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Multidimensional Effects of Political Involvement**

Jon A. Krosnick; Laura A. Brannon

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THE IMPACT OF THE GULF WAR ON THE INGREDIENTS OF PRESIDENTIAL EVALUATIONS: MULTIDIMENSIONAL EFFECTS OF POLITICAL INVOLVEMENT

JON A. KROSNICK and LAURA A. BRANNON *Ohio State University*

When the United States began its overt military conflict with Iraq in January 1991, the news media focused unceasingly on the Gulf crisis. Using national survey data, we show that this emphasis altered the ingredients of Americans' assessments of George Bush's performance. After the war, assessments were based more on beliefs about Bush's effectiveness in managing the conflict and less on confidence in his handling of other foreign relations matters or the domestic economy. Consequently, Bush's overall performance ratings increased dramatically following the war. We also show that the media's impact on political judgments was regulated by citizens' levels of political knowledge, exposure to political news, and interest in the war. Greater impact was associated with higher levels of knowledge and lower levels of exposure and interest. These findings challenge traditional views of these dimensions of political involvement and support a view derived from contemporary psychological theories of information processing.

The 1991 Gulf War was certainly a momentous event in recent history, and its impact on the American public is likely to have been multifaceted. For example, events in the Gulf may well have altered Americans' confidence in the U.S. military and their support for government spending on defense. Or the war may have changed public support for Israel, the Arab nations, or particular U.S. foreign policies in dealing with the Middle East. We shall focus on yet another potential effect of the war, namely, its effect on the process by which Americans evaluate their president's job performance.

Public opinion about presidential performance exerts powerful forces on policy formation and implementation in Washington. Opinion polls document a president's popularity across the country, and perceptions of his popularity in turn partly regulate his ability to control political events. Popular presidents have their way with Congress and the federal bureaucracy, while unpopular ones struggle much less successfully to shape legislative decision making (Neustadt 1960; Rivers and Rose 1981). Thus, the public's judgments of presidential performance are quite consequential.

A look at public opinion poll results suggests that the Gulf War may have had profound impact on Americans' views of George Bush's performance. As Figure 1 illustrates, Bush's approval ratings were moderate just before the war began, in October 1990, at about 55%. When, after a gradual massing of allied troops in the Middle East, the United States initiated air attacks on Iraq in mid-January 1991, approval ratings began to increase. And in March, by which time the military efforts were completed, approval ratings soared to nearly 90%. Although the following months saw a gradual decline in this positive sentiment, they were still near 70% even three months later, quite a high level.

What accounts for the dramatic increase in presi-

dential approval in early 1991? Perhaps it was simply the military alliance's success at ending the Iraqi occupation of Kuwait. But if this was all that drove the approval increase, it is puzzling why the rise began in January, just after the war began but before it was clear that U.S. efforts would be successful. A second possible reason for the increase is a shift in elite discourse, whereby administration critics are quelled during international crises (see, e.g., Brody 1991). A third possibility is an increase in domestic cohesion among Americans in response to external threat (Sigelman and Conover 1981). We focus here on a fourth possible explanation, whose starting point is the theory of *priming*.

Priming and the Gulf Crisis

The notion of priming begins by acknowledging evidence from psychological research indicating that when people make judgments or decisions, they rarely take into consideration the entire array of available relevant evidence. Rather, because of the cognitive burdens imposed by a complete and comprehensive information search and integration process, people tend to "satisfice," rather than "optimize" (see Simon 1957; Simon and Stedry 1968). That is, they often derive their decisions from limited subsets of the available information pool so as to make satisfactory judgments without expending a great deal of effort.

According to the theory of priming, satisficing operates for political judgments just as it does for other sorts of judgments. When Americans are asked to evaluate the job performance of their president, an optimal assessment might entail gauging the president's performance in a wide array of policy domains and integrating those domain-specific judgments into an overall summary. More likely, according to the theory of priming, especially during a relatively speedy

FIGURE 1

Proportion of the American Public Approving of President Bush's Job Performance

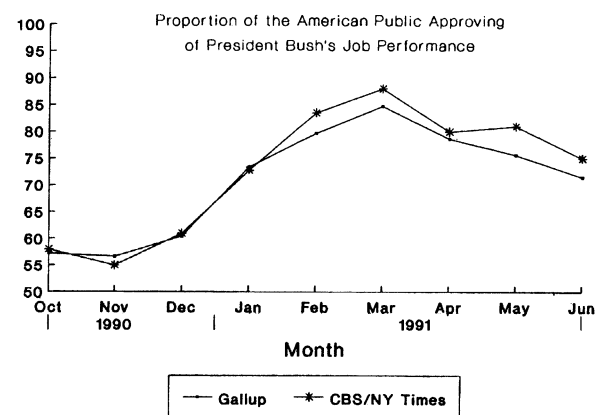
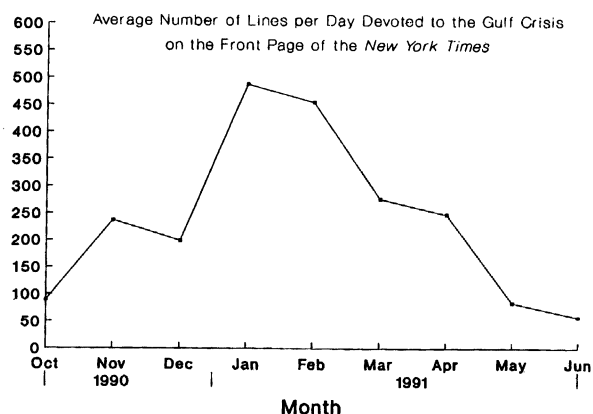


FIGURE 2

Average Number of Lines Per Day Devoted to the Gulf Crisis on the Front Page of the *New York Times*



survey interview would be a satisfying approach, assessing presidential performance in only a small sample of policy domains—a sample of convenience.

Which particular pieces of information get used are those that come to mind quickly and automatically for an individual citizen—those that are most accessible (Higgins and King 1981; Wyer and Hartwick 1980). And the accessibilities of various policy domains are in turn presumed to be determined importantly by news media coverage. Issues that have been the subject of extensive attention on television and radio and in newspapers are particularly likely to come to citizens' minds shortly thereafter and thereby to enjoy enhanced impact on presidential evaluations. In contrast, topics that have been addressed only minimally in the news media are rarely primed and are therefore likely to play little if any role in presidential assessment processes (Iyengar and Kinder 1987; Iyengar et al. 1984; Krosnick and Kinder 1990).

