred the public into a fear of a prolonged war. Also, considering the number of U.S troops that were killed in action, these unforeseen events, or fluctuations in conflict shape the public's opinion of war. When analyzing Lyndon Johnson's approval rating, the percentage of the public who support him start to dwindle from around seventy percent to as low as fifty percent within the year.
Literature Review

In order to understand how public opinion regarding war can affect the presidential approval rating, it is first imperative to understand how presidential approval can increase and decrease based upon fluctuation of conflict during the war itself and problems that arise, domestically. The following will briefly address and define fluctuation of conflict, as well as domestic affairs. It is also necessary to define public opinion, and provide theories regarding its authenticity. A brief explanation of how public opinion regarding the war can impact the overall presidential approval rating will follow.

Fluctuation of Conflict

Fluctuation of conflict is an action on either side of a war which makes a significant impact during the war itself. Events such as the entry of China into the Vietnam War are an example of fluctuation of conflict. The possibility of another World War, or an “everlasting” war changes the perceptions of the public; the shift in support for the Vietnam War decreased twenty five percent as a direct result of this fear.

Another significant fluctuation of conflict is the rise in casualties. Most recently, in the War in Afghanistan as American combat deaths rose to record levels in 2002, and public support for the war decreased exponentially.

In addition, when the public fears a war is becoming too costly, public approval decreases. This can be because of defense spending and how people interpret the aspects of how this
spending can effect matters within their own country, economically. These fluctuations of conflict are events, or instances within a war that have a lasting impact on the general public of the Democratic state itself (in this case, the United States). When public opinion increases or decreases, the analysis will draw on any indication of a fluctuation of conflict to help explain the variation in support.

*Domestic Affairs*

The importance of domestic affairs, in regard to considering the public's opinion regarding war having any correlation to the overall presidential rating is essential in its ability to shape public opinion in a majority of ways. Government spending on the war itself can have effects on the public's opinion regarding war, but domestic affairs have close ties to the presidential rating. Domestic affairs, or public policy concerning programs, laws and other administration decisions within the nation's borders serve as a between the people of that nation and the administration making the decisions. As the Vietnam War and Lyndon Johnson's presidency are analyzed, domestic affairs will assist in interpreting varying ratings that may or may not be justified by the public's opinion of the war and will also provide insight into reasoning behind the public's opinion in the first place.
Public Opinion

Public opinion is defined as prevalent views that are shared among the general public. Understanding how citizens interpret information into public opinion is comprehensive. Independent views can be much more difficult to define because of the ambiguity between the issue and the individual. Considerations, or the compound of cognition and affect - that is, a belief concerning an object and the evaluation of the belief (Zaller, 40) shape opinion. Depending on the level of political awareness, the individual may or may not understand the difference between persuasive and informative messages. They may be inhibited from understanding the information for many reasons. For example, a democrat might be more difficult to persuade into agreeing that Obama care is a "bad" thing than a person that considers their self a republican.

In addition, individuals answer survey questions by averaging across the considerations that are immediately salient or accessible to them (Zaller, 49). The theory of public opinion through a "socialization" model is described by Benjamin Goldsmith. We focus on the role of socialization of mass publics to certain perspectives - beliefs, values, and expectations about politics. Such socialization occurs through long and short-term historical experiences, as well as underlying social factors, such as democracy, religion, and economic development. We believe that that these factors are most usefully subsumed under the general category of political culture(410). Duffield (1999) argues that political culture is the most useful framework for understanding the effects of cultural factors on foreign policy.

As Erik Voeten notes, the public in general is a broad scope of people with considerably different reasons behind their opinions. When looking at any given topic concerning public
opinion and how they regard their leaders, it is important to consider why people form opinions in the way that they do. These debates turn over a variety of questions. Do citizens form political judgments based on the state of their personal financial circumstances or the macro economy? Do they use prospective or retrospective evaluations? Are they able to tell favorable economic outcomes created through genuine craftsmanship from those produced through temporary manipulation of economic policy instruments (Voeten, 811)? These issues also arise in the public's opinion of a leader concerning war. Citizens seek a leader who they believe is an intelligent decision maker when dealing with issues of security. This will be addressed later.

