
Opinion Polls and the Misrepresentation of Public Opinion on the War with Afghanistan



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Opinion polls since the attack in the United States on 11 September show that a slim but consistent majority of British people oppose strikes on Afghanistan. Yet the media have uniformly reported that there is consistent support for war. From the *News of the World* and the *Sun*, via the *Mirror*, the *Scotsman*, the *Economist*, the *Daily Telegraph*, and the *Times*, to the *Independent*, *Guardian*, and *Observer*, we hear that public opinion is "solid" (*The Economist*, U.S. edition, 22 September 2001), that Britons are "ready for battle" (*The Observer*, 23 September 2001), and that "Nearly Eight in 10 Britons Support Military Attacks" (*The Mirror*, 20 September 2001), "Scots Overwhelmingly Back a Just War" (*The Scotsman*, 19 September 2001), "Two-Thirds of Britons Back Blair Action" (*The Independent*, 24 September 2001), and "2 in 3 Back Air Strikes" (*The Guardian*, 18 September 2001). The *News of the World* (16 September 2001) reported "overwhelming" support for bombing under the headline "Attack. Attack. Attack." The *Daily Telegraph* (20 September 2001) claimed "the poll confirmed that there is virtually no support for peace campaigners." A *Guardian* leader (18 September 2001) claimed "there is no disputing the bottom line. On this one, Tony Blair is definitely speaking for Britain."

According to right-wing commentators such as Andrew Neil, the *Guardian* was acting as an "apologist" for terror in covering the attacks on the United States and was "henceforth better known as the *Daily Terrorist*" (cited in Preston 2001). Yet the misreading of public opinion was near universal across the media, including reports by the Press Association (16, 18,

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20 September 2001), reproduced (with minimal changes) in national newspapers.

Between 11 September and 28 September 2001, seven public opinion polls of British public opinion were conducted. They asked similar but differently worded questions about support for bombing. For example, a MORI poll for the *News of the World* (16 September 2001) asked "If the United States can identify the groups or nations responsible for this week's attacks, would you support or oppose taking military action against them?" Seventy-five percent of respondents said they would support this (12% were opposed).¹ In an ICM Research poll for the *Guardian* (18 September 2001), a smaller percentage of respondents (67%) supported "military action" by the United States.² These apparently high levels of support have been used by the media to suggest public backing for Tony Blair and George W. Bush.

But the headlines on public support have masked a strong current of opinion against military action that would target anyone but the "terrorists" or in practice harm civilians. A Gallup poll (*Daily Telegraph*, 20 September 2001) found that 82% of the British public said military action "should only be taken after the identity of the perpetrators was clearly established, even if this process took several months to accomplish." Even in the United States, the poll revealed that a significant majority (62%) of Americans felt the same. Of course, the degree of clarity in this area remained minimal following successive (broken) promises by the United States to reveal conclusive evidence.

A significant difficulty in assessing public opinion is that questions asked can collude with official propaganda. A YouGov poll for the *Observer* (23 September 2001) makes the point well. Sixty-five percent of respondents said they would "support 'surgical air strikes' against countries knowingly harbouring terrorist organisations," with only 22% against. But when the pollsters asked whether there was support for "massive air strikes," a majority (60%) were opposed.³ The *Observer* claimed that this showed that Britons were "ready for battle," but look again at the wording of the first question. The term "surgical strike" is an oxymoron. Dreamt up by the Western forces in the Gulf in 1991, it was supposed to presage the era of the "clean war." Civilians would be protected by "smart" weapons technology. But in fact in the Gulf only 7% of the ordnance used was "smart," 93% being indiscriminate bombs. Furthermore, according to official sources, fully 40% of the smart weapons missed their targets, targets which themselves often contained civilians, such as the bomb shelter in Baghdad incinerated by U.S. forces (Kellner 1992, 163). So to ask whether the public approves of surgical strikes is scientifically dubious.