In light of these principles, it is interesting to consider the potential impact of news coverage of the 1991 Gulf War on American's evaluations of George Bush. As Figure 2 illustrates, with the onset of the war came a dramatic alteration in the content of news coverage across the country. Before the overt military actions began in Kuwait, Americans heard about events unfolding there with increasing frequency. But once the armed combat began in January, there was a significant surge in coverage (a doubling, according to the data in Figure 2). The conflict became the central focus of the media every day for months. Certainly, then, the ingredients of Americans' presidential evaluations must have shifted significantly as the result of the war if the theory of priming is correct.

As easy as this prediction is to derive from the theory, it is quite a bit more difficult to specify a priori exactly how these ingredients are likely to have shifted. The most straightforward prediction would suggest that assessments of Bush's handling of the Gulf crisis would come to loom large in people's overall evaluations of him. But it is conceivable that

focusing Americans' attention on this conflict overseas might have increased attention to other political attitudes as well. That is, when a war occurs and news coverage of it is intense, it may stimulate thinking about many related issues, because the conduct of the war has effects on these issues. At the very least, because the Gulf War involved complex coordination of efforts by many countries worldwide, Americans might have become more attentive to and concerned about U.S. relations with these various other countries.

On the other hand, perhaps dramatically focusing people's thinking on the Gulf crisis would narrow their cognitive focus and thereby decrease thinking about other international issues. Along similar lines, concentrating media attention on a military conflict overseas and neglecting domestic issues such as the economy might cause the latter to recede in American's thinking. Thus, exactly which ingredients of performance evaluations rose and fell in importance presumably hinged upon precisely how Americans construed the meaning and significance of the Middle East conflict, as well as their cognitive capacities. Thus shedding light on these changes is one approach to gaining insight into how the public made sense of the war.

Our goal here is to do just this—to assess the impact of the Gulf crisis on the ingredients of presidential appraisals. To do so, we will analyze national panel survey data collected before and after the war. Included in both the prewar and postwar interviews that we examine were extensive batteries of questions assessing respondents' perceptions of presidential performance overall and in specific policy domains. Thus these data provide an opportunity to assess the impact of the war on presidential evaluation processes.

Identifying the Most Vulnerable Citizens

Once we have characterized shifts in determinants of presidential evaluations for the nation as a whole, we

shall attempt to identify those segments of the public whose evaluation strategies were most and least influenced by the media. Our prior research on priming has indicated that political expertise or involvement may be an important moderator here (see Iyengar et al. 1984; Krosnick and Kinder 1990). While the judgments of political novices have at times appeared to be highly responsive to news media emphasis, experts have seemed to be much more immune to these pressures. Since we have seen this pattern before, we might see it again here.

However, the empirical evidence on the moderating role of political expertise is actually rather inconsistent, in part depending upon the particular operationalization of expertise employed. Although priming effects have been weaker among people highly knowledgeable about politics in some investigations, no differences between highly knowledgeable and less knowledgeable people have appeared in others, (cf. Iyengar and Kinder 1987, chap. 10; Iyengar et al. 1984; Krosnick and Kinder 1990). Furthermore, other methods of assessing political involvement (e.g., reported interest in politics, frequency of exposure to political news, and frequency of political participation) have failed to distinguish people most susceptible to priming from those resistant to media influence (Iyengar and Kinder 1987, 90–97). These latter findings are puzzling, especially because these measures typically possess a moderately positive association with political knowledge and might therefore be expected to behave similarly (see, e.g., Krosnick and Milburn 1990). Consequently, it seems sensible at this point to step back and think carefully about exactly how particular aspects of political expertise or involvement might shape presidential evaluation processes and therefore how they might moderate priming effects.

There are two principal perspectives on how aspects of political involvement might operate here. One has been employed frequently by political scientists in empirical investigations of American public opinion since the 1950s. The second is suggested by contemporary work in cognitive and social psychology on memory and information processing. Although these two perspectives make quite different predictions, they both share a central underlying assumption: although positively correlated with one another, different dimensions of political involvement should have opposite effects on priming, so multivariate analyses must be conducted in order to see these effects clearly.

The Traditional Dosage-Resistance Perspective. The most traditional and long-standing approach to political involvement presumes that one can understand the impact of the news media on any particular individual by considering two regulatory factors: dosage and resistance (Converse 1962; McGuire 1968; Zaller 1987, 1989, 1992). The greater one's dosage of media content, the more one should be influenced by it, whereas the more knowledge one has, the more resistant one should be. Individuals with little knowledge about politics have only a minimal ability to see

flaws or distortions in new information; and they have few other bases from which to derive political judgments. Therefore, they should be highly responsive to news media content. In contrast, highly knowledgeable individuals are equipped to counterargue new information and assimilate it to their preexisting store of knowledge. They may therefore be especially resistant to the influence of any single dose of new information.

A Contemporary Psychological Perspective. Social and cognitive psychology suggest a second perspective that views the likely effects of exposure, interest, and knowledge quite differently. With regard to exposure and interest, there are at least two reasons to expect weaker priming effects among the most exposed and interested. First, individuals who are only minimally exposed to and interested in the news media will probably absorb little other than the "big message" contained in the lead stories and repeated regularly across media and across time. In contrast, highly exposed and interested individuals are likely to absorb both the "big message" and a wide range of peripheral details and additional stories. Consequently, the priming impact of the principal message is likely to be diluted by the many other knowledge domains that are also primed. Thus, priming effects of a principal story (such as the Gulf crisis) should be strongest among individuals with lower exposure and interest levels.

There is a second reason to expect this pattern, as well (see Hastie and Park 1986; Lodge, McGraw, and Stroh 1989). People who are highly attentive to the flow of political news are likely to think a great deal about political affairs. This extensive thought is likely to lead them to form a set of general political evaluations (e.g., regarding a president's overall job performance) stored in memory and to update them continually as new relevant information is acquired. Therefore, if asked by a pollster to report an assessment of a president's performance, these individuals need only retrieve and report these on-line evaluations. These judgments have a great deal of inertia, because they are based on large sets of previously acquired information, so new pieces of information have only small impact on them. Therefore, recent news media content would be expected to have relatively little effect on highly attentive citizens.

In contrast, citizens who pay little attention to the flow of news are unlikely to have such general political evaluations stored in memory. Consequently, they will most likely have to respond to an inquiring pollster by recalling whatever they can about presidential performance and deriving an overall evaluation on the spot. As the theory of priming suggests, instead of drawing upon expansive arrays of performance domains, these individuals are most likely to consider only the small handfuls of performance domains that come to mind most easily. Thus, lower levels of exposure and interest would again be associated with the greatest priming effects because of the employment of a memory-based judgment strategy.

