


2018

# The Relationship Between Education Levels and Public Opinion Before the Iraq War

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# Walden University

College of Social and Behavioral Sciences

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2018

Abstract

The Relationship Between Education Levels and Public Opinion Before the Iraq War

by

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MLS, Indiana University South Bend, 2007

BFA, Indiana University South Bend, 2002

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Public Policy and Administration

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## Abstract

Researchers have found that higher education is known to stabilize political opinions and thought to enhance critical thinking skills. The role that an individual's level of education plays in shaping public opinion during a foreign affairs crisis, within the context of repetitious and uniform news media coverage, has yet to be determined. The theoretical foundation of agenda-setting explains how salience is created by emphasizing certain messages and influencing public opinion and may bypass education and political knowledge. The purpose of this quantitative study was to examine the relationship between education level and public opinion immediately before the Iraq War. The analysis used a secondary dataset consisting of 3,262 respondents in a 2002 national public opinion survey. Binomial logistic regression was used to test 5 hypotheses. Findings indicated there was a significant relationship between education levels and support for combatting international terrorism as a foreign policy goal as well as the use of troops to invade Iraq ( $p < .006$ ). The results indicated that in some instances higher education played a significant role in shaping public opinion during the period before the Iraq War. Positive social change from this research includes helping policy-makers understand how public opinion is shaped during a crisis so the views of the citizenry can be more effectively incorporated into the policy-making process.

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## Dedication

I dedicate this body of research to the remarkable women in my life. My wife, Michelle, who has helped shape the man I have become. She has challenged me to not only obtain new skills and pursue my dreams, she has been instrumental in helping me accomplish anything I set my mind upon. To my daughters, Katanna and Satori - may you continue to seek out knowledge, never stop improving yourselves and leave the world a better place. But most importantly, *Gnothi Seauton*, always and forever. If you do this, the rest will fall into place, effortlessly.

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It is also necessary to express my eternal gratitude toward my wife, Michelle Steele. I could not have accomplished this monumental task without her words of encouragement, love, and patience, through all the late nights and sacrifices along the way. My daughters, Katanna and Satori, also for their love, patience, and understanding while I pursued this dream. I would not be the person I am without you all, and this would not have been possible without all your support.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

### **Introduction**

Agenda-setting occurs when a topic in the media is brought to the forefront of public awareness and influences public opinion (McCombs, 2004/2014; McCombs & Shaw, 1972). Agenda-setting can change public opinion. Individuals rarely take the opportunity to fact-check, and therefore may not know if the information provided has been misrepresented (Unkelbach, Bayer, Alves, Kich, & Stahl, 2011). The difficulty of fact-checking the enormous number of news media messages leads to information being consumed as presented without consideration of counter or dissenting arguments. Because context is necessary for a fuller understanding of historical events as they relate to a crisis or international dispute, the average citizen must rely on subject matter experts to frame arguments and detail facts, usually accomplished through the news media.

Those with higher levels of education have more stabilized political opinions compared to their less educated counterparts (Converse, 1964/2006; Zaller, 1991). Politics and their consequences are followed more closely by the educated than the less educated (Campbell, 2013). Johansen and Joslyn (2008) cited education as a resource to combat political propaganda but found it is not as effective when uncompetitive messaging exists. Higher formal education can influence the formation of public opinion.

Increased news media coverage concentrating on the topic of war then propagates agenda-setting (Rampton & Stauber, 2003). As the news media cover stories with increased repetition, their target audience is exposed to specific information designed to leave a lasting memory. Repeating information reinforces memory, improves recall, and

influences action (Brown & Nix, 1996; Dubuisson, Fiori, & Nicolas, 2012; Lakoff, 2006; Rampton & Stauber, 2003; Saville, 2011; Schreiber et al., 2013). Repetition of a message, even if the information is false, can promote belief in an idea (Rampton & Stauber, 2003). Message repetition may contribute to lessening the influence of education on the formation of public opinion. Zaller's (1992) research indicated that individuals answer questions "off the top of the head," relying on the information to which they have access at any given moment (p. 38). If Zaller (1992) is correct, and news media messaging is ubiquitous and repetitious in nature, an individual may only have access to a limited perspective.

News media coverage sets agendas through increasing the salience of the message, which in turn shapes public opinion. Salience is determined by repetition, by which a message garners more attention and credibility and becomes stored in long-term memory (McCombs, 2004/2014). Repeated information reinforces memory, improving recall and influencing action (Brown & Nix, 1996; Dubuisson, et al., 2012; Lakoff, 2006; Rampton & Stauber, 2003; Saville, 2011; Schreiber et al., 2013). The greater the salience, the greater its impact on public opinion (McCombs, 2004/2014). Whether education creates a barrier or an opening to changing public opinion is not understood fully. There is a gap in the literature regarding if and how education levels impact the way in which public opinion is shaped during a crisis. The findings of my research close the gap by determining if education levels have an impact on public opinion during a foreign affairs crisis when there is repetitious and uniform media coverage, such as before the Iraq War.

### **Problem Statement**

The role education levels play in shaping public opinion during a foreign affairs crisis within the context of repetitious and uniform news media coverage has not been determined. While agenda-setting is well-studied in political communication (Jenkins & Monroe, 2012; Johansen & Joslyn, 2008; McCombs, 2004/2014; Minor, 2013; O'Neal, 2011; Steuter & Wills, 2008), there has been little, if any, research conducted linking agenda-setting, education, and repetition during a foreign affairs crisis. To understand the complexities and effects of agenda-setting further, I conducted a quantitative study to determine if education levels affect public opinion during periods of crisis, specifically the period leading up to the Iraq War.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of the quantitative study was to determine if there is a relationship between education level attainment and public opinion before the Iraq War started. The independent variable was education level. I used ideology, sex, race, income level, and political party as covariates, which were expected to influence the dependent variables. The dependent variables were: favoring economic sanctions against Iraq, combating international terrorism as a foreign policy goal, Iraq developing weapons of mass destruction in the next 10 years, favor or oppose the use of U.S. troops if Iraq invaded Saudi Arabia, and, support for the United States using troops to invade Iraq and overthrow the government of Saddam Hussein.

### **Research Question and Hypotheses**

The following research question guided this study.

## Research Question

What is the relationship between education levels and public opinion on foreign policy issues covered extensively by the news media during periods of crisis such as before the Iraq War?

I formulated the following five hypotheses to help answer this research question by examining various aspects of public opinion before the Iraq War.

**H<sub>0</sub>1A.** There is no significant difference in public opinion opposing economic sanctions on Iraq by the United States based on education levels.

**H<sub>a</sub>1A.** There is a significant difference in public opinion opposing economic sanctions on Iraq by the United States based on education levels.

**H<sub>0</sub>1B.** There is no significant difference in public opinion rating combating international terrorism as a United States foreign policy goal based on education levels.

**H<sub>a</sub>1B.** There is a significant difference public opinion rating combating international terrorism as a United States foreign policy goal based on education levels.

**H<sub>0</sub>1C.** There is no significant difference in public opinion regarding if Iraq will develop weapons of mass destruction based on education levels.

**H<sub>a</sub>1C.** There is a significant difference in public opinion regarding if Iraq will develop weapons of mass destruction based on education levels.

**H<sub>0</sub>1D.** There is no significant difference in public opinion of favoring or opposing the use of U.S. troops if Iraq invaded Saudi Arabia based on education levels.

**H<sub>a</sub>1D.** There is a significant difference in public opinion on favoring or opposing the use of U.S. troops if Iraq invaded Saudi Arabia based on education levels.

**H<sub>0</sub>1E.** There is no significant difference in public opinion on using U.S. troops to invade and overthrow the government of Saddam Hussein/Iraq based on education levels.

**H<sub>a</sub>1E.** There is a significant difference in public opinion on using United States troops to invade and overthrow Saddam Hussein/Iraq based on education levels.

### **Theoretical Foundation**

Agenda-setting theory was the foundation for this study. Agenda-setting is created when the salience of topic is high, or prominent at a given moment (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). Journalists, unwitting or not, set the focus of public attention on topics and stories, which change perceptions of specific issues, thus changing public opinion (McCombs, 2004/2014). While agenda-setting can be used for a wide array of applications, it is best known for its use in understanding how public opinion is shaped.

McCombs (2004/2014) illustrated the central assertion of agenda-setting: transfer of issue to the salience of the message from the news media agenda to the public agenda. As news coverage becomes patterned, the public transfers the issue from prominence to importance (McCombs, 2004/2014). News media shape public opinion (Baum & Potter, 2008), which then shapes public policy. Agenda-setting is the critical link between the news media and the formation of public opinion. The shaping of public opinion through agenda-setting by the news media has created patterns that have been studied by social scientists for nearly five decades. Further examples of use, relevance, and explanation of agenda-setting theory follow in Chapter 2.

My research question examined the role of education levels in shaping public opinion during periods of crisis with repetitious and uniform news media coverage. The



theory of agenda-setting was appropriate for this study as it is designed to help explain how the news media influence public opinion and has been extensively used in previous research on political messaging (Berganza & Martin, 1997; McCombs, 2004/2014; McCombs & Shaw, 1972; Sanchez-Aranda et al., 1997). The role of education as a stabilizing mechanism of political opinion is relevant, as those same periods of high-messaging are often in conjunction with turbulent affairs, and as a result, politics (Converse, 1964/2006). Because the assumptions of news media and reaction were present, agenda-setting was an appropriate theoretical framework to address the research question.

### **Nature of the Study**

In this quantitative study, I used secondary data analysis to examine the role that education levels played in shaping public opinion on public policy during periods of crisis. I obtained the data set from Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research (Chicago Council on Foreign Relations, [ICPSR]). Study Number 3673, American Public Opinion and U.S. Foreign Policy (Chicago Council on Foreign Relations, 2002) involves a public opinion survey of 3,262 adults 18 years or older living in the United States. Surveys were conducted June 1–30, 2002, via telephone and personal interviews by the Chicago Council on Foreign Relations and The German Marshall Fund of the United States.

I chose a quantitative approach because it can determine if there were statistical correlations between the concepts of agenda-setting, education level, and public opinion, especially during times of war and crisis, with high repetition present. I chose secondary

data because the resources necessary to conduct nationwide interviews would have been difficult and costly as a graduate student. The questions asked of respondents of this survey coincided with the period directly before the Iraq War, therefore it makes this survey an ideal source of data to address the research question and hypotheses.

I used binomial logistic regression analysis to determine if there was a relationship between the independent variable and the dependent variable. In binomial logistic regression, the dependent variable must be dichotomous (Laerd Statistics, 2015). The independent variable was education level of the respondents. Covariates included ideology, sex, race, income level, and political party. The dependent variables were: favor economic sanctions against Iraq, combating international terrorism as a foreign policy goal, Iraq developing weapons of mass destruction in the next 10 years, favor or oppose the use of U.S. troops if Iraq invaded Saudi Arabia, and, support for the United States using troops to invade Iraq and overthrow the government of Saddam Hussein.

### **Definitions**

*Agenda-setting*: Messaging that is typically unintentional, and the consequence of the news media garnering ratings for the explicit purpose of sales. The journalistic focus of attention on issues that create salience, which influences perceptions and changes public opinion (McCombs, 2004/2014, p. 1).

*Propaganda*: messaging to achieve a desired outcome that consciously and deliberately manipulates the information to influence behaviors and opinions (Bernays, 1928, p. 38).

*Repetition:* A repeated message, or similar wording, which cumulates with higher impact psychologically than a single iteration, creating cohesion through “vocabulary links between sentences” (Fairclough, 1989, p. 54).

### **Assumptions**

There were three underlying assumptions in this study. My first assumption was that because I used secondary data, the data set was error-free and complete. Second, because the study was based on survey data, I assumed the responses accurately reflect the underlying opinions of respondents. My final assumption was that respondents were exposed to frequent news coverage regarding the link between the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001 and Iraq.

My first assumption involved the collection of the secondary data through the use of primary interviewers. The American Public Opinion and U.S. Foreign Policy (2002) survey was conducted between June 1–30, 2002 by The Chicago Council on Foreign Relations, and The German Marshall Fund of the United States (funded by the MacArthur Foundation and the McCormick Tribune Foundation). The purpose of the survey was to determine the opinions and attitudes of the general public for research purposes and as a part of a quadrennial public opinion survey conducted since at least 1978. All interviews were conducted by Harris Interactive, a professional polling firm and the data were collected by telephone and, personal interviews. Since the data were secondary in nature, I could not personally verify its accuracy. However, given the research was commissioned by non-profit organizations for the purpose of public opinion research, I concluded that the data were free from systematic errors.

My second assumption involved the use of survey data. Individuals questioned about public opinion must be taken at their word that they understood the questions and relevancy of the material and were honest in their responses since it is impossible to authenticate the answers of each participant.

My third assumption was that individuals who responded to the survey were repeatedly exposed to news media stories regarding Iraq, terrorism, and the Middle East before the Iraq War. This assumption was necessary because the respondents were not asked about their news media usage or exposure to information regarding Iraq in the survey. President Bush's use of repetition in messaging was very high in the year following September 11, 2001, with constant unsubstantiated claims of pending attacks in the United States (Donnelly, 2013). Kellner (2008) stated that Bush spoke in code, repeating the same phrases continually. Costenbader, Donahoe, Dry, Harvey, and Miller (2012) found a significant degree of repetition in President Bush's speeches between September 11, 2001, and March 20, 2003. Even the pundits and experts that were not contributing new information to the debate maintained the same repetitive narratives already presented (Hampton, 2008), reinforcing daily talking points. The repetition of talking points was translated into repeated stories by the news media. Hampton (2008) collected all Federal News Washington transcripts of public speech from January 19, 2001, to March 19, 2003 and found the 2,206 transcripts contained between 16 and 72,000 pages of references to Iraq or Iraqi. The volume of these transcripts is an indication that most individuals who were exposed to the news media heard repeated stories about these topics and therefore this assumption was reasonable.