The reluctance of the public to support the inevitable civilian deaths is emphasized in the data not printed on the front pages, but available on media and polling web sites. Of the polls taken between 11 September and

TABLE 1. Support for Strikes That Cause Civilian Casualties

Publication Date	Poll	Support	Opposed
17 September	MORI	43	46
19 September	ICM Scotland	40	45
19 September	Gallup	21	62
20 September	Gallup	47	38
23 September	MORI	45	47

the start of the bombing, only five asked questions about civilian casualties. With one exception, they all showed a majority opposed to strikes (Table 1).

The second Gallup poll was anomalous in that another question in the same poll found that fully 82% of British respondents agreed that the U.S. should take military action "only against the terrorist organisations responsible . . . even if it takes months to clearly identify them." In summary, there was majority opposition (albeit mostly slim) to bombing that would cause civilian casualties, as it inevitably did when it started.

More widely, public opinion was at odds with media cheerleading. In the YouGov poll, a majority (53%) did not blame Islam but, rather, Islamic terrorism (90%) for the "current crisis." More awkwardly for the government, a majority also blame Israel (a little or a lot, 53%) and the United States (62%), whereas 63% do not blame Britain at all. Fully 70% agreed (a little or a lot) that "in the past, the United States has been far too arrogant and selfish in the way it has treated the world's poorest countries." None of these responses made it into the press at the time.

Opinion in Britain and the United States is more complex than is being suggested in the press, but globally there is no evidence of support for war. According to Blair and Bush, respectively, "world opinion" and the "collective will of the world" supported the attack on Afghanistan. Yet analysis of international opinion polls shows that with only three exceptions, majorities in all countries polled have opposed the policy of the U.S. and U.K. governments.

World Opinion

The biggest poll of world opinion was carried out by Gallup International (2001) in 37 countries in late September. It found that apart from the United States, Israel, and India, a majority of people in every country surveyed preferred extradition and trial of suspects to a U.S. attack. Clear and sizable majorities were recorded in the United Kingdom (75%) and across Western Europe, from 67% in France to 87% in Switzerland. Between 64% (Czech Republic) and 83% (Lithuania) of Eastern Europeans concurred, as

did varying majorities in Korea, Pakistan, South Africa, and Zimbabwe. An even more emphatic answer was obtained in Latin America, where between 80% (Panama) and 94% (Mexico) favored extradition. The poll also found that majorities in the United States and Israel (both 56%) did not favor attacks on civilians. Yet such polls have been ignored by the media and by many of the polling companies. After the bombing started, opposition seems to have grown in Europe. As only the *Mirror* reported, by early November 65% in Germany and 69% in Spain wanted the U.S. attacks to end (Yates 2001). Meanwhile, in Russia polls before and after the bombing show majorities opposed to the attacks. One slogan doing the rounds in Moscow at the end of September, which reportedly commanded majority support, was "World War III—Without Russia" (Agency WPS 2001). After the bombing started, *Interfax* reported a Gallup poll showing a majority of Moscow residents against the U.S. military action (BBC Worldwide Monitoring 2001).

Polling Companies

The questions asked by a number of polling companies such as MORI, Gallup, and ICM have been seriously inadequate. They have failed to give respondents a range of possible options in relation to the war, and after the bombing started failed to ask about civilian casualties. When other polling companies allowed respondents to choose, support for war fell away quite markedly. In the United Kingdom prior to the bombing, all except one poll that asked the question showed a majority against bombing if it caused civilian casualties. After the bombing started, the polling companies stopped asking about concern for civilians. From the start of the bombing to the fall of Kabul on 13 November, there were only four polls on British-wide opinion—by ICM for the *Guardian* (18 September 2001) and the *Scotsman* (19 September 2001)⁴ and MORI for *Tonight* (11 October 2001)⁵ and the *Mail on Sunday* (4 November 2001)⁶—compared with seven between 11 September and the start of the bombing on 7 October. None has asked adequate questions about alternatives to bombing. ICM did ask one alternative question about whether bombing should stop to allow aid into Afghanistan, and 54% said it should (Travis 2001b). When questions about aid or alternatives to bombing were asked, the results were consistent: clear and sometimes massive majorities against the bombing. In a poll unreported in the British national press, the *Sunday Mail* found that 69% of Scots favored sanctions, diplomacy, and bringing Osama bin Laden to trial. Only 17% favored his execution, and a minuscule 5% supported bombing (21 October). *The Herald* in Glasgow also found only 6% favored then-current policy of bombing alone (3 November). It is well known that Scottish opinion tends to be to the left of U.K. opinion, but not by more than a few points on average. Al-

though the Press Association picked up on the *Herald* poll, it was not reported in the British national press.