The memory-based judgments of low-exposure, low-interest individuals will only be influenced by news media content absorbed days or weeks earlier if that content had been stored in their memories and could be retrieved at the time of judgment. Therefore, factors that enhance the likelihood of storage and retrieval will enhance media priming effects. One such factor is political knowledge. The more schematically organized knowledge one has about a domain, the more efficiently and effectively one can make sense of new information, find an appropriate place to incorporate it into one's memory, and retrieve it sometime later (see Fiske and Taylor 1991, 121-32). Therefore, the more knowledge one has about politics, the more quickly and easily one can make sense of a news story and the more efficiently one can store it in, and retrieve it from, an elaborate and organized mental filing system. In contrast, individuals with minimal knowledge about politics presumably have more difficulty interpreting new political information, are unlikely to store that information in memory, and have difficulty retrieving whatever information they do store. Therefore, media priming effects would presumably be greater among highly knowledgeable individuals than among minimally knowledgeable ones.

The Present Investigation

Exposure, interest, and knowledge are typically positively correlated with one another, but these two theoretical perspectives predict these variables to have oppositely signed effects on priming. Therefore, these perspectives offer potential explanations for the inconsistencies in prior studies of priming. None of these studies entailed multivariate analyses gauging the effect of each dimension of involvement while controlling for the effects of the others. Therefore, the resulting confounding of oppositely signed effects could well have yielded inconsistencies from study to study. All of this suggests that we should conduct multivariate analyses and look for additive and interactive effects of political involvement measures on changes in presidential evaluation ingredients produced by the Gulf War.

DATA

The data that we analyzed in this study were collected as a part of the 1990-91 National Election Panel Study (NES) of the Political Consequences of War. For this survey, a nationally representative sample of 2,000 American adults was interviewed during November and December 1990 and January 1991, prior to the major events of the war and the dramatic increase in media attention to the Gulf crisis. Of these individuals, 1,385 were interviewed a second time during June and July 1991, long after the military efforts were completed.

During both the prewar and postwar interviews, respondents were asked extensive series of questions addressing many political beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors. Of most significance for the current investi-

gation, respondents appraised George Bush's handling of the Persian Gulf crisis, his handling of foreign affairs generally, his handling of the domestic economy, and his job performance in general. Also, respondents reported their overall evaluations of Bush on a 101-point feeling thermometer. We combined these latter two judgments into a single index of respondents' attitudes toward Bush by averaging them together after recoding both sets of responses to range from 0 to 1.¹

In addition, respondents were asked questions measuring their knowledge about politics in general, their exposure to political information through the news media, and their interest in the Gulf War. We gauged political knowledge by the number of correct answers respondents gave to nine questions asking about factual matters, such as what political office Dan Quayle held and which party had the most members in the Senate. Media exposure was assessed by an index that combined answers to questions about frequency of watching television news in general, watching television news stories about the 1990 elections, reading newspapers in general, and reading stories in newspapers about the 1990 elections. Interest in the Gulf War was assessed by a single question asking respondents how much attention they paid to news about the war. As expected, these three indices of political involvement were moderately positively correlated with one another ($r_{\text{knowledge, media}} = .35, p < .01$; $r_{\text{knowledge, interest}} = .18, p < .01$; $r_{\text{media, interest}} = .29, p < .01$).

Our analyses focussed on only those respondents who answered all of these questions, a total of 1,090. These individuals constitute 78.7% of the total panel sample and 54.5% of the total wave 1 representative national sample of 2,000 people. As the Appendix illustrates, the subsample of 1,090 individuals is quite similar to the full representative sample of 2,000 respondents in terms of demographic characteristics (gender, race, age, educational attainment, and region of residence) and general political judgments (Bush approval ratings and party identification). Thus, we see little reason to worry about the subsample's representativeness.

Table 1 displays the prewar and postwar distributions of the subsample's responses to the Bush evaluation questions.² With regard to overall attitudes toward Bush, we see a sharp increase in approval after the war that matches the increase in support illustrated in Figure 1. Our sample also voiced more approval of Bush's handling of the Gulf crisis, foreign relations, and the economy after the war than before. Thus, the war clearly enhanced Americans' sentiments toward Bush. We turn now to assessing whether the war also altered the relations between these various judgments.

RESULTS

We assessed the impact of the war on the ingredients of overall Bush evaluations by specifying the following regression equation:³

TABLE 1

Presidential Evaluation before and after the War (%)

EVALUATION	PREWAR	POSTWAR
Bush's job performance		
Approve strongly	30.2	50.3
Approve not strongly	36.2	29.6
Disapprove not strongly	13.8	7.9
Disapprove strongly	19.8	12.2
Feelings toward Bush		
0-25	8.1	6.8
26-50	19.7	16.2
51-75	40.6	26.4
76-100	31.6	50.6
Bush's handling of		
The Persian Gulf crisis		
Approve strongly	38.3	67.3
Approve not strongly	23.5	17.2
Disapprove not strongly	12.6	4.5
Disapprove strongly	25.6	10.9
Foreign relations		
Approve strongly	42.5	55.2
Approve not strongly	24.0	23.8
Disapprove not strongly	8.6	6.2
Disapprove strongly	24.9	14.8
The economy		
Approve strongly	15.9	21.4
Approve not strongly	27.9	33.3
Disapprove not strongly	19.6	17.2
Disapprove strongly	36.6	28.1

Note: Number of cases = 1,090.

$$\begin{aligned} \text{Overall attitude} = & b_0 + b_1 (\text{economy approval}) \\ & + b_2 (\text{foreign relations approval}) \\ & + b_3 (\text{Gulf crisis approval}). \quad (1) \end{aligned}$$

To examine shifts in ingredients for the full sample, we estimated equation 1 twice, once using the prewar judgments and once using the postwar judgments. (All variables were coded to range from 0 to 1, with larger values indicating more positive evaluations.) We expected that b_3 would increase after the war, suggesting a priming effect. If the news media's attention to the Gulf crisis led Americans to focus their thinking on that incident to the exclusion of other foreign relations issues, b_2 should decline. If, on the other hand, media attention to the Gulf crisis led Americans to think more about other foreign relations matters, b_2 should increase. Finally, because increased attention to the Gulf crisis presumably pushed domestic economic problems out of the spotlight, we expected that b_1 would decline after the war.