### **Scope and Delimitations**

In this study, I used agenda-setting to test if education levels had a relationship in shaping public opinion on public policy during periods of crisis, such as before the Iraq War. The scope of the study was the period before the Iraq War and appropriate because news coverage from the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks until the Iraq War had high-messaging regarding U.S. foreign policy. The news media and Bush administration used repeated broadcasts and messages to inform the public, which changed public opinion.

The findings of this study may not be generalizable to public opinion on foreign affairs in all situations, such as when low-messaging is present. Findings should be generalizable to foreign affairs where high-messaging is present.

There were several alternative theories that I considered utilizing but did not address the research question as successfully as agenda-setting. Theoretical frameworks not chosen for study include Bandura's (1986) social cognitive theory; Bernays's (1928) use of Freudian theory; Biddle's (1931) Psychological definition of propaganda theory; Cappella, Fishbein, Hornik, Ahern and Sayeed's (2001) integrative theory of behavior change; Herman and Chomsky's (1988/2002) propaganda model; Lasswell's (1930/1977) theory of political propaganda; Lippman's (1921/2010) public opinion theory; Mills' conflict theory (1956/2000); Rogers's (1995/2003) diffusion of innovations; and Stephenson and Witte's (2001) extended parallel process model. I did not choose other current theories because they did not align with the research question as well, while early works were not chosen because there was no modern work to accompany them. I chose

agenda-setting as the theoretical framework because it is extant, evolving, and extends studies of propaganda research.

### **Limitations**

Limitations can impact internal and external validity (Campbell & Stanley, 1966). My first internal limitation was the observer effect, concerning the awareness of participant honesty and that their answers were not changed to suit an alternative agenda. A second internal limitation may have existed in statistical regression, as that is the statistical method chosen to extrapolate the data. These internal threats may limit the generalizability of the study (Campbell & Stanley, 1966).

Concerning external threats to validity, the first external limitation is that of *selection bias*, which may compromise the original study if randomness of participants was not an accurate representation of the population. Because these survey data were part of a quadrennial study by a reputable research organization, it was a reasonable expectation that sampling was well-conducted 2002.

Personal bias on my part may have also limited the study. I am a United States Air Force veteran who is disabled. As a noncommissioned officer, I was a trainer and subject-matter expert in air base ground defense during the Gulf War. My expertise consisted of the defense of priority aircraft, nonpriority aircraft and structures, nuclear materials, explosive ordinance, missiles, fellow airmen, VIPs, and foreign dignitaries. I was a standby for deployment to Iraq and the Gulf. I did not have influence on messaging or its distribution outside of following a chain-of-command. My disabilities occurred within the confines of training scenarios and not during conflict.

Because the data are of a secondary nature, I was limited in my study by the steps taken by the original researchers in collecting the data. Any personal biases I may have had were eliminated through the use of secondary data and the utilization of standard statistical methods for analysis in this study. These issues did not affect bias, and no further measures were necessary. Despite the limitations in this study, this study provides insight into agenda-setting, education, and repetition.

### **Significance**

This study was necessary because it extended the understanding of the relationship that education levels played in shaping public opinion on public policy during periods of crisis, such as before the Iraq War. The study relied on literature related to agenda-setting, education, and repetition within the framework of McCombs's (2004/2014) agenda-setting theory. The study would be of interest to university academics, educators, policy legislators, and news media agencies because it offers new perspectives regarding periods of crises when messaging is high, the effects on public opinion, and agenda-setting theory.

While agenda-setting is well-studied in political communication (Jenkins & Monroe, 2012; Johansen & Joslyn, 2008; McCombs, 2004/2014; Minor, 2013; O'Neal, 2011; Steuter & Wills, 2008), there has been little, if any, research conducted linking agenda-setting, education, repetition, and public opinion, especially during times of war and crisis with high repetition. The amount of repetition survey respondents was exposed to is also unknown, but certain. As individuals orient themselves by mapping their world to fill in gaps, especially through news media and messaging, the individual becomes

more susceptible to the effects of agenda-setting by news media (McCombs, 1967; McCombs and Weaver, 1973; Tolman, 1932; Weaver, 1991; Westley & Borrow, 1959). To understand the complexities and effects of agenda-setting further, I conducted a quantitative study examining the role that education levels played in shaping public opinion on public policy during periods of crisis, such as before the Iraq War.

The policy implications of this study are necessary to consider. Decades ago, American civics courses were mandatory learning in high school. Putnam (2000) stated that the generation born from 1910 to 1940 developed exceptional civic engagement that lasted until the present. The number of civics courses in the United States decreased from 34 in 2001 to 21 states in 2012, with only nine states requiring students to pass a civics course to graduate high school (Civics Education Testing, 2012). The Department of Education noted failing grades on important information regarding the Constitution in Grades 4, 8, and 12, causing the executive director of the Center for Civic Education to state that educational policy now seems to be focused on developing workers instead of citizens (Dillon, 2011). The overall decline in education may jeopardize U.S. national security through stolen intellectual property resulting in a lack of economic growth and competitiveness (Crotty, 2012). National security may also be jeopardized through a lack of physical safety, global awareness, unity and cohesion. Political knowledge is a predictor of voting behavior, as those with more knowledge are more likely to vote than those with less knowledge (Delli Capini & Keeter, 1996; Popkin & Dimock, 1999). The decline of civics may be costly to the United States as there continues a steady loss of



legacy news media, while non-traditional news sources grow and the use of social media carries the risk of repeated propaganda exposure.

The Information Age included exponential growth of knowledge and news media consolidation. Magazines are still regarded for their in-depth journalistic integrity and shape public opinion (Mueller & Reichert, 2009). While news media are still available in legacy formats such as newspaper, magazine, radio and television, digital content and cable news channels have overtaken much of that market, and in some cases, eliminated their competition. The proliferation of news media has not given rise to a more informed population. However, Bennet, Breuing, and Givens (2008) found that those citizens who dissented and protested against an impending Iraq War, particularly on February 15, 2003, used social media to mobilize. Lenz and Lawson (2011) stated that television viewers focus on the physical appearances of candidates instead of content, influencing the merits of qualifications. Barnhurst (2011) finds the requisite time necessary for journalists to do their job has been undercut by demands for instant gratification in the digital era.

In this study, I extended the theory of agenda-setting and benefitted public policy by improving how public opinion is formed, thereby improving policy initiatives. Implications for positive social change include demonstrating the need for civics coursework in K-12 education. One argument is that institutions are responsible for the impetus for social change because a representative democracy relies upon informed citizens who are actively educated. American civics courses, which used to be part of the curriculum, have been eliminated in many states. The removal of these lessons leave

graduating high school students less equipped than previous generations to engage in the democratic processes at the community level, regionally, and nationally. Understanding the relationship between education levels and public opinion would support the reinstitution of civics courses, which are fundamental to active citizenship.

Conversely, the impetus for social change from this research may reside in the individual more than the institution. A self-informed citizenry may be more feasible if individuals act as gatekeepers of their own news media consumption rather than depending on other options for social change. Citizens must recognize the circumstances and types of messaging to filter, digest, and process.

This study may further the understanding of how public opinions are shaped by crisis scenarios, help individuals and elected officials better understand the validity of polls, and inform better decision making. Because the Iraq War was the last war the United States was involved in and at the beginning of the 21st century, the results of the research are instructive moving forward, especially given how news media has affected public opinion with new methods.

### **Summary**

Media agenda-setting impacts public opinion on foreign policy. Despite the research, gaps still exist detailing the role education plays in shaping public opinion during a foreign affairs crisis with repetitious and uniform news media. While education is thought to have a variety of benefits, such as informing better opinions (Makowsky & Miller, 2014) and stabilizing political opinions (Converse, 1964/2006; Zaller, 1991), the effect of education level in response to agenda-setting is unknown. Also, repetition of

messages by the news media may also increase the effectiveness of agenda-setting.

Education levels that may normally create barriers to negative aspects of repetition and agenda-setting may be at risk during periods of crisis, affecting public opinion, such as before the Iraq War. McCombs' (2004/2014) agenda-setting is the theoretical framework guiding this quantitative study.

In Chapter 2, I will address relevant works within the theory of agenda-setting, I will also address public opinion and news media influence, the role of education, the impact of repetitive messages, and other factors that influence public opinion.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

### **Introduction**

News media using bold lettering, catchy phrases, images, and placement of articles to grab and hold the attention of their viewers are using agenda-setting tactics, which are essentially, marketing techniques. McCombs and Shaw (1972) found that placement and the frequency of news messaging had an impact upon public opinion, regardless of intent by the media. Agenda-setting by the news media creates the salience of the message that changes perceptions of public opinion (McCombs, 2004/2014). While agenda-setting is well-studied in political communication (Jenkins & Monroe, 2012; Johansen & Joslyn, 2008; McCombs, 2004/2014; Minor, 2013; O'Neal, 2011; Steuter & Wills, 2008), there has been little, if any, research conducted linking agenda-setting, education level, and repetition to shaping public opinion during a foreign affairs crisis. To understand the complexities of agenda-setting further, I conducted a quantitative case study to determine how education levels shape public opinion during a foreign affairs crisis within the context of repetitious and uniform news media coverage.

Education affords attributes and opportunities to those who have obtained formal study. Those with higher levels of education are thought to have a more stable political ideology (Converse, 1964/2006; Zaller, 1991) and are less likely to change their political opinions (Johansen & Joslyn, 2008; Zaller, 1991) than those with less education. Individuals with higher education are often associated with significantly more effective critical thinking skills than their less educated counterparts (Zufari, 2013). Political knowledge prepares individuals with information needed to plan and implement effective

social approaches, which enables them to participate in actions that represent their attitudes efficiently (Visser, Holbrook, & Krosnick, 2008). Education prepares individuals to be active citizens but can be undermined by bias, as it obfuscates facts, rendering the decision-making process incomplete.

Bias destroys objectivity, as only one viewpoint is expressed or favored. Biased news media were effective in changing public opinion before the Iraq War (DellaVigna & Kaplan, 2007). When only exposed to biased news media coverage preceding and during the Iraq War, the more educated were just as misinformed as the less educated (Johansen & Joslyn, 2008). Internationally, Baum (2013) found that countries with more political parties had more critical and diverse coverage of the Iraq War, resulting in more opposition to the war. While new electronic forms of media are burgeoning towards younger viewers and non-traditional ideologies, televised news programs in the United States are usually confined to network and cable news sources, which cater to mainstream ideas and traditional political party platforms. Johansen and Joslyn (2008) and Kull, Ramsay, and Lewis (2003) determined that out of all news media viewers, Columbia Broadcasting System (CBS) and Fox News viewers were the most misinformed. The U.S. news media reported few stories about foreign dissent of the Iraq War (Herber & Filak, 2007). Lin (2009) found that even toward the end of the Iraq War, viewership of Fox News proved a predictor for support for the war, while non-Fox News programs proved insignificant predictors of support for war. Vosoughi, Roy, and Aral (2018) found that false news traveled significantly faster and farther than the truth. Biased news media

coverage may circumvent education, as inaccurate and misrepresented stories create flawed understandings of complex events.

News media establish interest in topics based upon the need to remain relevant and up-to-date, with the intention of continuing coverage as necessary for ratings. Concurring news media messages have a direct correlation to message salience (McCombs, 2004/2014), which determines what topics are at the forefront in the minds and conversation of citizens. In turn, the news media messages can change public opinion (Brooks, 1985; Glynn, Herbst, Lindeman, O'Keefe, & Shapiro, 2016) and increase the likelihood of political action (Shaw & Hamm, 1997). Public opinion is shaped by the increased salience of the topic and can change policy as long as legislators have buy-in. The placement and frequency of coverage (repetition) are means to emphasize a message, creating increased salience of topic.

In Chapter 2, I will present the search techniques and terms used within the literature search strategy. I will explore the theoretical foundation, providing a framework and history of the theory used in this study. I will provide a literature review of public opinion and news media influence, the role of education, the impact of repetitive messages, and factors beyond education that shape public opinion. Lastly, I will provide a summary and conclusion to Chapter 2.

### **Literature Search Strategy**

I used the following search engines to complete the literature review: Academic Search Complete, Communication & Mass Media Complete, *EBSCO*host, Education Research Complete, ERIC, Google Books, Google Scholar, International Security &

Counter Terrorism Reference Center, JSTOR, Political Science Complete, ProQuest, PsychArticles, PsychBOOKS, PsychCRITIQUES, PsychEXTRA, PsychINFO, Research Starters - Education, SAGE, ScienceDirect, and SocINDEX.

Key search criteria I used were: *agenda-setting; age statistics in politics; belief preservation; binomial logistic regression; Bush administration; civics courses; cognitive science; critical thinking (and real life, in education); decision-making; disinformation; educated vs non-educated; effective frequency; embedded journalism; foreign policy (and knowledge); formal education levels; sex statistics; high-messaging; international terrorism; internet usage; marketing strategies; mass media statistics; news media (and usage); military support for warfare; political party identification (and statistics); persuasion; political messaging; propaganda; public opinion; repetition; Saddam Hussein; sanctions; September 11, 2001; the Gulf War; the Iraq War; Vietnam public opinion statistics; and WWII public opinion statistics.*

I reviewed full articles and referenced further materials when appropriate. Other searches of literature, both peer-reviewed and published, were focused on the past 10 years; however, many seminal works were outside of that period or had been updated by their respective authors/publishers.

### **Theoretical Foundation**

The theoretical foundation for the study was developed initially by McCombs and Shaw (1972) to study the 1968 American presidential election. McCombs (2004/2014) further developed agenda-setting to study public opinion formation. By 2005, more than

400 articles had been published that rely on agenda-setting (McCombs, 2005). Agenda-setting continues to be a relevant theory to understand how media shapes public opinion.

The intention of news headlines is to capture the attention of the viewer, drawing them into the article or segment. McCombs and Shaw (1972) concluded that news media created increased salience of topic by increased coverage, thereby influencing public opinion. McCombs and Shaw studied five main topics (from nine major news sources) and calculated the number of news stories on each topic. Page position and length of a newspaper article lend credence to stories and this, in turn, influenced public opinion (McCombs, 2004/2014). Agenda-setting and priming are methods that news sources use to ensure that subjects are more prominent and accessible when individuals are forming opinions (Weaver, McCombs, & Shaw, 2004). An underlying assumption of agenda-setting is that the news media creates interest in a topic, which creates a sense of importance to people.