It is not altogether clear whether the lack of options given to poll respondents is due to the media organizations or the polling companies. Certainly, both U.K. and U.S. polling companies have been guilty of misrepresenting their own data, almost without exception overemphasizing support for the war. For example, MORI claimed that its polling in late October had “extinguished any lingering doubt” that support was “fading” (Mortimore 2001). Of course, this completely ignores all the poll data that would give an alternative view and the fact that the polling questions have been inadequate.

Media Reporting

It comes as a surprise to many in the United Kingdom and the United States to discover that opinion is so markedly opposed to or ambivalent about the current action. One key reason is that the polls have been systematically misreported in the media. The television and the press in both countries have continued to insist that massive majorities support the bombing. One problem is that the drip-drip of apparent support may make advocates of peace or those worried about civilian casualties less confident in expressing their opinions. A second is that broadcast journalists were also misled about the real state of public opinion. According to James Naughtie of BBC Radio 4's flagship *Today* program, “This is not a war which is likely to split the country down the middle. It's not like Suez, Vietnam, or even the Falklands where a substantial section of public opinion thought the war was wrong. . . . There is a lot of consensus, I think, about this engagement” (*Sunday Herald*, 23 September 2001). Naughtie is simply wrong about this, but it is the effect of such misjudgments on how the BBC and other broadcasters cover the war that is most worrying. Senior BBC journalists have expressed surprise and disbelief when shown the evidence from the opinion polls. One told me that she did not believe that the polling companies were corrupt and that she thought it unlikely that the *Guardian* would minimize the opposition to the war. This was days after the *Guardian* published a poll purporting to show that 74% supported the bombing (Travis 2001a). What the BBC journalist had not noticed was that the *Guardian's* polls had asked only very limited questions and failed to give respondents the option of saying they would prefer diplomatic solutions. In the poll on 12 October, one question was used, but it only asked whether people thought enough had been done diplomatically. Given that the government and the media had been of the opinion that enough had been done and alternative voices were marginalized, it is surprising that as many as 37% of respondents said that enough had not been done.

Furthermore, the *Guardian's* editorial position has offered (qualified) support for the war, and it did not cover the demonstrations against the war in London and Glasgow on 13 October. As a result of a "flurry" of protests, this was raised by the readers editor at the *Guardian's* editorial meeting on 14 October, and the editor agreed that it had been a "mistake." However, the readers editor revealed that it is the paper's "general policy" not to cover marches (Mayes 2001), thus condemning dissent to the margins of the news agenda and leaving the field open to those with the resources to stage "proper" news events.

Elsewhere in the media, almost every poll has been interpreted to indicate popular support for the war. Where that interpretation is extremely difficult, journalists have tried to squeeze the figures to fit. One Scottish newspaper was so concerned about the low numbers supporting bombing that it phoned the author to ask how best to interpret the findings. Another paper, the *Sunday Mail*, showed only 5% support for bombing and 69% favoring conflict resolution. Nevertheless, the closest the *Sunday Mail* got to this in its headline was that Scots were "split" on bombing (21 October 2001).

Television news reporters have routinely covered demonstrations in Britain and the United States as if they represent only a small minority of opinion. The underlying assumption is that demonstrators only represent themselves, and they are not seen as an expression of a larger constituency of dissent. Thus, a BBC reporter claimed that "the opinion polls say that a majority of U.K. public opinion backs the war" (*BBC1 Panorama*, 14 October 2001). In reporting demonstrations in London, another reporter claimed that "despite the strength of feelings here today those opposed to military action are still very much in the minority" (*BBC1 News*, 13 October 2001, 21.50). These reports are at best naive and arguably a violation of the legal requirement of the BBC to be balanced.