Equation 1 was estimated via ordinary least squares regression, and the resulting unstandardized coefficients are displayed in Table 2.⁴ As expected, the impact of Gulf crisis performance on overall evaluations increased from .21 to .30, a 50% jump ($z = 3.30$, $p < .001$). The impact of foreign relations performance decreased slightly, and performance in han-

dling economic issues had slightly greater impact after the war, though these differences were nonsignificant. Thus, it seems that for the nation as a whole, news media attention to the war increased the impact of Gulf crisis performance on overall Bush evaluations without shifting the impact of other ingredients.

Next, we estimated equation 1 separately for respondents high and low in knowledge, media exposure, and interest (see Table 3).⁵ Despite the relative independence of the three involvement factors from one another, the results are largely comparable for all of them. First, the increase in impact of Gulf performance is pronounced and statistically significant for the low-involvement group but not for the high-involvement group in each case. Furthermore, although no significant changes in the impact of foreign relations and economic performance appear, trends suggest that their impact may have increased after the war in the high-involvement groups and decreased after the war in the low-involvement groups.

In order to test the differences between the high- and low-involvement groups formally, we analyzed both the prewar and postwar data simultaneously in a within-subjects repeated-measures regression. In addition to the predictors in equation 1, we also included a dummy variable for time (coded 0 for the prewar data, 1 for the postwar data) and interactions between this dummy variable and the three domain-specific performance appraisals. The statistical significance of these interactions assess the robustness of the differences between the prewar and postwar coefficient for each of the performance predictors. We also included a main effect of political involvement (either knowledge, exposure, or interest) and all possible interactions between involvement and the other variables in the equation.⁶ This equation was estimated three times, once for each of the three involvement factors.

Of most interest are the three-way interactions between the domain-specific performance measures, time, and the involvement measures (see Table 4). Surprisingly, none of the interactions involving political knowledge are significant. However, for exposure and interest, all six interactions are significant or marginally significant. Thus, the impact of Gulf crisis performance increased more among the low-exposure and low-interest groups than among the high-exposure and high-interest groups. And whereas the impact of economic and foreign relations performance increased in the high-exposure and high-involvement groups, their impact decreased in the low-exposure and low-involvement groups.⁷

All of the results thus far are consistent with previous research on priming and with reasonable expectations about the Gulf crisis. Among people minimally involved in politics, the Gulf crisis became a more important basis of presidential evaluations after the war, while the impact of foreign affairs and the domestic economy decreased. In contrast, among people highly engaged by politics, the ingredients of presidential evaluations were essentially unaltered. When our three measures of political involvement

TABLE 2

Estimates of the Impact of Domain-specific Evaluations on Overall Evaluations of Bush's Performance before and after the War

PERFORMANCE DOMAIN	UNSTAND. REGRESS. COEFF.		PRE-POST DIFFERENCE	Z-STAT. TESTING SIGNIF. OF THE DIFF.
	PREWAR	POSTWAR		
Gulf crisis	.21* (.02)	.30* (.02)	.09	3.30*
Foreign relations	.22* (.02)	.21* (.02)	-.01	-.31
Economy	.26* (.02)	.27* (.02)	.01	.18

Note: Number of cases = 1,090. Standard errors are shown in parentheses. Assessments of President Bush's Gulf crisis, foreign relations, and economy performance were the only predictors in these equations.

* $p < .001$.

were considered individually, media exposure and interest were the most effective at illustrating differences between high- and low-involvement individuals, whereas political knowledge was least effective at doing so (a result that conflicts with patterns observed by Zaller [1990] in similar head-to-head comparisons involving phenomena other than priming).

However, as we have suggested, considering knowledge, exposure, and interest individually may not be the most sensible approach. We therefore estimated a much-expanded within-subjects repeated-measures regression equation that again predicted overall Bush evaluations including all three aspects of political involvement simultaneously. The main effect variables included here were Gulf crisis performance, foreign relations performance, economic performance, time (prewar vs. postwar), knowledge, exposure, and interest. All possible two-way and three-way interactions among these variables were included, as were three four-way interactions: time \times interest \times exposure \times each of the three domain-specific performance appraisals. Most of the terms in this huge regression are of no interest theoretically in the present context, but a subset of them tests specific hypotheses.

First, we expected that the main effects of Gulf crisis performance, foreign relations performance, and economic performance would all be positive and significant, indicating that overall evaluations of Bush at the prewar time point were based partly on each of these three ingredients. The basic priming effects (among individuals low in knowledge, exposure, and interest) are tested by the two-way interactions between time and the three domain-specific performance assessments. We expected that these interactions would be positive for Gulf crisis performance (indicating increased impact) and negative for foreign relations and economic performance (indicating decreased impact over time).

The three-way interactions between time, domain-specific performance, and each of the three involvement measures test whether the increases and decreases in domain-specific performance impact are

different in the high involvement groups. If the traditional dosage-resistance model is correct, then the three-way interactions involving exposure and interest should have the same algebraic signs as the two-way interactions estimating the basic priming effects—positive for Gulf crisis performance and negative for foreign relations and economic performance (indicating greater priming at higher exposure and interest). For knowledge, the three-way interactions should have the opposite algebraic signs—negative for Gulf crisis performance and positive for foreign relations and economic performance (indicating decreased priming at high knowledge). In contrast, the information-processing perspective predicts the opposite effects: for exposure and interest, it predicts a negative sign for Gulf crisis performance and positive signs for foreign relations and economic performance; for knowledge it predicts a positive sign for Gulf crisis performance and negative signs for foreign relations and economic performance.

These predictions regarding the three-way interactions treat exposure and interest as additive components of dosage or information-processing load. But in fact, they are likely to be interactive. That is, if an individual is completely uninterested in politics, then increased exposure to the news media should have little or no effect on impact. Thus only exposure in the presence of interest should be consequential. Therefore, the four-way interactions between time, domain-specific performance, exposure, and interest should be significant and should have the same algebraic signs as the basic priming effects: according to the traditional perspective, positive for Gulf crisis performance and negative for foreign relations and economic performance; according to the information-processing perspective, negative for Gulf crisis performance and positive for foreign relations and economic performance.