For agenda-setting to exist, two levels must be present. The first level involves the spread of message salience, delivering subjects of importance (awareness); the second level is the spread of characteristic increased salience (information), which determines which part of the subject is worth attention (Littlejohn & Foss, 2010). Agenda-setting is a three-step process (Benton & Frazier, 1976): the importance of the stories in the news media themselves, the topics of the stories must have an influence on public opinion, and public opinion influencing public policy. Lastly, news media affect agenda-setting and vice versa (Littlejohn, 2002). Therefore, news media filters and shapes news while focusing on narrow bands of issues intimating importance.



Agenda-setting has been used to study news media (McCombs, 1967; Merritt, 1997; McCombs & Weaver, 1973; Weaver, 1991). Further, Weaver (1997) pointed to *purposeful* agenda-setting in the news media surrounding 1992 pre-election coverage by *The Washington Post* nationally and *The Wichita Eagle* in Kansas. Conway, Kenski, and Wang (2015) examined the use of Twitter in the 2012 U.S. presidential primary; Hopmann, Vliegenthart, De Vreese, and Albæk (2010) studied political party preference, Moon (2011) observed news media use and political participation, and Wood and Peake (1998) studied the dynamics of foreign policy.

I selected McCombs's (2004/2014) agenda-setting as the guiding theory for this study because it uses quantitative testing to determine how increased salience of message shapes public opinion. Increased salience is an aspect of news media messaging, especially with the advent of online news and the continuous coverage of dedicated news networks. McCombs (2004/2014) viewed the implications of agenda-setting as far reaching, with the consequences of news media messaging altering a wide range of behaviors, including how individuals think of policy and how they vote, no longer confined to the pictures in the mind of citizens. Muddiman, Stroud, and McCombs (2014) used agenda-setting to study the importance of cross-network viewing during the Iraq War. Atkin and Rice (2012) offered a definition of agenda-setting, stating, "The phenomenon of topical salience applies to campaign impact on the perceived importance of societal problems and the prominence of policy issues" (p. 4). Agenda-setting is an evolving theory that has been in use for more than 4 decades.

## **Public Opinion and News Media Influence**

Public opinion is crucial to public policy, as it drives support for diverse topics such as candidate favorability, legislation, and warfare. The president usually sets the tone, news agenda, and frames the argument for the news media and the public (Patrick & Thrall, 2007). These actions have historically garnered strong support for presidents. However, presidents must still vie for attention during news cycles and will lead only as far as the public will follow (Patrick & Thrall, 2007). During the normal course of events, public opinion varies in response over a period; when major events occur, such as military conflict, public opinion usually moves “strongly and universally in one direction” (Wolf & Holian, 2006, p. 587). Modern public opinion polling science dates to the period just before WWII, when President Roosevelt used such polling to shape public policy (Converse, 1987; Holsti, 2004). After WWII, new methods of social science research led to specific public opinion data relating to political interest (Converse, 1987). As the research of actual opinions grew, social scientists and news media used quantitative methods to gauge support, level-of-informed opinion, and favorability (McCombs, 2004/2014). Early studies concluded that even among the most prolific events of the era (WWII, nuclear technology, and the cold war), the knowledge of U.S. citizens remained very low (Almond, 1950). However, there is long-standing debate whether public policy responds to public opinion (Arrow, 1951/1963; Dahl, 1956; Sen, 1970). Early studies regarding warfare and public opinion did not have a distinct pattern (Almond, 1950; Campbell, Converse, Miller, & Stokes, 1960; Converse, 1964/2006; Lippman, 1955/2009). By the Korean War and Vietnam War, casualty reports began to

affect public opinion regarding U.S. involvement in warfare (Milstein, 1973, Milstein & Mitchell, 1968; Mueller, 1971; Mueller, 1973). Public opinion tends to move policy more than policy changes public opinion; however, a policy may inform public opinion to some degree (Page & Shapiro, 1983). As news media becomes more abundant through a variety of sources, the influence of agenda-setting on public opinion could become more robust.

One of the ways public opinion can influence public policy is when the news media cover stories, particularly when television news media uses agenda-setting. Sahlane (2012) determined the influence of the news media on sociopolitical issues undermines democracy through the deliberate interference of public opinion. Further, agenda-setting may give reciprocal action from policy to public opinion (Page, Shapiro, & Dempsey, 1987). People often change their minds to fit the cultural zeitgeist (Enns & Kellstedt, 2008); however, public opinion affects policy when the majority is stable (Page & Shapiro, 1983). Baum (2013) suggested the news media include more academic “research on the domestic sources of foreign policy and on international conflict,” allowing for more nuanced arguments presented by the news media (p. 456). Zaller (1991) stated that exposure to and reception of communication, as well as acceptance of the message, is dependent upon the level of political astuteness of the individual. This acceptance may also be attributed in part to the education level of the individual.

Evidence suggests that legislation is tied to public opinion (Bartels, 1991; Erikson, MacKuen, & Stimson, 2002; Jacobs & Shapiro, 1996/2000; Monroe, 1998; Page & Shapiro, 1983; Stimson, MacKuen, & Erikson, 1995; and Wlezien, 2004), but Doyle

(2007) maintained that constituents only matter to politicians who are trying to stay in office. In this case, public opinion informs elected officials of the popularity of topics and it is necessary that legislators listen keenly. Individuals within special interest groups tend to focus on specific opinions, using those preferences to change legislation (Stimson, 1999); however Page et al. (1987) found more than 20 cases where public opinion moved away from special interest group policy suggestions toward more general preferences. Further, a great deal of information is given to citizens from the news media by use of opinion leaders (pundits and political elites), who inform and influence news media consumers (Page et al., 1987; Watts & Dodds, 2007). Zaller (1992) disagreed somewhat, stating that while the exposure of elite opinions to citizens varies, exposure can “explain only a part of the variance in individual opinions,” although opinion is largely tied to news media exposure of elite discourse (p. 22). The literature on the impact of news media on foreign policy is limited (Eissler, Russell, & Jones, 2014). Elites control news media; their messages become the most pervasive, which sets an agenda, in turn affecting public opinion.

Public opinion is still tenuous, despite persuasion techniques, and relies on other variables. Preconceived notions or prior knowledge is a baseline in the formation of public opinion, but opinions change as time elapses and news media coverage and its influence increase (Hoffman, Glynn, Huge, Sietman, & Thomson, 2007). Specific goals instead of political party identification are better indicators of influence on public opinion, especially about military action without the approval of the UN (as was the case with the Iraq War), approving policies, and actions that are congruent with their attitudes

(Holyk, 2011). Zaller (1991) agreed with Converse (1964/2006), inasmuch as to say that individuals do not reason for themselves; they need contextualized ideas presented to them. As such, those with less education may be more open to suggestion, or to more suggestion than those with more or specific types of education. Public opinion is the uneasy, consensus of informed, and uninformed citizens on domestic, and foreign policy, whether influenced by public opinion leaders or not.

Citizens care more about domestic than foreign policy, as it is easier to understand, and affects them directly. Foreign policy issues are more difficult to grasp because of the number of nations, allies, conflicts, trade agreements, partnerships, geopolitical factors, and relevant historical events. Eichenberg (2016) stated that on foreign policy, U.S. citizens share the same apathetic attitudes that they do on other political issues (Zaller, 1991), as do citizens from around the globe. U.S. public opinions on international affairs are so uninformed they may be classified as not having an opinion; and uninformed opinion may have very little impact on foreign policy (Holsti, 2004). Foreign voices, on the other hand, influenced public opinion among Democrats and Republicans in the United States before the war in Iraq (Hayes & Guardino, 2011). Wanta, Golan and Lee (2004) determined that the more the news media covered another nation positively, the more U.S. citizens believed those nations to be of vital importance to U.S. interests, and the converse was true for negative stories on nations. Foreign policy has a direct effect on diplomacy with other nations regarding support for warfare.

United States citizens are historically not as informed on foreign as they are on domestic policy. There is congruence within foreign policy and public opinion, since

there are examples following WWII to 1979 where government responded to polling on foreign (military aid for Nationalist Chinese; the Marshall Plan; European recovery) and domestic policy (the Federal Election Campaign Act of 1971; legislation to ration gasoline) (Page & Shapiro, 1983). In the interim period between the Vietnam War and the Gulf War, Page et al. (1987) found little difference between domestic (70%) and foreign (62%) policies concerning knowledge of U.S. citizens. The more citizens become informed, the more they rely upon news media perspectives, controlled by elites especially for foreign policy (Zaller, 1992). It is with an eye toward diplomacy which keeps the United States at peace or propels the nation toward war utilizing foreign policy. Diplomacy often uses language in rhetoric to persuade both foreign national leaders, and U.S. public opinion.

The role of the news media becomes more important during wartime, as journalists are reporting for who are not present (Fahmy & Johnson, 2005). News media influence during the Vietnam War was difficult to detect, and for this reason, researchers rarely attempt documentation concerning present evidence in advertising within elections, as an example (Zaller, 1991). Since the Vietnam War, the Pentagon has used the news media to control censorship by only reporting favorable content. The method of censorship has been effective by restricting access to only trusted news media outlets that could be used to instill patriotism (Kellner, 2008; Kumar, 2006; MacArthur, 2003; Thrall, 2000), values that conservatives had a greater proclivity toward (Lin, 2009). However, few have used modern research to examine persuasion of news content, or endorsements in politics (Ladd & Lenz, 2009). In the case of the Iraq War, many journalists became

propagandists for the war, spinning messages from the Bush administration (Kellner, 2008). Cobb and Elder (1973) stated that some topics such as war (drastic topics) are simultaneously in the news media and public; though this assertion is decades old, it is the way in which modern news media is disseminated that changed how frequently the messaging was observed by the public. The Vietnam War and the Iraq War may be decades apart; however, news media had an important role in each of these conflicts.

The role of the news media on public opinion does not always reflect the accuracy of information. Further, “the media drive the content of poll questions” (Stroud & Sparrow, 2011, p. 162), which easily influences public opinion when results are given repeated attention from the news media. The news media did not hold the Bush administration accountable for “outrageous and false assertions about going to war in Iraq” (Harp, Loke, & Bachmann, 2010, p. 477). Further, the news media failed to ask tough unbiased questions and disregarded the best interests of an informed population, favoring sensationalism that translated into sales.

Public opinion in the United States about intervention or invasion in Iraq after the Gulf War but before September 11, 2001, was not unilateral. With few exceptions, research on messaging held partisan indications; Democrats and Independents were optimistic when presented with information that disputed with their previous opinions, while Republican were more pessimistic when faced with opposing information (Gelpi, 2010). Slusser and Williams (2008) found that support for military action in Iraq from 1991 to 2003 had decreased in almost every socioeconomic category, with the notable exception of those Republicans earning less than \$10,000 per year with less than a high

school education. This decrease in support between the Gulf War and the Iraq War may be due in part to continued airstrikes and sanctions against Hussein's regime during President Clinton's tenure, effectively rendering retaliation improbable. Furthermore, during the period between the Gulf War and the Iraq War, criticisms began to emerge and disseminate to citizens who wanted no part of such unnecessary conflicts.

The decrease in support for military intervention began to change after the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001. In the period between the terrorist attacks and the lead-up to the invasion, polls had shown that those individuals who were more knowledgeable about the war with Iraq were less likely to support it, while the inverse was applicable: those who were for the war knew considerably fewer facts concerning it (Merzer, 2003). Stroud and Sparrow (2011) determined that public opinion polls were not consistent regarding terrorism and Iraq during the period between September 11, 2001, and the authorization by Congress to invade Iraq. Finnegan (2007) found stories that had an alarmist nature were often placed on the front page of newspapers with high circulations, adding to agenda-setting (Finnegan, 2007). Kull et al. (2003) found that those who watched CBS or Fox News were more likely to be factually misinformed about the Iraq War than those who used National Public Radio (NPR) or Public Broadcasting Station (PBS) as their primary source of news. In reporting on the Iraq War, Fox News was more favorable to the Bush administration (Aday, 2010) than their counterparts, CNN and MSNBC (Muddiman et al., 2014). A Knight-Ridder poll in January 2002 suggested that American citizens who knew more about the build-up of the war were less likely to take a militaristic or aggressive perspective; the individuals who



were educated were less likely to support military action (Sheldon & Stauber, 2003).

Rampton and Stauber (2003) stated that the gap in knowledge and hawkishness is not by accident. The role of education levels and public opinion offers insight into how the two are related.

In the case of the Iraq War, the average citizen did not have access to classified intelligence and was not privy to national security briefings. A former national intelligence officer for the CIA leveled the accusation that the Bush administration intentionally misused or disregarded intelligence used as justification for the invasion of Iraq instead of utilizing the tools of the intelligence community (Fox, 2006; Pincus, 2006; van der Heide, 2013). In addition, President Bush asserted that Hussein/Iraq had links to al Qaeda (Allen, 2002); these assertions later proved false. President Bush delivered a public address to the UN that advocated binary thinking, stating, “you’re either with us or against us in the fight against terror” (You Are Either with Us, 2001). President Bush’s assertion had the intention of being a black and white issue. Instead, Bush’s message was perceived internationally as an ultimatum that weakened diplomatic ties. U.S. news sources merely repeated Bush’s message without questioning its legitimacy and legality.