Zaller uses Down's (1957) apt phrase that suggests citizens are rationally ignorant of foreign policies, but differ greatly on their degree of ignorance. They often rely on the media to make an opinion that they can invest in. These opinions can be based on a variety of reasons (political party, family, race, ethnicity, income, sex, etc). as well as their level of intellect and education. John Mueller states in *War, Presidents, and Public Opinion*:

- The interview situation is an odd social experience. The respondent, on his doorstep or in his living room, is barraged with a set of questions on a wide variety of subjects by a stranger, usually a rather well-educated woman over 30, who carefully notes each response on a sheet of paper. Few people are accustomed to having their every utterance faithfully recorded and many find the experience flattering. And, aware that their views are being preserved for the ages, they do not wish to appear unprepared at that moment. Under these circumstances it is not surprising to find respondents pontificating in a seemingly authoritative, if basically "truthful," manner on subjects about which they know nothing or to which they have never given any thought whatsoever(1).
Mueller suggests that the public opinion polls in the United States do not accurately reflect the views of Americans. In fact, Mueller further expresses that, when dealing with American foreign policy, Americans are not interested and/or lack the information necessary to form an educated opinion. They usually turn to a group that have predetermined opinions to help shape their own perspective on such issues.

On the other hand, public opinion polls are a useful tool to determine how a broad group of people think about a particular issue. Using a sample from a public opinion poll has proven to be a resourceful way to gauge the opinion of the larger population. According to Mueller, taking a tiny sample of some 1500 people can be within a 95 percent accuracy of the "real" value (the value that would be found if the entire population was polled).

Accountability and Approval of the Leader

What level of accountability is the leader held to? Ultimately, the President of the United States has the discretion to manage and wage war. Casualties, over-spending and other fluctuations of conflict can highly deter the public from supporting a leader's decision to go to war and make other "wartime" decisions.

Leaders in democracies differ from their authoritarian counterparts in the conduct of war in that they require higher levels of consent from the populace to initiate and prolong wars (Voeten, 809). In the United States there is a general opinion regarding the level of accountability of the President of the United States. As mentioned before, the public desires a leader who is well qualified in dealing with issues of security. Democratic leaders rely on
"contemporary consent": they need high levels of public support to initiate a war and must maintain that support to carry on a war (Reiter and Stam 2002). This assumes a relation between public opinion and policy not unlike that of the "dynamic representation" model for domestic policy (Stimson, Mackuen, and Erikson 1995)(Voeten, 810).

Considering fluctuations of conflict and domestic affairs during the Vietnam War, Lyndon Johnson's approval rating was on a steady decline throughout his terms in office. Realist accounts of international relations are based on a theory of strong leadership of domestic public opinion. Realist and neorealist argue that domestic elite actors' participation in foreign policy making is the critical intervening process that connects a state's behavior with the imperatives of its external environment. Opinion leadership by chief executives like American presidents is especially critical in representative democracies(Jacobs, 592). This suggests that the public relies heavily on the president regarding war. Do declining numbers in the president's approval rating follow a decline in support for the war? When doing research on the Vietnam War, shifts in support for the president to follow shifts in support for the war will be expected, but may only offer some insight into the overall decline in Lyndon Johnson's approval rating.
DATA & METHODS

"If (as must inevitably be the case, given this form of constitution) the consent of the citizenry is required in order to determine whether or not there will be war, it is natural that they consider all its calamities before committing themselves to so risky a game” (Kant 1983, 113).

Democracy requires that citizens' opinions play some role in shaping policy outcomes, including foreign policy. Although literature on public opinion and foreign policy has made significant progress in recent decades, scholars have yet to analyze data on whether or not the public's opinion of a war can affect the president's approval rating. This research will be designed to illustrate the correlation between the public's opinion regarding war and the approval rating of the president. The significance of this data is to analysis similarities between the decline and rise of the two, during times of war.