Is there not an argument for cautious words in the buildup to war? Strangely, given the assault on the *Guardian* and the *Observer* by right-wing commentators, the *Observer's* own opinion poll contained an "ace in the hole" at the end of its report. One question asked whether "critics of the U.S. should voice their opposition or stay silent over the next few weeks." A massive 70% agreed that criticism of the United States should be voiced.

In the United States, there has been markedly less dissent in the news media (Solomon 2001). The pictures of dead children featured in the rest of the world press have been hard to find (Lucas 2001), and the debate on the use of cluster bombs and the "daisy cutter" bombs (a weapon of mass destruction) that was brought up in the mainstream U.K. media in late October was almost nonexistent on the television news in the United States.⁷ CNN continued to report under the heading "America Strikes Back," which is of itself a woefully partial version of what was happening. Polling companies in the United States have given their respondents little choice of

policy options. When they have asked a variety of questions, answers opposing U.S. policy have been downplayed in media reports. The *New York Times* reported on 25 September that 92% of respondents agreed that “the United States should take military action against whoever is responsible for the attacks.” But the text of the report belied the “support for war” headline, indicating that fully 78% felt that “the United States should wait until it was certain who is responsible” before responding. Edward Herman, leading critic of U.S. foreign policy, has written of the inadequacy of polls that do not ask about extradition, civilian casualties, or whether to support action that breaches international law (Herman 2001). One little-reported poll for *Newsweek* in early October showed that “58 percent of respondents said the U.S. government’s support for Israel may have been the cause” of the attacks, thus indicating that America may have struck first rather than simply striking back as CNN would have it.

Furthermore, there is evidence that dissent in the United States is being underrepresented in responses to opinion polls. In a Gallup poll, 31% agreed that the attacks on the United States had made them “less likely to say things that might be unpopular.”⁸ Opposition to the war is unpopular in media coverage of the war. When Bill Maher, host of the *Politically Incorrect* chat show, criticized remarks by Bush describing the World Trade Center attackers as “cowards,” White House spokesman Ari Fleischer said, “There are reminders to all Americans that they need to watch what they do, and this is not a time for remarks like that” (Usborne 2001). Maher’s show lost advertisers and was dropped by some affiliates.

Conclusion

The most fundamental problem with the polls is that they assume the public has adequate information. But the media in the United Kingdom, and even more emphatically in the United States, have been systematically distorting what is happening in Afghanistan, especially with regard to civilian casualties and alternatives to war. To ask about approval of what is happening assumes that people actually know what is happening. But given that a large proportion of the population receives little but misinformation and propaganda, it is less surprising that some should approve of what they are told is happening—that the United States and the United Kingdom are doing their best to avoid civilian casualties and that Blair exercises a moderating influence on Bush. When they are asked their own preferences about what *should* happen (rather than approval questions about what *is* happening), there is much less support, even in the United States. In other words, there is no world support for the attack on Afghanistan, and public opinion in the United States and the United Kingdom,

which are leading the action, is at best dubious and at worst flatly opposed to the war in Afghanistan. If Bush and Blair were really democrats, they would never have started the bombing.

Notes

1. See <http://www.mori.com/polls/2001/notw-id.shtml>.
2. See <http://www.icmresearch.co.uk/reviews/2001/guardian-poll-sept-2001.htm>.
3. See <http://www.observer.co.uk/waronterrorism/story/0,1373,556343,00.html>.
4. See <http://www.icmresearch.co.uk/reviews/2001/scotsman-bombing-poll-sept-2001.htm>.
5. See <http://www.mori.com/polls/granada.shtml>.
6. See <http://www.mori.com/polls/2001/ms011104.shtml>.
7. The author spent 10 days in the United States between 26 October and 4 November 2001 and compared the mainstream news in the United States with the debates taking place in the media in the United Kingdom.
8. See <http://www.gallup.com/poll/releases/pr011008c.asp>.

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