### **The Role of Education**

The role education plays in critical thinking influences the ability to sort information, such as news media, during times of war and crisis with high media coverage (Converse, 1964/2006). Research suggests that those with more education have better health, healthier lifestyles, live longer, and make better choices in their lives than their less educated counterparts (Feinstein, Sabates, Anderson, Sorhaindo, & Hammond,

2006; Visser, Holbrook, & Krosnick, 2008). Formal education helps to stabilize political opinions (Converse, 1964/2006; Zaller, 1991) by altering prevailing biases, preconceptions, policies, and social customs (Gardner, 2009). Together, education and intelligence enhance the opinions of each citizen. The educated are socially accepted to have more knowledge than uneducated citizens. Critical thinking is an integral part of intelligence, but it is important to note that higher education is no guarantee of knowledge (Deary & Johnson, 2010). The idea of those with education having knowledge is largely predicated on the notion that the educated can use outside influencers to their advantage and can sift through more information and extract better data.

Education shapes public opinion on matters of government policy (Converse, 1964/2006; Zaller, 1991), however, most citizens are uninformed, ambivalent and conflicted about complex issues (Eichenberg, 2016; Zaller, 1992; Zaller & Feldman, 1992). The highly educated and people with strong knowledge of politics have complex ideologies regarding domestic and foreign policies (Feldman & Lynch, 1988). The phenomenon of education affecting political attitudes during elections started to become relevant in the late 1960s (Nie & Andersen, 1974). Delli Carpini and Keeter (1996) discovered strong correlations between political knowledge and participation in politics. In research of non-educated and educated citizens using emotion to help code information, the gap “narrowed for emotionally personalized stories. These findings confirm that education levels drive information acquisition gaps” (Bas & Grabe, 2015, p. 176). While political knowledge is not directly measured in public opinion surveys, education is often used as a proxy (Neuman, 1986), as exemplified in research regarding

attitudes on domestic policies (Anderson, 1998). While citizens may vote according to their interests regarding public policy (Stimson, 1999), many do not (Becker & Mulligan, 2016). Domestic policy differs from foreign policy, as it is exponentially more complicated. It is unclear whether there is a causal relationship between foreign policy and public opinion due to fewer studies investigating connections between them (Holsti, 1992; Light & Lake, 1985; Mello, 2014). Education and the influence of the public opinion leaders in modern news media may correlate with political opinions since it is their perspectives being broadcast extensively.

Public opinion leaders influence public opinion through individuals; however, research suggests that individuals may inflate their knowledge if they are unfamiliar with political information. Lasorsa (2009) found that women and those with less education, income, and were younger in age tended to inflate their political interest when presented with probing political questions. However, lack of information and education about perceived threats may not reflect mass public opinion post-September 11, 2001 within the United States and United Kingdom (Buckmaster & McKenzie, 2009). These results may indicate in part that older citizens are better informed than their younger counterparts, perhaps due to their choice of news media sources. Makowsky and Miller's (2014) research indicated that the ideal swing voter pool would be full of highly intelligent high school graduates, and few individuals with college degrees. Based on these research findings of Buckmaster and McKenzie (2009), Lasorsa (2009) and Makowsky and Miller (2014), an ideal voter is young, highly intelligent, but uninformed, and perhaps female.

The inflated supposition of political knowledge is in opposition to the thoughtful response on administration directives, policy, and casualties.

Public opinion on warfare in the United States has remained relatively steady for decades. Support for warfare among the educated had not changed significantly since WWII when support was low (American Public Differs from Experts, 1939). During the Vietnam War, public opinion in support of war among the educated began shifting toward an anti-war stance as foreign policy knowledge increased (Zaller, 1991). Data suggests that public opinion began to change in greater numbers in the early stages of the Iraq War, with rising vocal dissent amongst the educated (Burris, 2003). Johansen and Joslyn (2008) examined news media coverage preceding and during the Iraq War and discovered education offered no protection against propaganda when news was obtained from a singular source. As public opinion becomes more recognized as a motivating factor influencing public policy, the importance of education and levels of attainment may be important in circumventing repetitious and uniform media messaging.

Critical thinking blocks indoctrination by challenging messages, which is an obstacle a propagandist must overcome to ensure their message is persuasive (Rampton & Stauber, 2003). Rampton and Stauber (2003) stated the bypassing of the rational brain through emotional symbolism is meant to manipulate individuals on a primal level. Even auditory symbolism is important, as music and score set the tone to mirror the desired feeling (Borchers, 2013; Sellnow, 1996). News media during the lead-up to the Iraq War used metaphor, symbolism, slogans, iconography, and music repeatedly to persuade public opinion. There is a gap in the literature about the role education levels play in

shaping public opinion during a foreign affairs crisis within the context of repetitious and uniform news media coverage.

### **The Impact of Repetitive Messages**

The impact of repetitive messages may create a more favorable environment to agenda-setting, which affects public opinion. The old folk adage and propagandist maxim, that when a lie is repeated often it can be accepted as truth, has been confirmed by cognitive science studies in repetition by Arkes, Hackett and Boehm (1989); Bacon (1979); Begg, Anas and Farinacci (1992); Begg and Armour (1991); Begg, Armour and Kerr (1985); Brown and Nix (1996); Gigerenzer (1984); Hasher, Goldstein and Toppino (1977); Rampton and Stauber (2003); and Schwartz (1982). Redundant messaging helps duplicate the core idea and create connections to actions, and circumstances (Clampitt, 2012). Brown and Nix (1996) found that if the false repetitious information is not corrected immediately, it becomes solidified as truth to the viewer. Asch stated that even most reasonable people would agree that it is easy to “manipulate opinions and sentiments almost at will” (1952, p. 617). Further, Asch (1952) found the idea that human beings could be so easily suggestible and put so little effort into processing information, that it painted a pessimistic portrait of the human psyche. Stone and McCombs (1981) suggested that it takes between two and six months for themes to become part of the public consciousness. Repetition of news message contributes to increased salience of message, creating agenda-setting.

The number of iterations of a message delivered to change opinion is unknown, and while not an exact science, repetition is known to have a direct impact on memory

and personality traits. Kim, Han, Choi and Kim (2012) found that in Korea, testing of Stone and McCombs (1981) hypothesis, using a longer period of twelve months, resulted in the discovery that news pieces that covered a particular topic from two to five times more often than other stories were identifiable by viewers. Kim et al. (2012) pointed out that the effect of accessibility is usually short-term, however, other research suggests agenda-setting and priming are longer lasting (Krosnick & Brannon, 1993; Stone & McCombs, 1981). Also, Kim et al. (2012) discovered that agenda-setting worked so long as viewers watched the news. Kim et al.'s (2012) results relating to the repetition of news media messaging could be generalizable to the United States particularly if news stories have an emotional component. Repetition alters not only memory, but also reinforces and/or creates habits, attitudes, and values, especially when emotion is involved.

While emotion within news stories is frowned upon by journalism schools and media watchdogs, it has played a role in media, especially when warfare is imminent or ongoing. Emotion is viewed as a liability to rationality and informed citizenry (Bas & Grabe, 2015). Boaz (2011) listed 14 propaganda techniques that Fox News, specifically, uses in their broadcasts: panic mongering; character assassination/ad hominem; projection/flipping; rewriting history; scapegoating/othering; conflating violence with power and opposition to violence with weakness; bullying; confusion; populism; invoking the Christian God; saturation; disparaging education; guilt by association and diversion. In many cases, what is being saturated/repeated does not have to have merit or be factual, if it is repeated enough, someone will believe the lie, especially if the assertion is untrue and not fact-checked. Vosoughi, Roy, and Aral (2018) discovered that while

false news traveled significantly “faster, deeper, and more broadly than the truth,” false political news, was more pronounced than any other category (p. 1150). Emotion used in stories is exacerbated when used in volume through repetition.

Fast stimuli, like 24-hour news channels, use repetition not only to tell narratives but also when the news is slow to fill time, which leaves viewers unable to keep up with the volume of potential misinformation. Huxley (1958) viewed all forms of media as neutral and recognized that in repressive societies repetitious message utilization of the same idea was an “immensely powerful instrument” for propaganda, especially by use of radio and television. Individuals are now faced with a bombardment of messages that arrive through a variety of media, including logos, brochures, pamphlets, advertisements, and viral Internet campaigns (Dardis, 2009). When news media distribute misinformation, the potential for alteration of public opinion is present. The news, generally for profit, is delivered to audiences to inform, persuade (Fortunato & Martin, 2016), and increasingly, to entertain (Graber, 1994; Hallin, 1990; Mellado & van Dalen, 2016; Taylor, 1998; Thussu, 2007). News sources contribute to repetitious messaging because saturation of information is profitable to business, as it equates to expanded viewership and larger advertising revenue. Since news media delivery mechanisms have changed greatly in past two decades, the messages they deliver are almost incalculable to the average citizen.

Advertising and marketing research use effective frequency (repetition), to reach a target audience repeatedly to result in the message acceptance before being rendered useless (Rethans, Swasy, & Marks, 1986). There does not seem to be a specific message

delivery number to reach the desired yield, but making a memorable impact is necessary. Long-lasting results are obtained by continuous repetition in all media formats, as talk radio and the Internet can keep an issue salient long after traditional legacy news media have changed its focus (Ratner & Scarrah, 2006). While Janiszewski and Meyvis (2001) also studied marketing concepts, their conclusions somewhat echo Kitson (1927) with the exception that it is difficult to address when the influence began by stating that repeated exposure influences and evidence points to processing fluency, which results in preference. The effects of repetition are still being studied and understood by cognitive scientists, and delivery, as well as a specific number or repetitions remain elusive, unique or situational.

Increased news media presence due to technology ensures the repetition of messages, and thus saliency. CNN's Wolf Blitzer acknowledged the effect of repetition of information given by government officials that were broadcast by the news media was tantamount to groupthink (Blitzer, 2004). According to the Pew Research Center (2014), Internet usage between September 2001 (the period before the Iraq War) and August 2011 (just before the ending of the Iraq War), went from 59% to 78% of households. The assumption of repetition of the message is important because of the volume of information before, and during the Iraq War, suggests consumption of that media messaging was on a massive scale and inescapable, omnipresent, and unprecedented. Because of the nature of modern news media, messaging is now unavoidable, especially in times of war and crisis such as before the Iraq War.



### **Factors Beyond Education that Shape Public Opinion**

Public opinion is complex, and many factors are part of the process of shaping it. Education is one of the primary drivers, as addressed above, but there are other factors that need to be considered in this study. Key demographics that aid in the understanding of public opinion includes ideology, sex, race, income level, and political party. I used these variables to control for systematic differences in public opinion.

With age comes an interest in politics, and current events. Traditionally, older U.S. citizens tend to be interested in policy as it affects their attitudes and values, needs and goals (Caprara, Capanna, Vecchione, & Barbaranelli, 2006; Krosnick, 1988), however, this may no longer be the case. Regardless of political demographic, citizens are becoming more politically active at younger ages, such as at the high school level or younger, who may be sensitive to policies that directly affects them. Fahmy (2006/2016) stated that linking a specific causality to the political system and young people is difficult. A specific age is difficult to pinpoint, though the proclivity to use media and be exposed to news stories has become more commonplace with young people consuming new media sources. There is a rise in pro-government youth, but it is unclear if this trend will continue (Benedict-Nelson, 2012). Lee and Yang (2014) found that news media viewers in Korea who relied heavily upon legacy news media tend to have more political knowledge than those who either avoided news or only consumed emerging news media (The Internet, and social media). While older citizens tend to cling to legacy media, sources are changing due to the influx of technology, affecting citizens at younger ages than previously understood.

The Internet has grown as a source for news media since its broad use as an informational tool, with younger citizens who are accustomed to using it their entire lives. Data regarding Internet usage is varied; Davis (1999) asserted that the Internet does not initiate political interest, while Bonchek (1997) believed that it increased the political information that resulted in more participation. Wang (2007) agreed with Bonchek (1997), finding the Internet has “positive effects on political attitudes and political participation” (p. 393). Civic education has been in decline for the past few decades in the United States (Galston, 2001), and impacts the formation of public opinion, particularly with the use of Internet news (Wang, 2007). While there are exceptions, many minors, and young adults are not actively engaged in the political process. After the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, the idea of reinstating the draft was discussed, as was compulsory service (Kamarck, 2016), but neither policy garnered public or political support for implementation (Ross, 2011), yet these policy initiatives garnered only apathy among the young citizens who would have been directly affected. Age is correlated with where U.S. citizens get their news, so it is important to consider age in analyzing public opinion. Senior citizens preferred CBS and Fox News before the Iraq War (Rich, 2014), while younger citizens are more likely to obtain their news from social media (Barthel, Shearer, Gottfried, & Mitchell, 2015; Duggan, 2015; Holcomb, Gottfried, & Mitchell, 2013). Younger citizens tend to be more drawn to breaking news than their older counterparts (Social and Demographic Differences, 2014). While many age groups get their news from social media, younger citizens are inclined to do so more than their older peers.

Earlier studies indicated that Facebook influenced political participation and protest (Gil de Zúñiga, Jung, & Valenzuela, 2012; McClurg, 2003), however, later studies from Chan (2016) and Theocharis and Lowe (2015) found evidence that Facebook does not aid in electoral campaign participation. Social media, while powerful in making citizens aware, does little to sway them to participate in democracy. Paulo Serra (2014) posited that citizens displeased with government propaganda in mainstream news media turn to the Internet as alternative news sources. President Obama (as cited in Solon, 2016b) stated in a press conference in Germany with respect to misinformation on social media that, “if we can’t discriminate between serious arguments and propaganda, then we have problems” (para. 2). Social media has recently come under fire for being a propaganda tool by way of disseminating false information against political rivals and ideologies. Vosoughi, Roy, and Aral’s (2018) research indicated that humans were responsible for spreading false news stories on the social media site, *Twitter*, not bots, and political stories were spread faster and farther than any other type of news story. The issue of veracity is the obvious concern, especially regarding issues of national importance and the mere ability for false stories to influence public opinion.

