

The Monkey Cage

Democracy is the art of running the circus from the monkey cage. - H.L. Mencken

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Partisan Identity and Foreign Policy

At Cato's blog, Justin Logan [discusses](#) Adam Berinsky's book *In Time of War* and Gary Jacobson's [recent article](#) ([gated](#)) — both of which focus on public opinion during war, including the Iraq War. Logan marvels at the power of partisan identity. He cites this telling passage from Jacobson:

...support for the war was consistently higher among Republicans who did not believe that Iraq possessed WMD, that Saddam Hussein was involved in September 11, or that Bush was chosen by God to lead the global war on terrorism than among Democrats who did believe these things.

Logan then goes on to puzzle over an apparent point of tension between Berinsky's and Jacobson's accounts:

Importantly, Jacobson seems to disagree with Berinsky on one crucial point: how and why did Democratic voters come to oppose the Iraq War? Berinsky argues that even in the absence of Democratic elites making loud, principled arguments against the war in the first place, Democratic voters took their cues from the Bush administration and decided that if Bush was for it, they were against it. Jacobson tells a different story that is somewhat more like the ideal-typical democratic theory story: Dem voters developed beliefs about the war's premises, which yielded opinions on the policy of going to war, which yielded opinions of the president who was taking the country to war.

Three points in response:

First, Berinsky does suggest that there wasn't a "consistent and strong antiwar stance" among Democratic elites, at least as of the summer of 2004. I'm a little uncertain about that. It seems to me that while there were divisions among Democratic elites prior to the war's inception, by the summer of 2004 (over a year after "Mission Accomplished") there was concern among a larger number of Democratic elites that had been building for some time. See for example, the [close vote](#) on Ted Kennedy's amendment to the 2005 defense appropriations bill. This concern about the war didn't lead all the Democratic Senators who ran for president to renounce their vote authorizing the war, but certainly even they were criticizing Bush. However, some more rigorous analysis would be necessary to confirm my intuition.

Second, the lack of a unified Democratic opposition did not mean that Americans lacked for voices of opposition or were not influenced by the opposition. Danny Hayes and Matt Guardino [have showed](#) that in the months prior to the war, opposition from abroad was commonly reported in the news media (see also [this earlier post](#).) Moreover, this opposition mattered:

Despite the fact that domestic political elites publicly voiced very little opposition to the Iraq War, large numbers of Americans—especially Democrats—remained opposed to military action throughout the pre-war period. We argue that some rank-and-file Democrats and independents expressed these negative sentiments because of the widely reported anti-war positions staked out by foreign, not domestic, elites.

That is the conclusion of a second Hayes and Guardino [paper](#).

But note that both points only concern the nuances of the Iraqi case. The broader point — and Berinsky's central contention — remains: cue-taking from elites was crucial for public opinion about Iraq and other wars.

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