Gallup Polls

Using provided Gallop polls to construct a graph with data sets of both the presidential approval rating and public opinion of the war (from August 1965 to September of 1972), fluctuations of conflict and domestic affairs will be analyzed to determine the reasoning for such variations. The construction of a graph will serve to illustrate any possible correlations between the public's opinion regarding war and the approval rating of the president. It is the purpose of
this data to examine whether the public's opinion of a war impacts the approval of the president at that time.

*War and President*

Concentrating on the Vietnam War and drawing on the presidential approval of Lyndon Johnson throughout the course of the war, data will show instances where in the presidential approval rating was significantly impacted by a war time decision made by the administration. The variables in this analysis will be the president's approval rating (dependent), the public's opinion of the war (independent). Fluctuations of conflict in the war and domestic affairs will assist in explaining the variants in the aggregated amounts of each set of data.
Analysis

The graph below shows the presidential approval rating of both Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon. This study will not include Richard Nixon's presidency which began in January of 1969. The graph also contains the overall public opinion regarding the question, "In view of the developments since we entered the fighting in Vietnam, do you think the U.S. made a mistake sending troops to fight in Vietnam?" This question was asked from August of 1965 (as American combat troops had been officially introduced into Vietnam in March 1965) until almost the end of 1972. The most significant correlations between the two lines are as follows: Late spring of 1966 until shortly after public opinion rises in November of 1966; and December 1968 as presidential approval makes a steady incline around April of 1970. Thus attempting to determine any correlations, negativity or positively.

"In view of the developments since we entered the fighting in Vietnam, do you think the U.S. made a mistake sending troops to fight in Vietnam?"

![Graph showing presidential approval and public opinion](image)
As Gallup's Poll illustrates a steadily growing opposition to the war (from sixty percent in 1965 to forty eight percent in May 1966), which stabilized until November 1966 (slowly rising back to fifty two percent for a couple months), the presidential approval rating dropped six percent during the duration of that time. This suggests that due to the public's change of opinion overtime, resulting in a permanent assessment for nearly five months; the overall presidential approval rating shifted in the same direction at nearly the exact same time as public opinion settled. Presidential approval does not balance at fifty one percent until November 1966 again until Gallup's Poll begins to increase in support.

There were several moments during the war at the times mentioned above. At the end of spring in 1966, yet none of the conflict caused casualties to drastically increase. In late May, The North Vietnamese Army(NVA) crossed over the demilitarized zone causing marines and the Southern Vietnamese Army to defend themselves and push the NVA back. Throughout the summer of 1966, until November there was steady conflict where upon the U.S increased the amount of reinforcements, artillery and air force. This dissolved the NVA ability to penetrate the U.S defense.

Thus, it is difficult to perceive any instances during this point of the war that suggest an increase in casualties or other causes for the loss in public support of the war. The North Vietnamese Army (NVA) gained footing against U.S troops, but there is no evidence of severe loss. As Goldsmith suggests, considering the socialization model, the historical significance of U.S culture may impact the public's perception of the war at a particular time and impact the percentage decrease in public favor of the war. Public opinion could of indeed shifted merely due to the fact that the poll was conducted directly after Memorial Day, and the promotion of peace and honoring falling soldiers may justify the impact on the public's opinion regarding the
war. The ambiguity of such a drastic shift in public opinion signifies the public's misunderstanding and misinterpretation of the question itself. This is deeply rooted in Zaller's research concerning the public's inability to perceive the question objectively in order to make a intelligent decision when asked for their opinion.

Attempting to explain why presidential approval shifted in percentage throughout the course of the Vietnam War can also be explained domestically. Considering Lyndon Johnson's diligent work regarding civil rights, there are many instances during his six years in office that could severely impact his presidential approval rating. At the time of passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 (no data provided above), the Voting Rights Act, Immigration Act of 1965, Great Society and countless other programs in education, gun control, healthcare and the space program it is suffice to assume presidential approval rating varies accordingly.