Political Party identification seems to condition opinions of citizens. Jones (2003) found political party identification was a key indicator of military support against Iraq. Before the Iraq War, overall support for the invasion was 76% (Erikson & Tedin, 2010), with Republican support at 93% (Jones, 2003). Democrats typically favor anti-war policies, however, before the Iraq War, the Democratic political party leadership was unclear of their stance on the invasion, which became a temporary anomaly. Before the

Iraq War, Democratic support of invasion was at 53% (Jones, 2003). Other studies found between 57% and 59% favoring diplomacy rather than an invasion of Iraq (Berinsky, 2007; Erikson & Tedin, 2010; Hetherington & Suhay, 2011). When the Democratic political party did find unity on the issue of Iraq, the War was mired in controversy, casualties, and cost. It became difficult for dissenters to have a voice, as the Bush administration and supporters of the Iraq War perpetually changed the goals and questioning their support of the troops, patriotism, and loyalty to their country.

Socioeconomic status such as ideology, sex, race, income level, and political party can also affect public opinion. Individuals with income less than \$10,000 per year supported military action in Iraq from 1991 to 2003 (Slusser & Williams, 2008). In one study on foreign policy among college students, males scored slightly higher than females, with the authors hypothesizing that females may learn differently than their male counterparts (Arbitter, Bach, Berkowitz, Brown, & Krebs, 2011). Seventy-seven percent of men favored the Iraq War, while 66% of women were in support (Jones, 2003). Overall support for the Iraq War by Whites was 78%, while Black support was at 29% (Jones, 2003). With sharp divides between socioeconomic demographics, clear lines of support were drawn.

Republicans were more apt to favor the Iraq War than their Democratic counterparts. The Iraq War was initiated by the Bush administration and highly supported by the Republican political party throughout, while Democratic and general support decreased markedly in May 2004 (Berinsky, 2007; Everts & Isernia, 2005). Ideology, sex, race, income level, and political party variables are all factors that may shape public

opinion. I controlled for each of these in my statistical analysis, so they did not affect the dependent variable. This way I determined the relationship between the independent variable of education levels on the dependent variables and avoided any confounding effects (Vogt & Johnson, 2011).

### **Summary and Conclusion**

In Chapter 2, I presented an introduction to the theoretical foundation of agenda-setting. The purpose of this quantitative research study was to determine the role that education levels played in shaping public opinion on public policy during periods of crisis, such as before the Iraq War. The frequency and placement of news as subject matter by news media that creates agenda-setting (McCombs, 2004/2014). McCombs (2004/2014) detailed how agenda-setting creates salience, especially in situations similar to the period before the Iraq War. Public opinion is shaped through agenda-setting by the news media, and delivered by media elites to change public opinion and policy through the method of increased message salience (McCombs, 2004/2014). Both repetition and agenda-setting helped shape the news messages the public heard before the Iraq War.

Education is thought to provide a role when critically viewing news stories, propaganda and political commentary, but this may not occur in all situations. Education has many benefits on the individual, including to help stabilize political opinions (Converse, 1964/2006; Zaller, 1991) and informs better opinions (Makowsky & Miller, 2014), though there is no guarantee of intelligence (Deary & Johnson, 2010). However, there is a correlation between higher education and knowledge of complex ideologies, domestic, and foreign policies (Feldman & Lynch, 1988). Johansen and Joslyn (2008)

examined news media coverage preceding and during the Iraq War and discovered education offered no protection against propaganda when news was obtained from a singular source. Education may not be a protective barrier for viewers when repetition is present.

Repetition contributes to the role in which individuals recall and process information methodology. The Bush administration and the news media heavily relied upon repetition and metaphor, which were inescapable before the Iraq War and changed public opinion. Message repetition may enhance memory action (Brown & Nix, 1996; Dubuisson et al., 2012; Lakoff, 2006; Rampton & Stauber, 2003; Saville, 2011; Schreiber et al., 2013), but it may be at odds with critical thinking (Gordon, Soldan, Thomas, & Stern, 2013). Further, Brown and Nix (1996) outlined a large body of literature that supports the effect of repetition on perception, and Rampton and Stauber (2003) documented the occurrence of agenda-setting before and during the Iraq War. Repetition equates to news media saturation, ensuring messages are consumed in some capacity.

There was a gap in the literature regarding the role that education levels play in shaping public opinion on public policy during periods of crisis, such as before the Iraq War. Research is currently limited on repetition and its effects on public opinion and agenda-setting. Agenda-setting may circumvent aspects of political knowledge that an education provides during periods of crisis such as before the Iraq War. The purpose of this research was to determine if there was a relationship between education levels in public opinion before the Iraq War.

In Chapter 3, I will address the methodology I used to examine the research question regarding the relationship between education levels and public opinion in the year before the United States war with Iraq. I chose to use secondary data from the American Public Opinion and U.S. Foreign Policy survey of 2002 to address the research question, and associated hypotheses. Binomial logistic regression analysis were used to test the relationship between education, and public opinion before the Iraq War. I will also discuss threats to validity and ethical considerations in the chapter.

## Chapter 3: Research Method

### **Introduction**

Agenda-setting may bypass education and political knowledge with messages that speak to emotion instead of intellect. Repetition of messaging may enhance the effectiveness of agenda-setting, and it is unknown if education affects agenda-setting in a repetitive environment. Agenda-setting is well-studied in political communication (Jenkins & Monroe, 2012; Johansen & Joslyn, 2008; McCombs, 2004/2014; Minor, 2013; O'Neal, 2011; Steuter & Wills, 2008); however, little if any research has been conducted linking agenda-setting, education, and repetition. To understand these linkages further, I examined the role that education levels played in shaping public opinion on public policy during periods of crisis, such as before the Iraq War. To do so, I used secondary data analysis on a survey of public opinions regarding a wide variety of foreign policy questions before the Iraq War.

Chapter 3 includes descriptions of the research design rationale, the secondary data from Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research that I used for the study, a detailed explanation of methodology, the data analysis used, issues of validity, and ethical concerns. Lastly, I will provide a summary and transition into Chapter 4.

### **Research Design and Rationale**

The purpose of the quantitative study was to determine if there is a relationship between education level attainment and public opinion before the Iraq War. I conducted a quantitative study that employed binomial logistic regression using a secondary data set,



Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research Study Number 3673, which was a study of public opinion before the Iraq War. The American Public Opinion and U.S. Foreign Policy (2002) nonexperimental survey data were gathered between June 1–30, 2002 by The Chicago Council on Foreign Relations, and The German Marshall Fund of the United States (funded by the MacArthur Foundation and the McCormick Tribune Foundation). Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research was part of a quadrennial series investigating opinions and attitudes of the general public about funding, aid, support, opposition, policy goals, treaties, terrorism, justification of troop involvement, invasion of Iraq, and the overthrow of Saddam Hussein (Chicago Council on Foreign Relations, 2002). American Public Opinion and U.S. Foreign Policy (Chicago Council on Foreign Relations, 2002) included two parts. Part 1: opinion leader data (decision-makers in positions of leadership in government, academia, business, labor, media, religious institutions, special interest groups, and private foreign policy organizations) and, Part 2: general population data from a national probability sample (men and women over the age of 18). For this analysis, I only used Part 2 as it could be used to test assumptions about public opinion during a 30-day period before the Iraq War.

My objective for this study was to determine if there was a relationship between the independent variable of interest, education level, with different questions regarding public opinion related to Iraq. Five dependent variables were tested: favor economic sanctions against Iraq, combating international terrorism as a foreign policy goal, Iraq developing weapons of mass destruction in the next 10 years, favor or oppose the use of U.S. troops if Iraq invaded Saudi Arabia, and, support for the United States using troops

to invade Iraq and overthrow the government of Saddam Hussein. Covariates included ideology, sex, race, income level, and political party. I analyzed the data using binomial logistic regression to test five hypotheses because the dependent variables were dichotomous. The nature of the research question was best addressed with a quantitative approach because it relied on public opinion data collected by a survey in the past.

It was necessary to obtain secondary data collected during a period when public opinion on foreign affairs was high due to the impending preemptive strike against, subsequent invasion, and war with Iraq. The timing and the questions asked of respondents of this survey coincide directly with the period before the Iraq War and effectively captures public opinion at that time. The importance of the time-frame was to have statistical data on public opinion surrounding the events before the Iraq War. It would have been impossible for me as a graduate student with limited resources and access to conduct a national study. Further, using a secondary data set is necessary, as the study deals with events and public opinion in the past, immediately preceding the Iraq War, so the data can no longer be collected.

### **Methodology**

The data I used for this study were originally used in the American Public Opinion and U.S. Foreign Policy survey of 2002. The data were collected by telephone, and personal interviews of the general population from June 1, 2002–June 30, 2002, and the Project Managers were David Krane, and Shawn Wade (Chicago Council on Foreign Relations, 2002). The unit of observation was the individual. The population for the sample was all people over the age of 18 in the United States (Chicago Council on

Foreign Relations, 2002). The researchers used a national probability sampling technique to collect the data. The data set includes a total of 3,262 respondents with 2,862 being from phone interviews and 400 in-home interviews. All interviews were conducted by Harris Interactive. All participation of respondents was voluntary. The survey was designed to certify equal representation of households in differing regions such as city, suburban, and rural areas within the United States (Chicago Council on Foreign Relations, 2002). Harris Interactive supervisory staff continually monitored the interviews to ensure quality results (Chicago Council on Foreign Relations, 2002).

In conducting statistical analysis, such as binomial logistic analysis, it is critical to determine if the sample size is large enough to determine if the results are statistically significant. I completed a power analysis based on the overall population in the United States of those 18-years-old and above; a total of 344 respondents were needed to have a margin of error of 5%, and a confidence level of 95% (Raosoft, 2004). Because the sample size in the dataset was 3,262 respondents, it was large enough to test my hypotheses and find statistical significance.

The secondary data set needed for this study was available through ICPSR, of which Walden University is a member. As a Walden student, I had access to the dataset. I downloaded the data set after IRB gave approval; no other permissions were needed. The data were provided by ICPSR within a Sav file format that was uploaded into SPSS for analysis.

## **Operationalization of Variables**

I chose the variables for this study with the consideration of alignment to the research question, and relevance to the topic. The variables I chose are defined below based on American Public Opinion and U.S. Foreign Policy, 2002 (2002). Coding can be viewed in Table 1.

### **Independent Variable**

*Education level.* This variable captured the respondent's last grade of school completed.

### **Dependent Variables**

*Favoring economic sanctions against Iraq.* This variable was measured by asking respondents if they favor or oppose the use of economic sanctions against Iraq.

*Combating international terrorism as a foreign policy goal.* This variable was measured by asking respondents their opinion about combating international terrorism as a U.S. foreign policy goal. Answers were given on a Likert scale of *very important*, *somewhat important*, and *not important at all*. I determined that the observations were less than 2% without simplifying categories. However, once the data were analyzed, there were very few (less than 2%) of the respondents who answered that combating international terrorism as a foreign policy goal was not at all important. Given the lack of variance in the (lower/higher) end of the scale, the two responses not at all important and somewhat important were merged into a new variable. Further, making the transformation allowed the hypothesis to be tested using a binomial logistic regression model instead of multiple ordinal regression.

*Iraq developing weapons of mass destruction in the next 10 years.* This variable was classified by listing possible threats to the vital interest of the United States in the next 10 years, there are three potential responses: *critical threat, important but not critical threat, not an important threat at all.* I determined that the observations were less than 2% without simplifying categories. However, once the data were analyzed, there were very few (less than 2%) of the respondents who answered that Iraq developing weapons of mass destruction in the next 10 years was not at all important. Given the lack of variance in the (lower/higher) end of the scale, the two responses not at all important and important but not critical were merged into a new variable. Further, making the transformation allowed the hypothesis to be tested using a binomial logistic regression model instead of multiple ordinal regression.

*Favor or oppose the use of U.S. troops if Iraq invaded Saudi Arabia.* This variable was classified by asking respondents if there was justification for using U.S. troops if Iraq invaded Saudi Arabia. Respondents were asked if they favor or oppose the use of U.S. troops.

*Support for the United States using troops to overthrow Saddam Hussein's government.* This variable was selected as respondents were asked whether the United States should use its troops to invade Iraq and overthrow the government of Saddam Hussein. Respondents were asked if they favored or opposed.

### **Covariates**

*Ideology.* This variable was identified by asking respondents how they would describe their political views.

*Sex.* This variable ascertained if the respondent identified as male or female.

*Race.* This variable was identified by asking respondents their race and ethnic origin.

*Income level.* I selected income level as a variable to ascertain the respondent's total 2001 household income.

*Political Party affiliation.* This variable was created to determine political party affiliation. Using Q1010, where each respondent identified which political party affiliation they considered themselves: Republican; Democratic; Independent; or other. The Independents who leaned were merged into the Republican or Democratic parties, respectively, with the true independents narrowed down from those that remained and who identified as independent. Those without political party identification of Republican, Democratic, or Independent were eliminated from the sample.

Table 1

*Values and Categories of Variables*

Variables	Categories
Education	0 = 8 <sup>th</sup> grade or less, 1 = Some high school, 2 = High school graduate, 3 = Some college, 4 = College graduate, 5 = Postgraduate study
Economic sanctions against Iraq	0 = Oppose, 1 = Favor
International Terrorism	0 = Not important at all/somewhat important, 1 = Very important
Iraq will develop WMDs	0 = Not an important threat at all/important but not critical threat, 1 = Critical threat
U.S. troops if Iraq invaded S. Arabia	0 = Oppose, 1 = Favor
Overthrow Saddam Hussein/Iraq	0 = Oppose, 1 = Favor
Ideology	0 = Very liberal, 1 = Fairly liberal, 2 = Middle of the road, 3 = Fairly conservative, 4 = Very conservative
Sex	0 for male, and 1 for female
Race	0 for non-Hispanic White and 1 for all other groups
Income level	0 = \$14,999 or less, 1 = \$15,000 - \$24,999, 2 = \$25,000 - \$34,999, 3 = \$35,000 - \$49,999, 4 = \$50,000 - \$74,999, 5 = \$75,000 - \$99,999, 6 = \$100,000 - \$124,999, 7 = \$125,000 - \$149,999, 8 = \$150,000 - \$199,999, 9 = \$200,000 - \$249,999, 10 = \$250,000 or more
Political Party	0 = Republican, 1 = Democratic

**Data Analysis Plan**

I used binomial logistic regression to test those hypotheses because the dependent variables were binary. I used Statistical Packages for Social Sciences version 24 software (SPSS 24.0) to test the hypotheses.