The relevant unstandardized regression coefficient estimates we obtained are displayed in Table 5.⁸ The top third of the table addresses changes in the impact of Gulf crisis performance assessments. Prior to the war, these assessments had no impact on overall

TABLE 3

Estimates of the Impact of Domain-specific Evaluations on Overall Evaluations of Bush's Performance before and after the War, Separately for High- and Low-Political-Involvement Groups

INVOLVEMENT GROUP ^a AND PERFORMANCE DOMAIN	UNSTAND. REGRESS. COEFF.***		PRE-POST DIFFERENCE	Z-STAT. TESTING SIGNIF. OF THE DIFF.
	PREWAR	POSTWAR		
Knowledge				
Low (N = 688)				
Gulf crisis	.20 (.02)	.30 (.03)	.10	2.95**
Foreign relations	.21 (.02)	.18 (.02)	-.03	-.97
Economy	.25 (.02)	.24 (.02)	-.01	-.42
High (N = 402)				
Gulf crisis	.23 (.03)	.29 (.03)	.06	1.27
Foreign relations	.25 (.03)	.27 (.03)	.02	.66
Economy	.28 (.03)	.31 (.03)	.03	.72
Exposure				
Low (N = 554)				
Gulf crisis	.21 (.03)	.36 (.03)	.15	4.00***
Foreign relations	.20 (.03)	.15 (.03)	-.05	-1.25
Economy	.25 (.03)	.23 (.02)	-.02	-.41
High (N = 536)				
Gulf crisis	.22 (.03)	.26 (.03)	.04	1.01
Foreign relations	.24 (.03)	.25 (.03)	.01	.42
Economy	.28 (.02)	.29 (.02)	.01	.62
Interest				
Low (N = 379)				
Gulf crisis	.19 (.04)	.39 (.03)	.20	4.18***
Foreign relations	.22 (.04)	.15 (.03)	-.07	-1.41
Economy	.29 (.03)	.21 (.03)	-.08	-1.82*
High (N = 711)				
Gulf crisis	.22 (.02)	.26 (.02)	.04	1.10
Foreign relations	.22 (.02)	.24 (.02)	.02	.66
Economy	.26 (.02)	.30 (.02)	.04	1.54

Note: Standard errors of the coefficients are shown in parentheses. Assessments of President Bush's Gulf crisis, foreign relations, and economy performance were the only predictors in these equations, which were estimated separately for each involvement group. All unstandardized regression coefficients are significant at .001 level.

^aKnowledge was gauged by the number of correct answers that respondents gave to nine questions asking about factual matters. Exposure was assessed by questions about frequency of exposure to television news and newspapers. Interest was assessed by a question gauging attention respondents paid to news about the war.

* $p < .10$.

** $p < .01$.

*** $p < .001$.

TABLE 4

Estimates of the Impact of Political Involvement Factors in Regulating the Priming Effect

INVOLVEMENT DIMENSION AND INTERACTION	UNSTAND. REGRESS. COEFF.	T	P
Knowledge × time × Gulf crisis	.15 (.12)	1.26	.21
Foreign relations	-.01 (.12)	.08	.93
Economy	-.04 (.10)	.39	.70
Exposure × time × Gulf crisis	-.33 (.10)	3.16	.002
Foreign relations	.18 (.10)	1.75	.08
Economy	.17 (.09)	1.91	.06
Interest × time × Gulf crisis	-.43 (.14)	3.02	.003
Foreign relations	.34 (.14)	2.50	.01
Economy	.22 (.13)	1.77	.08

Note: Number of cases = 1,090. Standard errors of the coefficients are shown in parentheses. Separate regressions were performed for each measure of involvement (knowledge, exposure, and interest). In each analysis, Gulf crisis performance, foreign relations performance, economy performance, involvement (either knowledge, exposure, or interest), and a dummy variable for time (coded 0 for prewar data and 1 for postwar data) were entered as main effects, in addition to all two-way interactions and three three-way interactions between involvement (knowledge, exposure, or interest), domain-specific performance (Gulf crisis, foreign relations, or economy), and time (prewar vs. postwar).

TABLE 5

Estimators of Main Effects and Interactions Predicting Overall Evaluations of George Bush Using Domain-specific Performance Evaluations and Political Involvement Factors

PREDICTORS	UNSTAND. REGRESS. COEFF.	T	P
Gulf Crisis	-.27 (.25)	1.10	.27
Gulf crisis × time	.88 (.29)	3.01	.003
Gulf crisis × time × Knowledge	.41 (.13)	3.18	.002
Exposure	-1.35 (.54)	2.51	.012
Interest	-.94 (.34)	2.81	.005
Exposure × interest	-1.10 (.59)	1.86	.063
Foreign relations	.64 (.28)	2.26	.024
Foreign rel. × time	-.36 (.29)	1.26	.21
Foreign rel. × time × Knowledge	-.25 (.13)	1.91	.056
Exposure	.52 (.52)	1.00	.319
Interest	.48 (.33)	1.48	.14
Exposure × interest	-.37 (.57)	0.64	.52
Economy	.46 (.24)	1.97	.05
Economy × time	-.51 (.27)	1.93	.054
Economy × time × Knowledge	-.12 (.11)	1.08	.28
Exposure	.96 (.45)	2.11	.035
Interest	.72 (.30)	2.36	.018
Exposure × interest	-.91 (.50)	1.82	.069

Note: Number of cases = 1,090. Standard errors of the coefficients are shown in parentheses. In this regression, the following predictors were entered as main effects: Gulf crisis performance, foreign relations performance, economy performance, knowledge, exposure, interest, and time (prewar vs. postwar). Also entered were all two-way interactions, all three-way interactions, and three four-way interactions between time, exposure, interest, and domain-specific performance (Gulf crisis, foreign relations, or economy).

evaluations of Bush ($b = .27$, n.s.). But after the war, the impact of these assessments became strong and significant among low involvement individuals ($b = .88$, $p < .003$), indicating a typical priming effect. Knowledge, exposure, and interest all regulated the magnitude of this priming effect but in directions opposite to the traditional view and consistent with the information-processing view. The priming effect became *stronger* as political knowledge increased ($b = .41$, $p < .002$) and *weaker* as exposure increased ($b = -1.35$, $p < .01$) and as interest increased ($b = -.94$, $p < .005$). The exposure × interest interaction indicates that the additive effects of exposure and interest did not combine fully linearly; rather, the priming effect is a bit stronger at the highest levels of exposure and interest than would be expected based on the main effects alone ($b = 1.10$, $p < .07$).