Throughout the course of the Vietnam War at the times that have been analyzed, major riots broke out in black neighborhoods. One of the most devastating was in April of 1968. This was also shortly after the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. These riots left twenty six people dead, and fifteen hundred people injured. At this point, public opinion of the war has been on a steady decline and these riots may provide the reasoning behind its continuance. These riots continued throughout the Johnson administration. Overall, presidential decisions to diffuse the situation are believed to have caused the massive decline in presidential approval until the end of Johnson's term as president.

In the last few days of January of 1968, the Tet Offensive (a campaign of surprise attacks) was launched by the forces of the Viet Cong. Viet Cong units attacked hundreds of cities and towns in South Vietnam. These attacks made a profound impact on the views and opinions of the government and public of the U.S. Casualties included much of the Viet Cong fighters
and officers, but also two thousand and five hundred U.S troops. Up until this point of the war, the U.S was not aware that North Vietnam was capable of such offensive force. The amount of casualties and the shock the strength of the Viet Cong attacks had on the public explain the reason for the decrease in public support of the war. This fluctuation of conflict, creating a decrease in public support, does not seem to correlate with the presidential approval rating which stayed at fifty six percent from December 1967 to September 1967.

Examining the graph to indicate any correlations between the two ratings, in late November of 1968 (as Operation Rolling Thunder came to an end), eighteen U.S pilots were either dead or missing, and hundreds are imprisoned by the NVA. In addition it is estimated that one hundred and eighty two thousand Vietnamese civilians had been killed as well as twenty thousand Chinese support personnel. This did indeed make an negative impact on the level of public support for the war, but the presidential approval rating steady follows in support throughout the course of the following months.

Concerning the correlation between the increase in public support and presidential approval in December 1968 (until presidential approval begins to dwindle in the spring), the war continues to provide an answer to these results.

In determining the question whether public support of the war makes any significant impact on the president’s approval rating, these fluctuations of conflict did see significant decreases in the level of public support, which did not correlate with the presidential approval rating. Establishing whether or not public support can affect the presidential approval negativity, it is difficult to suggest due to the lack of any information that may provide such results.
Furthermore the assumption that public support for the war being the key factor in explaining increases or decreases in the presidential approval rating is doubtful. As these shifts are explained by conducting a critical analysis of the war itself, there are other factors that can make an impact on the public's opinion of the war. Also, there are other factors that affect the presidential approval rating. What is clear is that by noting the similarities on the graph to determine the scope of the Vietnam War at that precise moment in time, there are fluctuations of conflict that can (to some degree) suggest a correlation between the data on the graph at the two historical moments addressed above.
Findings

Attempting to answer the question whether public opinion regarding the Vietnam War had any direct impact on the overall presidential approval rating of Lyndon Johnson is difficult. As the analysis above explains, many factors go into the presidential approval rating itself and the degree of the impact the public's opinion of the war truly had is unknown. Although correlating waves of data on the graph exist, domestic affairs tend to weigh heavily on the presidential approval rating. Domestic affairs are much more apt in explaining the decrease in Lyndon Johnson's presidential approval rating over the course of his presidency.

It is suffice to say that the public's interpretation of the war itself affected their view of the administration's decision regarding the war, but to what degree is uncertain. While analyzing the data, there were instances where in the presidential approval rating did not change; increase or decrease, although there were fluctuations of conflict that should of suggested a variance in the presidential approval, if the hypothesis was correct. The two instances that provided some degree of certainty into this hypothesis were met with other factors that could also justify such variances, as well as the fluctuation of conflict in the war itself.

A broader range question could be of great benefit. Perhaps asking if public opinion regarding war effects the presidential approval rating through the course of wars since World War II. It would be beneficial to conduct such research on a broader level in order to identify if the influence of public opinion regarding war had little impact on the presidential approval rating than it does presently; bring insight regarding whether this was an isolated case where in Lyndon
Johnson might differ from another president, and address incidents that had more casualties than that of 1965-1969. Comparisons need to be made between wars at different period of times.
References