Because the data were of a secondary nature, a careful review was necessary to clean, and remove any identifying information, or errors within the data set. This required a visual and electronic inspection of the data fields to ensure mitigation of errors (Osborne, 2012). Additionally, I ran a frequencies check to ensure there were not missing data fields in the data set and recoded any missing variables by inputting a value of 99. Any case with a missing value in the regression equation was omitted from the analysis.

As outlined above, it was necessary to recode some of the data and merge variables because of the infrequent observations in some categories. These issues were addressed by re-coding the data by hand and extensive double checking to ensure accuracy.

The following research question guided this study.

### **Research Question**

What is the relationship between education levels and public opinion on foreign policy issues covered extensively by the news media during periods of crisis such as before the Iraq War?

The following five hypotheses were formulated to help answer this research question by examining various aspects of public opinion before the Iraq War.

**H<sub>0</sub>1<sub>A</sub>.** There is no significant difference in public opinion opposing economic sanctions on Iraq by the United States based on education levels.

**H<sub>a</sub>1<sub>A</sub>.** There is significant difference in public opinion opposing economic sanctions on Iraq by the United States based on education levels.

**H<sub>0</sub>1<sub>B</sub>.** There is no significant difference in public opinion rating combating



international terrorism as a United States foreign policy goal based on education levels.

**H<sub>a1B</sub>**. There is significant difference public opinion rating combating international terrorism as a United States foreign policy goal based on education levels.

**H<sub>01C</sub>**. There is no significant difference in public opinion regarding if Iraq will develop weapons of mass destruction based on education levels.

**H<sub>a1C</sub>**. There is significant difference in public opinion regarding if Iraq will develop weapons of mass destruction based on education levels.

**H<sub>01D</sub>**. There is no significant difference in public opinion of favoring or opposing the use of U.S. troops if Iraq invaded Saudi Arabia based on education levels.

**H<sub>a1D</sub>**. There is significant difference in public opinion on favoring or opposing the use of U.S. troops if Iraq invaded Saudi Arabia based on education levels.

**H<sub>01E</sub>**. There is no significant difference in public opinion on using U.S. troops to invade and overthrow the government of Saddam Hussein/Iraq based on education levels.

**H<sub>a1E</sub>**. There is significant difference in public opinion on using United States troops to invade and overthrow Saddam Hussein/Iraq based on education levels.

I performed binomial logistic regression to test on all of the hypotheses. At least two variables are needed to use binomial logistic regression (Laerd Statistics, 2015). To determine if the data were appropriate for binomial logistic regression analysis, I specifically tested to ensure a linear relationship existed. Binomial logistic regression makes four key assumptions: (1) that dependent variables are measured by means of a dichotomous scale; (2) independent variables must be continuous or categorical; (3) independence of observations, as well as mutually exclusive and exhaustive categories;

(4) linear relationship between the independent variable and logistic change of the dependent variables (Laerd Statistics, 2015; Pampel, 2000). Laerd Statistics (2015) suggested checking the assumptions in the order listed, because if a violation of the assumptions exist, and are not correctable, binomial logistic regression cannot be used.

I searched for multicollinearity to ensure the hypotheses were accurately plotted (Vogt & Johnson, 2011). Because each regression model had more than one variable, there existed the likelihood of multicollinearity. If there is a high probability of correlation, it will be difficult to discern their distinct effects on the dependent variable (Li, 2011; Vogt & Johnson, 2011). Once I determined that the data met the assumptions of binomial logistic, I tested my five hypotheses with the same independent variable (education level), and each of the five dependent variables. All models also included five covariates (ideology; sex; race; income level and political party) to control for demographic factors that could influence public opinion.

I performed alpha-level testing to conclude if each of the null hypotheses were to be rejected (Vogt & Johnson, 2011). Each  $H_0$  were rejected for  $p$ -values less than  $\alpha$ , otherwise, the  $p$ -value was represented (Gill, 1999). The alpha error level was  $p < .05$  to minimize Type I errors (Moyé, 2003).

### **Threats to Validity**

Validity is the quality and accuracy of data, indicating the strength of the research design, while threats to external validity are applying the research to other studies (Vogt & Johnson, 2011). Further, threats to validity “can lead to false conclusions” (Vogt & Johnson, 2011, p. 399). Because the data was of a secondary nature from the American

Public Opinion and U.S. Foreign Policy (2002), external threats to validity were minimized due to the original study utilizing random participants that appear to be an accurate representation of the population. The original survey data was part of a quadrennial study by a reputable research organization. Further, maturation is limited or non-existent, since the respondents of the original survey are not being tested except for opinions during a given thirty-day period. Developers of the study did not indicate what percentages of the telephone interviews were conducted via a landline vs. cellphone. There is concern that data could be skewed toward older citizens who prefer landline phones versus younger citizens who prefer cell phones. There was also concern that the study was not completed just by those who were willing to answer the survey. It was taken at face value that Harris Interactive did an effective job of obtaining a representative sample, given the inherent limits of telephone polling.

The original study was conducted in June 2002, examining public opinion and attitudes of the general public. This study determined if education affected agenda-setting despite the repetition of the message before the Iraq War. Generalizability is the degree by which outcomes from the sample of the study are characteristic of results obtained from the study's overall population (Furr, 2011). The findings of this study may not be generalizable to public opinion on foreign affairs in all situations, such as when low-messaging is present. Findings should be generalizable to foreign affairs where high-messaging is present.

There exists an internal threat to the results of the study because validity about the repetition of the message cannot be measured. However, the Bush administration citation

of links to Iraq complicit in the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, as justification for the invasion was perpetuated by the news media. The news media continued the narrative that Hussein was involved in some capacity to the terrorist attacks was repeated continually, which aided in changing public opinion about Hussein, Iraq and the subsequent justification for invasion. News coverage of the lead-up to the invasion of Iraq was available in a variety of sources that it is probable individuals in the United States were exposed to this messaging. It was impossible to quantify the messaging due to each person's unique news media ingestion, but it is unlikely that individuals over the age of 18 in the United States participating in public opinion polls were not aware of news media messaging.

### **Ethical Procedures**

Because the nature of the secondary data derived from the American Public Opinion and U.S. Foreign Policy survey of 2002, ethical concerns are minimized and negligible. The survey available had no identifying information; therefore, no ethical concerns were present for participants in the survey. The original ICPSR 3673 code book cited that any inadvertent identification of individuals was discouraged and should be reported to ICPSR. Also, the data was be double-checked for errors and the presence of identifiable information. Any identifiable information was corrected before testing in accordance with Walden University IRB standards, as well as reported to David Krane and Shawn Wade, the Project Managers on Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research Study Number 3673 per their request (Chicago Council on Foreign Relations, 2002). The Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research

dataset was available on the website of ICPSR to an affiliated organization, such as Walden University, and was not confidential data. After IRB approval, the data was downloaded from ICPSR, secured, stored and password protected within my Dropbox account, as well as my PC for five years, and then it will be destroyed from my personal files using an overwrite erase software.

### **Summary**

In Chapter 3, I examined the dataset to be used, the methodology, and design for the study. I proposed a quantitative, correlative study using binomial logistic regression that would determine the extent education levels had upon public opinion before the Iraq War, with assumed repetition of message. I drew the data from ICPSR Study Number 3673 (Chicago Council on Foreign Relations, 2002), and used statistical analysis to predict public opinion of a general population.

The variables I used were determined by their relative association to the research question and the hypotheses. My study used one independent variable (higher education level), five covariates (ideology; sex; race; income level; and political party), which were expected to have an effect on the ability to affect agenda-setting, and five dependent variables (favoring economic sanctions against Iraq; combating international terrorism as a foreign policy goal; Iraq developing weapons of mass destruction in the next 10 years; favor or oppose the use of U.S. troops if Iraq invaded Saudi Arabia; and, support for the United States using troops to invade Iraq and overthrow the government of Saddam Hussein).

Detailed statistical analysis and survey results of the study are presented in Chapter 4. I will document and present any found discrepancies in data collection. I will analyze the statistical data, discuss the hypotheses tested and summarize the research question.

## Chapter 4: Results

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this quantitative study was to determine if there was a relationship between education level attainment and public opinion before the Iraq War started. I used secondary data to answer the following research question: what is the relationship between education levels and public opinion on foreign policy issues covered extensively by the news media during periods of crisis such as before the Iraq War? I tested five hypotheses independently, using binomial logistic regression.

In this chapter, I will discuss the data collection and the results of my study. I will discuss how I procured the data, and the methods I used to clean and recode. I restate the research question that guided this study, as well as the hypotheses used to help answer this research question. This chapter will detail the descriptive statistics and the analysis process used in this study. Finally, I will summarize the results and transition to Chapter 5.

### **Data**

I used a secondary dataset in my study. My data use was approved by the Walden IRB. Once Walden IRB granted permission to retrieve the ICPSR dataset (approval #07-27-17-0197654) it was downloaded from ICPSR's website and imported into SPSS 24 for analysis.

### **Descriptive Statistics**

Preliminary testing by means of frequency analysis and descriptive statistics was used to observe a basic summary of the data. The frequencies check ensured there were

no missing data fields in the data set and I recoded any missing variables by inputting a value of 99. Any case with a missing value in the variables of interest were omitted from the analysis. I recoded the data containing independent variables and covariates to ensure normal distribution was present to prepare it for statistical analysis. As a result of the missing data, the sample size was for testing hypothesis 1 was 656, 1100 for hypothesis 2, 1108 for hypothesis 3, 1034 for hypothesis 4, and 656 for hypothesis 5. I determined the mean, median, and mode of the independent variable of education levels, as well as for each of the five dependent variables: economic sanctions against Iraq, international terrorism, Iraq will develop WMDs, U.S. troops if Iraq invaded Saudi Arabia, and overthrow Saddam Hussein/Iraq (See Table 2). In addition, I also determined the mean, median and mode of each of the five covariates: ideology, sex, race, income level, and political party, as they were expected to have an effect on the testing of agenda-setting theory.



Table 2

*Descriptive Statistics – All Variables*

<u>Independent Variable</u>	Min	Max	Mean	SD
Education	0	5	3.19	1.197
<u>Dependent Variable</u>				
Economic sanctions against Iraq	0	1	.74	.437
International Terrorism	0	1	.91	.284
Iraq will develop WMDs	0	1	.86	.346
U.S. troops if Iraq invaded S. Arabia	0	1	.52	.500
Overthrow Saddam Hussein/Iraq	0	1	.73	.446
<u>Covariates</u>				
Ideology	0	4	2.20	1.033
Sex	0	1	.50	.500
Race	0	1	.17	.377
Income level	0	10	3.30	2.157
Political Party	0	1	.510	.500

The original ICPSR 3673 dataset was a national probability sample, ensuring respondents represented a general cross-section of individuals 18 years and older living in the United States. Since the original dataset was generalized, its use as a secondary data should also be generalizable to the U.S. population. While population shifts occur, the most notable shift between the 2000 and 2010 Census' indicated a 43% increase in the Hispanic population, and 97% of the total U.S. population identified as a single race (2010 Census, 2011). Since the original data was collected in June 2002, two years after

the 2000 Census and eight years prior to the 2010 Census, it is then reasonable to believe that the data is still generalizable to American public opinion.

### **Assumption Testing**

Laerd Statistics (2015) clarified that the assumptions for binomial logistic regression are met if there is an independence of observations, the dependent variable is dichotomous and ordinal, and the independent variable mutually exclusive and exhaustive. There must be one or more independent variables that are measured as continuous or nominal. Laerd (2015) also stated, “there must be a linear relationship between the independent variable and the logit transformation of the dependent variable,” and “data must not show multicollinearity” (p. 5). It is necessary that the dataset must not violate the assumptions of binomial logistic regression, or missing data.

In each of the dependent variables, the assumption of independence of observations was met, as each variable was dichotomous and ordinal. I had one independent variable, education level, which was continuous, measuring level of education attainment, thereby meeting the assumption of the independent variable. I tested for multicollinearity by performing multiple regression looking at variance inflation factors (VIF). I determined that the highest VIF values were within tolerance thresholds and are annotated within each variable. The necessary statistical assumptions regarding each variable were fulfilled prior to analysis. Significance was accepted at .05.

To determine linearity and non-linearity, binomial analyses were performed to test assumptions of the model for each dependent variable. An analysis of the dependent variable, independent variable and the covariates were performed and were normally

distributed at ( $n = 1,008$ ,  $\mu = .74$ ,  $s = .437$ ). The independent variable, education levels, which remained constant regardless of dependent variable, distributed at ( $n = 3,254$ ,  $\mu = 3.19$ ,  $s = 1.197$ ). Rating dependent variable combating international terrorism as a United States foreign policy goal, an analysis of the dependent variable, independent variable, and the covariates were performed and were normally distributed at ( $n = 1,100$ ,  $\mu = .91$ ,  $s = .284$ ). The dependent variable regarding if Iraq will develop weapons of mass destruction, an analysis of the dependent variable, independent variable, and the covariates were performed and were normally distributed at ( $n = 1,108$ ,  $\mu = .86$ ,  $s = .346$ ). Favoring or opposing the use of U.S. troops if Iraq invaded Saudi Arabia, an analysis of the dependent variable, independent variable, and the covariates were performed and were normally distributed at ( $n = 1,034$ ,  $\mu = .52$ ,  $s = .5$ ). Concerning the use of U.S. troops to invade and overthrow the government of Saddam Hussein/Iraq, an analysis of the dependent variable, independent variable, and the covariates were performed and were normally distributed at ( $n = 656$ ,  $\mu = .73$ ,  $s = .446$ ). The assumption testing proved acceptable, as there were no violations. Because the assumption criterion were met, I moved forward using SPSS version 24 to test the five hypotheses using binomial logistic regression.