With regard to assessments of foreign relations performance (as shown in the middle third of Table 5), the pattern is the same, though weaker in statistical terms. Overall Bush evaluations were partly based on assessments of his handling of aspects of

foreign affairs other than the Gulf crisis before the war ($b = .64$, $p < .03$). This impact tended to decline a bit (although not significantly) among low-involvement individuals after the war ($b = -.36$, $p < .21$), but it declined more among respondents high in political knowledge ($b = -.25$, $p < .06$). Though not significantly, high levels of exposure and interest were

again associated with reduced priming effects ($b = .52, p = .32$ and $b = .48, p = .14$, respectively). Exposure coupled with interest was again associated with a slightly strengthened priming effect ($b = -.37, p = .52$), though this effect is not even close to being statistically significant.

More statistically significant coefficients emerged for economic judgments, as displayed in the bottom third of Table 5. Overall assessments of Bush were based in part on assessments of his economic performance before the war ($b = .46, p < .05$). And after the war, the impact of economic judgments was decreased significantly ($b = -.51, p < .06$), presumably reflecting the news media's dominant focus on the war. Although not statistically significantly, high levels of knowledge were again associated with an enhanced priming effect ($b = -.12, p = .28$). And the priming effect was again stronger at higher levels of exposure ($b = .96, p < .04$) and interest ($b = .72, p < .02$). As before, the priming effect was strengthened when both exposure and interest were coupled ($b = -.91, p < .07$).

These results make it clear that priming affected the impact of all three policy domains on overall presidential evaluations. Furthermore, these effects were clearly regulated by the three dimensions of political involvement in different ways. Thus the findings just described highlight significant psychological shifts in the American public's political information processing. In order to understand the political significance of these effects, however, we must assess how much of the postwar rise in President Bush's approval ratings is attributable to these priming effects.

As Figure 1 illustrates, presidential approval increased from 56% in October–November 1990 to 76% in June 1991. Reflecting this surge, our sample's mean overall presidential evaluation increased from .613 before the war to .722 afterward, a change of .109 units on the 0 to 1 scale. This increase is presumably due to at least two changes: increased positivity of Americans' assessments of President Bush's handling of the Gulf crisis and his handling of foreign relations (as shown in Table 1) and increased weight attached to these two domains and reduced weight attached to his handling of the economy, which was evaluated more negatively.

To assess how much of the increase in overall evaluations was due to each of these components, we used the regression equation described in Table 5 to estimate what postwar evaluations of Bush's overall performance would have been had the ingredient weights remained unchanged. This exercise yielded a predicted mean overall evaluation of .702, .089 units higher than the prewar average evaluation. Thus, the shift in domain-specific ratings could account for 82% of the pre-to-post increase. Substituting the postwar weights to generate predicted overall evaluations increased the mean by .020 units, or 18% of the total pre-to-post surge. Thus, of the 20% increase from prewar to postwar shown in Figure 1, almost four of these percentage points are attributable to priming.

DISCUSSION

The big news here is in two parts: the impact of the Gulf War on Americans' evaluations of their president's performance and the roles of political knowledge, exposure, and interest in regulating priming effects.

The Impact of the Gulf Crisis

Consistent with previous research on priming, the news media's incessant focus on the Gulf crisis appears to have increased the impact of Americans' assessments of George Bush's handling of it on their evaluations of his overall job performance. And at the same time, attention to the war apparently reduced attentiveness to other aspects of foreign relations and to the domestic economy.

Because most Americans evaluated Bush's handling of the Gulf crisis much more positively than they evaluated his handling of the domestic economy or other aspects of international relations, this shift in focus may have contributed to the sharp increase in Bush's overall popularity illustrated in Figure 1. Of course, simply "winning" the war was, in and of itself, probably largely responsible for the surge in approval ratings. But priming seems to have contributed significantly to this shift as well.

These findings are in marked contrast to one plausible vision of the American citizen. One might imagine that political affairs are at the periphery of most Americans' lives most of the time because the more mundane and personal concerns of everyday life exhaust their abilities for cognitive engagement. But when a war occurs and intrudes into the daily lives of numerous people in many powerful ways, their interest in and exposure to political affairs presumably surges. It is conceivable that this shift might lead people to become thoughtful about a wide range of political issues indirectly related to the war. Thus, perhaps ordinarily passive citizens are drawn into political affairs when their attentions are grabbed by large-scale and consequential events such as wars.

In fact, our results offer no support for this vision. Americans were apparently quite narrow in their response to the war, focusing their attentions on it to the exclusion of other issues, even other foreign relations issues. Thus, the Gulf War did not induce cognitive engagement in an array of political issues. This result is in harmony with evidence from laboratory experimental studies showing that priming effects appeared only in policy domains that have been directly addressed in news coverage (see Iyengar and Kinder 1987, chap. 11). This correspondence enhances our confidence in those studies and in ours.

Might other wars have been capable of inciting broad cognitive engagement in politics? Certainly, the Gulf War was unusual in many ways, in terms of minimal casualties, brief combat engagement, and a variety of other attributes. Perhaps more costly wars conducted over more protracted periods of time lead Americans to attach cognitive significance to many

other policy issues. But it may instead be that Americans' capacities for attention are limited to just a few big issues at a time.

Moderators of Priming

When considered individually, political knowledge, exposure, and interest all seemed to have the same effects on priming: higher involvement was associated with reduced priming, just as has been seen in various previous investigations (Iyengar et al. 1984; Krosnick and Kinder 1990). However, when these three variables were examined simultaneously, they turned out to have opposite effects on priming. High levels of political knowledge enhanced priming, and high levels of exposure and interest reduced priming, although the coupling of exposure and interest was associated with slightly increased priming.

The directions of these effects are in sharp contrast to those anticipated by a traditional view of political involvement. Greater media exposure and interest have been viewed as indicating stronger dosages of media content, whereas greater knowledge has been viewed as a basis for greater resistance to the new information acquired from the media. Our findings clearly challenge this view and instead support the contemporary psychological alternative. Greater knowledge constitutes a greater ability to interpret, encode, store, and retrieve new information. And higher levels of exposure and interest are associated with a greater likelihood of forming on-line political evaluations and a dilution of priming effects due to a wider range of knowledge being activated by media coverage.

There is another way to think about the effect of political interest that we identified. Recent studies suggest that priming manipulations may have the greatest impact when they occur without people paying much attention to them (Lombardi, Higgins, and Bargh 1987; Strack, Schwarz, Bless, Kubler, and Wanke 1993). When people attend closely to and are aware of the potential impact of context on their judgments, they correct for it. In our case, highly interested viewers may therefore have said to themselves, "I know the news media have paid a lot of attention to inflation lately, but I don't want that to cause me to place too much weight on inflation in deriving my presidential performance evaluation. So I'll reduce its weight a bit." This could explain why weaker priming effects appeared among the most interested readers and viewers.

