

The Rally ‘Round the Flag Effect and Presidential Uses of Force

by

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One of the most popular pieces of conventional wisdom in American politics is that of the “rally ‘round the flag effect,” the belief that a president’s popularity invariably increases during an international crisis. According to the rally theory, when the nation is confronted with a foreign threat or crisis, the public responds with a surge of patriotism which manifests itself through a surge in popular support for the president as measured by public opinion polls. However, many people who study politics and public opinion have cast doubt on this theory, noting that it does not consistently explain what happens to presidential approval during international crises.

In this exercise, students will select or be assigned an international crisis from the Clinton presidency, then do some research on the political reactions to those crises from the White House, the president’s opposition, and the media. When completed, the students should find that rallies, or increases in presidential approval, in response to international crises are by no means certain. Rallies are most likely to result when the White House’s opposition publicly support the president’s policies, when the media report favorably on those policies, and when the White House draws attention to those policies through presidential televised addresses, press conferences, etc.

It is recommended that this lesson be coordinated in a government class with a discussion on the presidency, foreign policy, and/or public opinion. This lesson should take one 90-minute block or two 45-minute periods to complete.

Grade Level: 11-12

Subject Area: American Government, Civics, Current Events

Objective: Students will

1. Learn to navigate government websites for information on political leaders and policies.
2. Develop an understanding of the foreign policy crises of the Clinton administration, and the congressional reactions to those crises.
3. Consider the relationship between presidential approval, presidential uses of force, media coverage, and partisan reactions to presidential initiatives.
4. Compare and discuss your findings with those of other students in the class.
5. Compose a short essay addressing the following points:
 - a. Does the president’s popularity increase following each use of force? Under what conditions is an increase in popularity (a “rally”) most likely?
 - b. Does the president’s opposition always support the president following a use of force?
 - c. Does the media always present a presidential use of force in a way that is positive toward the president and his policies? When is the media most likely to report favorably on a presidential use of force?
 - d. What conclusions can you draw as to the relationship between uses of force, presidential statements, opposition statements, and presidential approval? When a president’s popularity increases following a use of force, is the public reacting out of patriotism, or because the president’s opposition is supportive of the president’s policies?

Materials:

1. At least one Internet-accessible computer

Activity:

- A. For this assignment, you will each select or be assigned a presidential use of force from the Clinton Administration (1993-2001), as follows:
1. Iraq (June 26, 1993) - U.S. launches attack on Iraq in retaliation for assassination plot against former President Bush.
 2. Somalia (October 3, 1993) - Ranger Task Force assaults Olympic Hotel in Mogadishu in search of Mohammed Farah Aidid, results in 17 hour battle, 18 U.S. soldiers killed, 84 wounded.
 3. Haiti (September 19, 1994) - U.S. troops enter Haiti to overthrow Raul Cedras, restore President Jean-Bertrand Aristide to power.
 4. Bosnia (November 27, 1995) - Clinton announces U.S. troops will go to Bosnia to enforce Dayton Peace Accords.
 5. China (March 11, 1996) - U.S. warships are sent to protect Taiwan from a feared Chinese invasion attempt.
 6. Afghanistan/Sudan (August 20, 1998) - Attacks on terrorist camps in retaliation for African embassy bombings.
 7. Iraq (December 16, 1998) - U.S. attacks Iraq for not cooperating with weapons inspectors.
 8. Yugoslavia (March 24, 1999) - U.S. launches war against Yugoslavia to stop ethnic cleansing in Kosovo.
- B. Go to the U.S. Government Printing Office website (http://www.access.gpo.gov/su_docs/databases.html), look for the following pieces of information, and answer the following questions:
1. A statement on the use of force from the White House (try looking under "Public Papers of the President." What form does the statement take (a televised presidential address to the nation, a press conference briefing, etc.)? Who issues the statement (the president himself, a member of the cabinet, press secretary, etc.)
 2. A statement on the use of force from a leader of the opposition party (you'll need to browse through several of the headings under "Congress," such as "Congressional Record," "Congressional Hearings," "Congressional Committee Prints," etc...try doing a search for the name of the incident or the name of the opposition leader you're looking for). If the use of force took place between January 1993 and January 1995, look for statements by the House or Senate minority leader, minority whips, or ranking members from relevant committees. If the use of force took place after January 1995, look for statements by the Speaker of the House, Senate Majority Leader, majority whips, or chairs of relevant committees. Are the statements supportive, critical, or neutral in regard to the presidential use of force?
- If you're having trouble finding an opposition statement on the GPO website, you may try just a general search through an Internet search engine

(www.google.com, www.altavista.com, Lexis -Nexus, etc.)

3. Go to the Polling Report website at <http://www.pollingreport.com/clinton-.htm>, and determine President Clinton's public approval in a public opinion poll prior to and following the use of force. Is there any change? Remember, a change of less than three percentage points is statistically insignificant.
4. What conclusions can you draw as to the relationship between uses of force, presidential statements, opposition statements, and presidential approval? When the president's popularity increases following a use of force, is the public responding to the use of force itself or to the presentation of the event by the White House, the opposition party, and the media?