## **Results**

The following research question guided this study: what is the relationship between education levels and public opinion on foreign policy issues covered extensively by the news media during periods of crisis such as before the Iraq War? The null hypotheses associated with the research question presumed that there was no significant

difference in public opinion on a dependent variable affecting education levels. I evaluated the significance of the variables to either accept or reject the null hypotheses.

**H<sub>01A</sub>.** There is no significant difference in public opinion opposing economic sanctions on Iraq by the United States based on education levels.

I used binomial logistic regression to ascertain the effects of ideology, sex, race, income level, and political party on the respondent's opinions rating public opinion opposing economic sanctions on Iraq by the United States based on education levels. The measure of the dependent variable is nominal and dichotomous. The VIF ranged between 1.038 and 1.402 on all six variables. The Hosmer and Lemeshow test indicated a good fit of  $p = .462$ . Linearity of the continuous variables with respect to the logit of the dependent variable was addressed via the Box-Tidwell (1962) procedure. A Bonferonni correction was applied using all terms in the model resulting in statistical significance being accepted when  $p < .00625$ . Of the six predictor variables only one was statistically significant: political party (as shown in Table 3). All other variables were not statistically significant from baseline. Because significance for the education levels variable was not high enough to accept the alternative hypothesis, I accepted the null hypothesis, that there is no significant difference in public opinion opposing economic sanctions on Iraq by the United States based on education levels.

Table 3

*Favoring or opposing economic sanctions against Iraq*

Variable	<i>B</i>	<i>S.E.</i>	Wald	<i>df</i>	Sig.	Exp(B)	95% C.I. for EXP(B)	
							Lower	Upper
Education	.134	.082	2.705	1	.100	1.144	.975	1.343
Ideology	.074	.098	.561	1	.454	1.076	.888	1.305
Sex	-.059	.184	.104	1	.748	.942	.656	1.353
Race	-.195	.245	.635	1	.425	.823	.509	1.329
Income	.064	.049	1.740	1	.187	1.066	.969	1.173
Political Party	-.651	.212	9.408	1	.002	.522	.344	.791

**H<sub>a1B</sub>.** There is a significant difference public opinion rating combating international terrorism as a United States foreign policy goal based on education levels.

I used binomial logistic regression to ascertain the effects of ideology, sex, race, income level, and political party on the respondent's opinions rating combating international terrorism as a United States foreign policy goal. The measure of the dependent variable is ordinal and dichotomous. The VIF ranged between 1.044 and 1.333 on all six variables. The Hosmer and Lemeshow test indicated a good fit of  $p = .313$ . Linearity of the continuous variables with respect to the logit of the dependent variable was addressed via the Box-Tidwell (1962) procedure. A Bonferonni correction was applied using all terms in the model resulting in statistical significance being accepted

when  $p < .00625$ . Of the six predictor variables only one was statistically significant: education level (as shown in Table 4). All other variables were not statistically significant from baseline. Based on these findings, I rejected the null hypothesis, as there is a significant difference public opinion rating combating international terrorism as a United States foreign policy goal based on education levels.

Table 4

*Opinions rating combating international terrorism as a United States foreign policy goal*

Variable	B	S.E.	Wald	df	Sig.	Exp(B)	95% C.I. for EXP(B)	
							Lower	Upper
Education	-.312	.128	5.985	1	.014	.732	.570	.940
Ideology	.105	.138	.577	1	.447	1.111	.847	1.457
Sex	.424	.275	2.374	1	.123	1.528	.891	2.621
Race	-.560	.303	3.419	1	.064	.571	.315	1.034
Income	.106	.074	2.037	1	.153	1.112	.961	1.287
Political Party	-.311	.321	.937	1	.333	.733	.391	1.375

**H<sub>01c</sub>.** There is no significant difference in public opinion regarding if Iraq will develop weapons of mass destruction based on education levels.

I used binomial logistic regression to ascertain the effects of ideology, sex, race, income level, and political party on the respondent's opinions regarding if Iraq will develop weapons of mass destruction. The measure of the dependent variable is ordinal and dichotomous. The VIF ranged between 1.041 and 1.329 on all six variables. The

Hosmer and Lemeshow test indicated a good fit of  $p = .634$ . Linearity of the continuous variables with respect to the logit of the dependent variable was addressed via the Box-Tidwell (1962) procedure. A Bonferonni correction was applied using all terms in the model resulting in statistical significance being accepted when  $p < .00625$ . Of the six predictor variables only one was statistically significant: sex (as shown in Table 5). All other variables were not statistically significant from baseline. Based on these findings, I accepted the null hypothesis, that there is no significant difference in public opinion regarding if Iraq will develop weapons of mass destruction based on education levels.

Table 5

*Opinions regarding if Iraq will develop weapons of mass destruction*

Variable	<i>B</i>	<i>S.E.</i>	Wald	<i>df</i>	Sig.	Exp(B)	95% C.I. for EXP(B)	
							Lower	Upper
Education	-.108	.096	1.269	1	.260	.897	.744	1.083
Ideology	-.075	.115	.424	1	.515	.928	.740	1.163
Sex	.930	.228	16.662	1	.000	2.534	1.621	3.959
Race	.204	.311	.431	1	.512	1.226	.667	2.253
Income	.103	.058	3.105	1	.078	1.108	.989	1.243
Political Party	-.002	.488	.000	1	.995	.998	.614	1.622

**H<sub>01b</sub>.** There is no significant difference in public opinion of favoring or opposing the use of U.S. troops if Iraq invaded Saudi Arabia based on education levels.

I used binomial logistic regression to ascertain the effects of ideology, sex, race, income level, and political party on the respondent's opinions on favoring or opposing the use of U.S. troops if Iraq invaded Saudi Arabia. The measure of the dependent variable is nominal and dichotomous. The VIF ranged between 1.048 and 1.451 on all six variables. The Hosmer and Lemeshow test indicated a good fit of  $p = .084$ . Linearity of the continuous variables with respect to the logit of the dependent variable was addressed via the Box-Tidwell (1962) procedure. A Bonferonni correction was applied using all terms in the model resulting in statistical significance being accepted when  $p < .00625$ . Of the six predictor variables only one was statistically significant: sex (as shown in Table 6). All other variables were not statistically significant from baseline. Based on these findings, I accepted the null hypothesis, that there is no significant difference in public opinion of favoring or opposing the use of U.S. troops if Iraq invaded Saudi Arabia based on education levels.



Table 6

*Opinions of favoring or opposing the use of U.S. troops if Iraq invaded Saudi Arabia*

Variable	B	S.E.	Wald	df	Sig.	Exp(B)	95% C.I. for	
							EXP(B)	
							Lower	Upper
Education	.106	.069	2.355	1	.125	1.112	.971	1.274
Ideology	.127	.085	2.242	1	.134	1.135	.962	1.341
Sex	.435	.156	7.808	1	.005	.647	.477	.878
Race	-.284	.215	1.752	1	.186	.753	.494	1.146
Income	.027	.041	.432	1	.511	1.027	.948	1.112
Political Party	-.118	.183	.418	1	.518	.889	.621	1.271

**H<sub>a1E</sub>.** There is a significant difference in public opinion on using United States troops to invade and overthrow Saddam Hussein/Iraq based on education levels.

I used binomial logistic regression to ascertain the effects of ideology, sex, race, income level, and political party on the respondent's opinions favoring or opposing the support for the United States using troops to overthrow Saddam Hussein's government. The measure of the dependent variable is nominal and dichotomous. The VIF ranged between 1.048 and 1.446 on all six variables. The Hosmer and Lemeshow test indicated a good fit of  $p = .002$ . Linearity of the continuous variables with respect to the logit of the dependent variable was addressed via the Box-Tidwell (1962) procedure. A Bonferonni correction was applied using all terms in the model resulting in statistical significance being accepted when  $p < .00625$ . Of the six predictor variables, three were statistically

significant: education, ideology, and political party (as shown in Table 7). All other variables were not statistically significant from baseline. Based on these findings, I reject the null hypothesis, as there is a significant difference in public opinion on using United States troops to invade and overthrow Saddam Hussein/Iraq based on education levels.

Table 7

*Opinions on using United States troops to invade and overthrow Saddam Hussein/Iraq*

Variable	<i>B</i>	<i>S.E.</i>	Wald	<i>df</i>	Sig.	Exp(B)	95% C.I. for EXP(B)	
							Lower	Upper
Education	-.439	.108	16.535	1	.000	.645	.522	.797
Ideology	.305	.123	6.146	1	.013	1.357	1.066	1.727
Sex	.009	.221	.002	1	.969	1.009	.655	1.554
Race	-.319	.263	1.474	1	.225	.727	.434	1.216
Income	.024	.054	.199	1	.656	1.025	.921	1.140
Political Party	-1.118	.268	17.464	1	.000	.327	.193	.552

### Summary

The research question that guided my research was what is the relationship between education levels and public opinion on foreign policy issues covered extensively by the news media during periods of crisis such as before the Iraq War? In testing the five hypotheses, I rejected the null hypothesis for two: there is a significant difference in public opinion combating international terrorism as a United States foreign policy goal based on education levels; and there is a significant difference in public opinion on using United States troops to invade and overthrow Saddam Hussein/Iraq based on education

levels. Three null hypotheses were accepted: there is no significant difference in public opinion opposing economic sanctions on Iraq by the United States based on education levels; there is no significant difference in public opinion regarding if Iraq will develop weapons of mass destruction based on education levels; and there is no significant difference in public opinion of favoring or opposing the use of U.S. troops if Iraq invaded Saudi Arabia based on education levels. While a majority of the hypotheses could not reject the null hypotheses, with a margin of 3-to-2, in some cases, education levels had influenced public opinion prior to the Iraq War.

In this chapter, I detailed the data collection and procedures used for analysis. In Chapter 5, I will interpret my findings, discuss their implication on public policy and social change, as well as discuss limitations of the study and further recommendations for study.

## Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this quantitative study was to examine the relationship between education levels and public opinion on foreign policy issues covered extensively by the news media during periods of crisis such as before the Iraq War using McCombs's (2004/2014) agenda-setting theory. I used secondary data from ICPSR Study 3673 which was originally conducted in June 2002. I used the covariates of ideology, sex, race, income level, and political party to control for influence on the independent variable of education levels. The dependent variables were: favoring economic sanctions against Iraq; combating international terrorism as a foreign policy goal, Iraq developing weapons of mass destruction in the next 10 years, favor or oppose the use of U.S. troops if Iraq invaded Saudi Arabia, and support for the United States using troops to invade Iraq and overthrow the government of Saddam Hussein.

In this study I analyzed the effect education levels have on public opinion using binomial logistic regression analysis, and accepted the null hypotheses of three of the five hypotheses presented. Not all of the hypotheses were nullified; I demonstrated that education levels can have an influence on public opinion on two of the five hypotheses.

This chapter includes an interpretations of the findings and the limitations of the study. I will conclude the chapter with recommendations for future research and policy implications for positive social change.

### **Interpretation of the Findings**

While there has been research devoted to agenda-setting, types of news media consumption, and post-September 11, 2001, this research extended study on the effects of education levels on public opinion. Research on the impact of news media on foreign policy is limited (Eissler, Russell, & Jones, 2014). Further, studies on the effects of repetitious news media during crisis have been nonexistent up to this point. This study links agenda-setting, education, and repetition during a foreign affairs crisis.

Understanding the effects of education levels on public opinion is important, as it is known to stabilize the political opinions of those with higher education compared to their less educated counterparts (Converse, 1964/2006; Zaller, 1991). Higher education is a means to combat political propaganda but not as effective in an uncompetitive news media environment (Johansen & Joslyn, 2008). The effect of higher education on public opinion may have important ramifications for news media consumption. My research aided in closing the gap by determining that, depending on the particular issue, education levels were influential upon public opinion during a foreign affairs crisis when there is repetitious and uniform media coverage, such as before the Iraq War.

Education level is not always a predictor of opinion. I found that higher education was not a significant predictor in public opinion opposing economic sanctions on Iraq by the United States, if Iraq will develop weapons of mass destruction, and favoring or opposing the use of U.S. troops if Iraq invaded Saudi Arabia. However, in some cases, I found that higher education levels were a significant predictor of public opinion. The instances where higher education played a significant role were combating international

terrorism as a United States foreign policy goal and using United States troops to invade and overthrow Saddam Hussein/Iraq. In testing international terrorism as a United States foreign policy goal as a dependent variable, only education levels were a significant predictor variable. The significance was .014 and the Exp(B) was .732. In some specific foreign policies, it appears that opinions about combating international terrorism may have been more significant due the fact that those with more education grasp politics and its consequences more than the less educated (Campbell, 2013).

I also found education levels a significant predictor of opinions on the topic of using United States troops to invade and overthrow Saddam Hussein/Iraq. Education levels were highly significant at .000 and the Exp(B) was .645. Ideology and political party also showed significant prediction of using United States troops to overthrow Saddam Hussein/Iraq. Those identifying with the Democratic political party, and who considered themselves very liberal ideologically had the lowest favorability of favoring an overthrow of Hussein/Iraq with 5.5%. The closest statistical landmark was that of the far right, very conservative, which held at 10.1%. In fact, those who considered themselves fairly liberal were only 17.6% likely to favor an overthrow of Hussein/Iraq. Ideology was significant at .013 and an Exp(B) of 1.357. Political party was highly significant at .000 and an Exp(B) of .327. Further, the overthrow hypothesis details that there was significantly less support for the overthrow of Saddam Hussein/Iraq amongst those with higher education levels. The Bush administration was accused of intentionally misusing gathered intelligence, and disregarded information from the intelligence community that did not fit the narrative that justified the invasion of Iraq to the United

Nations, as well as to American citizens (Fox, 2006; Pincus, 2006; van der Heide, 2013). Because the initial invasion was tied to the overthrow of Hussein/Iraq through the use of a preemptive strike, and a subsequent war, perhaps of the five hypotheses, this was the most important.