It is important to acknowledge, however, that the exposure and interest effects we observed could have occurred at a point in time much later than encoding, via retroactive interference. People who were especially interested in politics and who absorbed lots of information about the war no doubt continued to attend closely to information about politics after the war as well. Consequently, as the news media's attention to matters other than the Gulf crisis increased during April and May of 1991, these highly attentive individuals were filling their minds with this new information, which would interfere with the

cognitive effects of previously stored knowledge about the war. Thus, greater interest and exposure may yield more absorption of information about the war but also more absorption of information about a range of other political matters as well. Individuals who were typically only minimally interested in and exposed to political information would have absorbed little political news after the war and would therefore have experienced much less postwar interference. This may explain why these people based their presidential evaluations in June and July 1991 on war-related attitudes.

This alternative interpretation of our results makes it clear how the timing of survey interviews can have tremendous impact on substantive conclusions about the war. Had a set of interviews been conducted during the war, in late January or February, we could have assessed the impact of exposure and interest on priming while avoiding confounding these factors with retention or retroactive interference. We might, therefore, have found more priming to be associated with greater exposure and interest at that time, reflecting greater dosage of media content, just as the traditional perspective on these measures of political involvement would have anticipated. In the absence of such data, the plausibility of retroactive interference must remain unclear for the moment.

Our results regarding knowledge, exposure, and interest do not challenge the *assumptions* underlying the dosage-resistance perspective. There is enough other available evidence supporting these notions in general (see Petty and Cacioppo 1986; Zaller 1992) that they need not be called into question here. Rather than challenging these general perspectives, our results challenge the *application* of this perspective to news media priming. That is, the failure of knowledge, exposure, and interest to behave like dosage and resistance factors suggests that priming does not entail a persuasionlike process of belief shifts but instead occurs by shifts in decision-making *criteria*.

Generalizing to the Iran-Contra Affair

The theoretical significance of these findings regarding political involvement is a bit difficult to assess with just this one investigation in hand. It is conceivable that there is something unique about the Gulf War that is responsible for these effects, so we might observe different patterns of results for other events. On the other hand, it is also possible that the patterns of effects observed here do indeed generalize across political contexts.

To assess this possibility, we conducted a reanalysis of data regarding priming in the context of the Iran-Contra affair from a study that ignored exposure and interest and examined only the effect of political knowledge and, as expected, found priming to be decreased among highly knowledgeable citizens (Krosnick and Kinder 1990). Using the same methodology, we returned to those data and assessed the simultaneous effects of knowledge, exposure, and interest. Our findings were consistent with the ones we have reported regarding exposure and interest in

the Gulf War context. High levels of exposure and interest were each associated with *reduced* priming effects individually (for exposure, $t = 1.86$, $p = .064$; for interest, $t = 1.67$, $p = .096$; $N = 767$); and the confluence of exposure and interest slightly decreased their individual impacts ($t = 1.84$, $p = .066$). Once we controlled for these effects, political knowledge had no impact on priming ($t = .79$, $p = .43$).

These findings are encouraging in two regards. First, they suggest that the negative impact of exposure and interest on priming is not limited to the Gulf War case. In addition, this replication suggests that our Gulf War results are not the artifactual result of aspects of the 1990–91 NES panel study design, because the Iran–Contra study design is quite different in numerous ways. For example, instead of being a panel study, the Iran–Contra investigation involved two independent cross sections of respondents: one interviewed before the scandal was revealed, and the other afterward. And instead of a delay of months between the enhanced media coverage and postevent interviews, the Iran–Contra postevent interviews were conducted beginning the day after the revelation. It therefore seems unlikely that our present results are artifactually produced by some aspect of the 1990–91 NES study design. Furthermore, the retroactive-interference explanation for the interest and exposure effects we have described seems unlikely as well.

It is conceivable, however, that study design differences may account for the disappearance of the knowledge effect in the Iran–Contra case. Recall that knowledge enhances priming by facilitating information storage and retrieval processes. Such processes are very likely to be involved in long-term priming over a period of months, as was the case in the Gulf War. But because the postevent interviews for the Iran–Contra case were conducted immediately after the revelation, long-term storage and retrieval issues were probably less relevant, thus explaining the lack of a knowledge effect in this case.

Alternative Explanations for Our Findings

We have presumed all along that the shifts in the ingredients of presidential evaluations observed here are due to the increase in news media attention to events unfolding in the Gulf. But of course, we have provided no definitive evidence to support this causal assertion. And other theoretical perspectives would attribute the surge in presidential support to other causes. For example, Brody (1991) has argued that presidents enjoy enhanced popularity immediately after bold international acts because their critics are temporarily quiet. Sigelman and Conover (1981) have argued that Americans draw together in response to the external threat that war represents, and positive feelings about the nation and its leader swell. (For a review of other possible alternative explanations, see Brody 1991.)

It is certainly conceivable that these or other explanations could be partly or even fully responsible for President Bush's increased public support immedi-

ately after he initiated military action in the Gulf. Unfortunately, the data we have at hand do not allow us to test these alternative explanations or to pit them against the account of these events based on priming. For the moment, then, priming must remain a viable explanation, though not necessarily the definitive one.

Dimensions of Political Involvement

Finally, our results suggest that researchers studying public opinion take a step back from traditional views of political involvement in light of contemporary theories of information processing and decision making. First, the sometimes-employed practice of combining measures of political knowledge, interest, and exposure into a single index of political involvement (e.g., Cassel 1984; Chong, McClosky, and Zaller 1983; Judd and Downing 1990) now seems especially unwise, given that it may obscure unique effects of the components. Furthermore, head-to-head comparisons looking for the single most effective measure of involvement (e.g., Zaller 1990) also seem misdirected, because different dimensions may have oppositely signed effects and therefore do not reflect a single underlying construct. In addition, it seems risky to examine the impact of only a single dimension, such as exposure (see, e.g., Bartels 1993), given that controlling for other dimensions, such as interest and knowledge, can dramatically change that first dimension's apparent effect. Instead, our results (like other recent investigations, e.g., Krosnick and Milburn 1990), illustrate why it is most sensible to treat political knowledge, interest, and exposure as distinct constructs that may have distinct effects on political information processing and decision making. Multivariate analyses simultaneously examining these three dimensions clearly seem in order for future studies.