I used McCombs (2004/2014) agenda-setting theory as the foundation for the study. McCombs (2004/2014) stated that the coverage of the news media becomes what individuals then wish to see regarding topics of the day. This coverage loop then becomes an increased salience of topic and stored in long-term memory (McCombs, 2004/2014). Zaller (1992) stated that an individual pulls information from the sources they have readily available. In this case, most Americans derive their knowledge of politics and current events from the news media. Rampton and Stauber (2003) indicated that repetitious messaging can promote false narratives. Research has shown that repetition reinforces memory, the recall of message, and subsequently influences future action (Brown & Nix, 1996; Dubuisson, et al., 2012; Lakoff, 2006; Rampton & Stauber, 2003; Saville, 2011; Schreiber et al., 2013). Consumption of repeated of media messaging is assumed in this study. If the news media is providing false equivalency, erroneous information, or biased coverage of events, this perspective is then set into the consciousness of the news consumer. The susceptibility of news media consumers to agenda-setting has been well documented (McCombs, 1967; McCombs & Weaver, 1973; Tolman, 1932; Weaver, 1991; Westley & Borrow, 1959). McCombs (2004/2014) indicating that the greater the increased salience of topic, the more profound an impact on public opinion. The September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, subsequent conversations about

blaming Iraq, and the talk of potential war with Iraq, may have been the most covered news story of the past century, and increased salience of topic was not only high, but inescapable.

There were a few interesting insights in examining the data per the relationship between education levels and public opinion on foreign policy issues covered extensively by the news media during periods of crisis such as before the Iraq War. The results showed that perhaps some of the fears being driven by the media repetitiously prior to the Iraq War might have driven the three null hypotheses that there is no significant difference in public opinion opposing economic sanctions on Iraq by the United States based on education levels, there is no significant difference in public opinion regarding if Iraq will develop weapons of mass destruction based on education levels, and there is no significant difference in public opinion of favoring or opposing the use of U.S. troops if Iraq invaded Saudi Arabia based on education levels.

As these were highly reported stories in the time prior to the Iraq War, it is possible that agenda-setting played a significant role in altering public opinion. This research links agenda-setting, education, and public opinion, especially during times of war, and crisis with high repetition.

### **Limitations of the Study**

The limitations of this study were consistent with those described in Chapter 1. While there were some missing data, no compromises to the analysis were necessary. Because the data were secondary, no known internal risks to validity exist. Further, external risks are minimal or nonexistent, as the survey data were part of a quadrennial



study in June 2002 by a reputable research organization, there was a reasonable expectation that the sampling was of high quality. I found nothing that made me question the validity or quality of their original work. Therefore, the trustworthiness, validity, and reliability of the ICPSR Study 3673 were valid.

My study was limited by the by the steps taken by the original researchers in collecting the data. Any personal biases I may have had were eliminated through the use of standard statistical methods and the use of secondary data, because I did not participate in collecting. Despite any limitations, this study provides insight into agenda-setting, education, and repetition and their effect on public opinion.

### **Recommendations**

I examined the relationship between education levels and public opinion on foreign policy issues covered extensively by the news media during periods of crisis such as before the Iraq War. I assumed the repetition of news media messaging was present. Agenda-setting leads to the repetition of news media messages. The Iraq War began over 15 years ago, and the September 11, 2001 and terrorist attacks slightly longer ago. In that period, the United States has seen news media proliferation and changes in media distribution, as well as consumption.

Johansen and Joslyn (2008) and Kull et al. (2003) identified problems with viewership during the lead-up to the Iraq War; biased news coverage from CBS and Fox News caused viewers in an uncompetitive news media environment to be misinformed about facts surrounding Iraq. Further, even as the Iraq War was nearing its end, Fox News proved a predictor for support for the war, while non-Fox News programs proved

insignificant predictors of support for war (Lin, 2009). Research indicated that false information that is repeated is just as accepted as factual information (Arkes, Hackett, & Boehm, 1989; Bacon, 1979; Begg, Anas, & Farinacci, 1992; Begg & Armour, 1991; Begg, Armour, & Kerr, 1985; Brown & Nix, 1996; Gigerenzer, 1984; Hasher et al., 1977; Rampton & Stauber, 2003); Schwartz, 1982). Brown and Nix (1996) determined that if false, repetitious information is not corrected immediately, it becomes truth to the viewer. Vosoughi, Roy, and Aral (2018) found that political stories were spread faster and farther than any other type of news story. Biased news media coverage may circumvent education, as inaccurate and misrepresented stories create flawed understandings of complex events. Holding the news media accountable so that they remain unbiased and deliver factual information to their audience is an ongoing consideration. A new consideration is that of social media providers and their part in fake news proliferation or mitigation.

In order to further understand how public opinion is shaped by repetitious news media messaging, especially during periods of crisis such as before the Iraq War, more study is needed. Eissler, Russell and Jones (2014) determined that research on the effect of news media on foreign policy is limited. Further studies might include asking respondents about specific news sources, their media consumption habits, including their preferences of method of viewing said news media, if they remember hearing or reading the story more than a determined amount of times, and using a journal to document their media habits. By asking the respondents more specific questions about the media, usage and acknowledgement of repetitious messaging, a more complete picture could be

ascertained. An additional area of study could be conducted by a researcher wishing to determine the outcome from news stories that were purposefully manipulated in an intervention group and observe differences of opinion based upon education levels.

Another area of interest that may prove significant is a study of education levels broken down by fields of general study and the effect each have on a significant public opinion event, such as war, environmental concerns, or foreign policy. Such research could indicate if some schools of academic thought teach or attract individuals who are more or perhaps less resilient to disinformation strategies, propaganda techniques, or control mechanisms than others, as an example. This hierarchy of education level fields with deference to agenda-setting and political propaganda studies would be of significant value to academics.

### **Implications**

This research aided in closing the gap in the literature concerning the impact of education levels on public opinion during a foreign affairs crisis when there is repetitious and uniform media coverage, such as before the Iraq War. While education has had the benefit of informing better opinions (Makowsky & Miller, 2014) and stabilizing political opinions (Converse, 1964/2006; Zaller, 1991), the effect of education levels in response to agenda-setting has been unknown. Repetition of messages by the news media may also increase the effectiveness of agenda-setting, which may perpetuate inaccurate, misleading, or false information. Normally, education is a barrier to negative aspects of repetition and agenda-setting, but this may not be the case in periods of crisis, affecting public opinion on foreign affairs.

An implication of positive social change is through the betterment of public policy by improving an understanding of how public opinion is formed, thereby improving policy initiatives. Research shows that political knowledge is a predictor of voting behavior (Delli Capini & Keeter, 1996; Popkin & Dimock, 1999). Not every citizen is a candidate for or wishes to pursue higher education. Nor is higher education for everyone viable or probable. Civics knowledge is an efficient means to instill interest in government and citizenship.

Civics courses in K-12 education used to prepare young citizens for the complexities of domestic and foreign policy, as well as their rights, obligations, and duties in American society. These courses had substantial value in discourse, having a lasting effect on their political interests and involvement. Since their eradication in recent decades (Civics Education Testing, 2012), there are few states that still offer these civics programs, with more of an increased educational policy focusing on work skills for graduates (Dillon, 2011). The lack of civics knowledge causes problems with the fundamental understanding of American diplomacy and security, as well as leaving the citizens open for mental hijacking by news media or disinformation strategies. In lieu of higher education, or a desire to self-educate, civics coursework is necessary for the active citizenry. The decline of civics courses comes as individuals shift their focus from news media sources to social networking sites, putting American citizens at risk for misinformation. Social media disinformation strategies have increased since the 2016 Presidential Election (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017; Rogers & Engel Bromwich, 2016; Solon, 2016a). During that period, there were many sources of disinformation that

changed public opinion leading up to the outcome of the election, being widely reported as the hacking of Democracy. Research indicated that political stories were spread 6 times faster than any other type of news story (Vosoughi, Roy, & Aral, 2018). These false news sources may become more incumbent to mitigate in the future, as social media disinformation strategies affect perceptions of domestic and foreign issues. Informed citizenry is an important characteristic of democracy.

If citizens are not engaged in actively participating in the process of being informed and informing their elected representatives of their needs, elected officials may simply enact their own agendas. This is not to say that all elected officials will listen to their constituents and represent them accordingly, but they are held more accountable by citizens who are educated on topics than those who are not. Further, education can only be mandated at the K-12 level. By the time an individual reaches the voting age without being educated on domestic and foreign policy at a university, their chances of learning this information independently is probably negligible. It becomes necessary to not only teach children the intricacies of civics in K-12, but the earlier, the better. Research shows that learning civics at an early age sticks with individuals longer, preparing them for lifelong involvement (Feldman, 2007). Further, early lessons would aid young children in the understanding of their government, the news media, and how to spot disinformation campaigns easier. Americans stand to benefit from more active citizenry, should the educational systems reinstitute civics courses. In absence of civics lessons, teaching children how to become more aware of media messaging, as well as how to self-inform, to guard against messaging that may alter their perceptions in deleterious ways. A

reinstitution of civics coursework in K-12 education helps protect Americans and American interests from misinformation, propaganda, and control.

Not only is it important that the citizens desire an understanding of how government works, but it is incumbent of legislative bodies to protect not only their constituents, but also the very constructs of government which they serve. Perhaps nothing is more important to positive social change as ensuring citizens are fully aware of how their participation, volunteerism, activism, running for public office, and voting affect their communities, as well as their ability to understand the news media around them. My research indicated education levels had some significance in altering public opinion on foreign policy issues covered extensively by the news media during periods of crisis such as before the Iraq War. War may or may not be generalizable to other high frequency events, however, it is certainly generalizable to potential future conflict.

### **Conclusion**

My research indicated that education levels may be, in certain instances, linked to public opinion on foreign policy issues covered extensively by the news media during periods of crisis, such as before the Iraq War. Further research is needed to determine if there are other areas that are tangential, but it is clear that education does play at least some significant role in public opinion on foreign policy. The areas in which education did conclusively have significance may not prove the value of education but verify its role in civic discourse. Individuals obtaining higher education are likely to have a better understanding of government, policy, media, and public opinion than their less educated

counterparts, even those with civics lessons within their K-12 education, but something is better than nothing.

There were a few interesting insights in examining the data per the relationship between education levels and public opinion on foreign policy issues covered extensively by the news media during periods of crisis such as before the Iraq War. The results showed that perhaps some of the fears being driven by the news media repetitiously prior to the Iraq War might have driven the three null hypotheses that were accepted: there is no significant difference in public opinion opposing economic sanctions on Iraq by the United States based on education levels; there is no significant difference in public opinion regarding if Iraq will develop weapons of mass destruction based on education levels; and there is no significant difference in public opinion of favoring or opposing the use of U.S. troops if Iraq invaded Saudi Arabia based on education levels.

As each of these topics were talking points well reported by the news media prior to the Iraq War, it is possible that agenda-setting played a significant role in altering public opinion. The results showed that in some instances, higher education played a significant role in public opinion prior to the Iraq War by the alternate hypotheses that were accepted: there is a significant difference public opinion rating combating international terrorism as a United States foreign policy goal based on education levels; and there is a significant difference in public opinion on using United States troops to invade and overthrow Saddam Hussein/Iraq based on education levels.

This research links McCombs's (2004/2014) theory of agenda-setting, education, repetition, and public opinion, especially during times of war, and crisis with high

repetition present. Further research of agenda-setting in these specific conditions may determine to what degree, and when higher education mitigates the effects of repetitious political propaganda. Lastly, such research may indicate what areas of study could be more resilient to negative effects of repetition during periods of crisis, if any.



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## Appendix A: Operational Definitions Full Text from the original Survey used by ICPSR

Study Number 3673 (Chicago Council on Foreign Relations, 2002).

Question number	Variables	GSS code	Survey question	Measure
Q1002/96	<i>Independent</i> Education level	EDLEVEL	What is the last grade of school you completed?	Categorical
Q675/2	<i>Dependent</i> Favoring economic sanctions against Iraq	SANCTIONS	Do you favor or oppose the use of economic sanctions against each of the following countries? Iraq.	Dichotomous
Q575/6	Combating international terrorism as a foreign policy goal	INTERROR	I am going to read you a list of possible foreign policy threats that the United States might have. For each one please say whether you think that it <u>should</u> be a very important foreign policy goal of the United States, a somewhat important foreign policy goal, or not an important goal at all. First, how important a foreign policy goal <u>should</u> combating international terrorism [be]?	Dichotomous
Q530/19	Iraq developing weapons of mass destruction in the next 10 years	IRAQWMD	I am going to read you a list possible threats to the vital interest of the United States in the next 10 years. For each one, please tell me if you see this as a critical threat, an important but not critical threat, or not an important threat at all?	Dichotomous



Q535/2	Favor or oppose the use of U.S. troops if Iraq invaded Saudi Arabia	INVADE	There has been some discussion about the circumstances that might justify using U.S. troops in other parts of the world. I'd like to ask your opinion about some situations. First, would you favor or oppose the use of U.S. troops if Iraq invaded Saudi Arabia?	Dichotomous
Q540/2	Support U.S. troops to overthrow Saddam Hussein's government	OVERTHROW	There has been some discussion about the circumstances that might justify using U.S. troops in other parts of the world. I'd like to ask your opinion about some situations. First, would you favor or oppose the use of U.S. troops in order to overthrow Saddam Hussein's government in Iraq?	Dichotomous
Q1010 & 1025	<u>Covariates</u> Political party affiliation	HAVEPARTY REP_OR_DEM	Generally speaking, do you think of yourself as a Republican, a Democrat, an independent, or what? Do you think of yourself as closer to the Republican Party or to the Democratic Party?	Categorical
Q1005	Political views	IDEOLOGY	How would you describe your political views: as very conservative, fairly conservative, middle of the road, fairly liberal, or very liberal?	Categorical
Q1001	Gender	SEX	Record Gender	Categorical
Q1080	Race	RACE	Do you consider yourself White, Black or African American, Asian or Pacific Islander, Native American or Alaskan native, or some other race?	Categorical

Q1070	Income Level	INCOME	Which of the following income categories best describes your total 2001 household income?	Categorical
N/A	Political Party Identification	PARTY	N/A	Categorical

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