This conclusion has substantive as well as methodological implications. Theorists have catalogued the many benefits of mass public engagement in the political affairs of democracies, as well as the dangers of apathy and ignorance (e.g., Dahl 1989). At the same time, political observers have often lamented lack of political involvement in the American public and other mass publics across the globe (e.g., Kinder and Sears 1985). The operating assumption here is that political involvement is a single entity that can be maximal, moderate, or minimal for a nation as a whole or for any given individual. This assumption leads observers to presume that any single indicator of low involvement (such as a low turnout rate in an election) reflects low levels of engagement generally (e.g., Milbrath 1965).

Our results suggest a different view of political involvement, one that treats involvement as having multiple distinct components. Any given individual may be exposed to lots of political information but may have no interest in it and may therefore retain little of it. Alternatively, although an individual may be very interested in politics, other aspects of life may be extraordinarily demanding, leaving little time to attend to contemporary events. Or, by virtue of living

in a household with others who frequently discuss political affairs, one may become highly knowledgeable about politics without any interest or exposure to the news media.

This new perspective is both encouraging and discouraging about the prospects for increasing mass involvement in democracies. On the bright side, any single piece of evidence indicating mass disengagement should not be so disappointing. That is, political involvement may be higher at a particular point in history than any single indicator (e.g., voter turnout) might suggest. But on the more discouraging side, the task of increasing political involvement entails increasing many different and distinct components: interest in political affairs, exposure to political information, storage of that information in memory, behavioral participation in political events, and so on. Our results suggest that large-scale social interventions intended to maximize involvement must be multipronged and therefore perhaps much more complex and expensive than a simpler view of involvement might support. This is not to say that such efforts will be futile but rather simply to suggest why they may be more difficult than might be imagined and how to make them most effective.

CONCLUSION

In reporting our most recent investigation of priming effects, we concluded that "change over time in popular approval [of presidential performance]—and thus the waxing and waning of presidential power—may depend the most on the citizens who know the least" (Krosnick and Kinder 1990, p. 510). The findings reported here clearly demand a revision of this conclusion. Instead, media-priming-induced shifts in presidential popularity and power seem to be driven by citizens who are highly knowledgeable about politics but relatively inattentive to the flow of political news. This more textured conclusion makes it clear that in political science, as in all of life, things are often more complex than they at first appear.

APPENDIX

Table A-1 compares demographic characteristics and general political judgments of the original representative national sample of 2,000 and the subsample of 1,090 who completed all questions that we used for our analysis. The subsample is seen to be quite similar to the parent sample.

Notes

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TABLE A-1

Characteristics of the Full Representative National Sample and the Subsample Analyzed (%)

CHARACTERISTIC	SUBSAMPLE WITH COMPL. DATA	COMPL. REPRESENT. NAT. SAMPLE
Gender		
Male	48.0	45.2
Female	52.0	54.8
Race		
White	87.7	83.4
Black	10.0	13.6
Others ^a	2.3	2.7
Age		
18–29	22.7	23.5
30–39	26.0	23.1
40–49	19.1	16.7
50–59	10.8	11.2
60–69	11.8	12.0
70–94	9.9	13.5
Education		
8 grades or less	4.9	9.6
9–11 grades	11.2	14.1
High school diploma	36.1	35.2
Some college	17.5	15.3
Junior or comm. coll. degree	6.7	6.3
B.A.-level degree	16.0	12.8
Advanced degree	7.6	6.2
Region		
Northeast	20.5	20.2
North Central	28.3	25.9
South	29.6	34.6
West	21.7	19.3
Bush's Job Performance		
Approve strongly	30.2	28.6
Approve not strongly	36.2	36.2
Disapprove not strongly	13.8	15.2
Disapprove strongly	19.8	20.1
Party Identification		
Republication	27.8	24.1
Democrat	38.4	39.0
Independent	28.9	28.4
Other (no preference, don't know)	4.9	8.3

Note: Number of Cases = 1,090.

^aAmerican Indian, Alaskan, Asian, or Pacific Islander.

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1. We obtained similar results to those we report when we repeated our regressions using only the Bush job performance rating or the feeling thermometer rating as the dependent variable.

2. The domain-specific evaluations were moderately to strongly correlated with one another. For prewar, $r_{\text{economy, relations}} = .45, p < .01$; $r_{\text{economy, Gulf}} = .44, p < .01$; and $r_{\text{Gulf, relations}} = .70, p < .01$. For postwar, $r_{\text{economy, relations}} = .42, p < .01$; $r_{\text{economy, Gulf}} = .37, p < .01$; and $r_{\text{Gulf, relations}} = .57, p < .01$.

3. One might imagine that assessments of President Bush's foreign relations performance are based partly upon evaluations of his handling of the Gulf crisis. If so, effects of the latter in equation 1 would reflect only the direct effect (instead of the total effect) of Gulf crisis performance on overall

performance evaluations. However, when we reestimated equation 1 omitting foreign relations performance assessments, the results for Gulf crisis and economy performance were essentially identical. Therefore, indirect effects of Gulf crisis performance via foreign relations performance do not seem problematic here. Also, the results that we report were not meaningfully altered when we included controls for demographics (i.e., gender, race, age, education, and region) and partisanship in our regressions.

4. We also performed this analysis and those that follow after subjecting the dependent variable to a probit transformation. These analyses yielded results comparable to those reported below.

5. The high- and low-involvement groups were formed by selecting points near the means of the knowledge, exposure, and interest distributions that yielded approximately equal-sized high and low groups while, if necessary, making the high-involvement group a bit smaller than the low-involvement group.

6. In these equations, the political involvement indices were entered as continuous variables, rather than dichotomous ones.

7. Zaller (1992) has suggested that priming effects like these should be more pronounced among respondents moderate in political involvement than among respondents very high or very low in involvement. We found a curvilinear pattern matching this prediction when we separated respondents into low-, moderate-, and high-knowledge groups, but this pattern did not even approach statistical significance. Furthermore, purely monotonic patterns appeared in the cases of exposure and interest. We therefore did not pursue the possibility of curvilinear effects further.

8. Of the remaining 48 coefficients not shown, only 5 were statistically significant. Of these, only 3 seem theoretically meaningful: at the prewar wave, Gulf crisis performance had heightened impact on overall evaluations among individuals high in exposure or high in interest, although the conjunction of exposure and interest reduced these effects.

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Jon A. Krosnick is Associate Professor of Political Science and Psychology and Laura A. Brannon is Doctoral Candidate of Psychology, The Ohio State University, Columbus, OH 43210.