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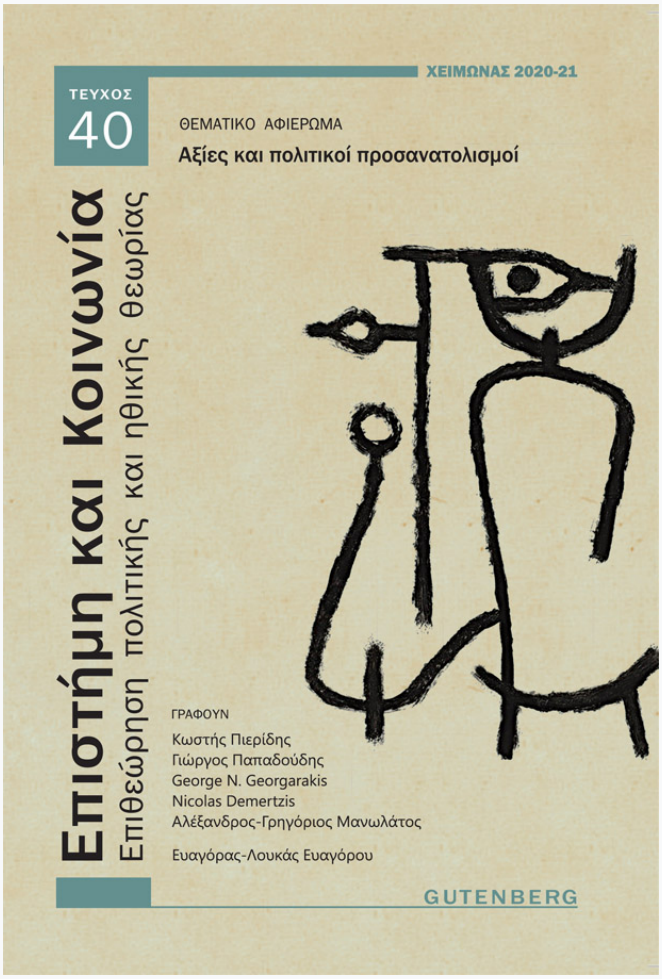


**Anatomy of the Rally Round the Flag Effect**

*George Georgarakis*

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*George N. Georgarakis**

# ANATOMY OF THE RALLY 'ROUND THE FLAG EFFECT

When national security is breached, citizens systematically increase their trust in the political system and the head of state, in particular. This effect is dubbed 'rally 'round the flag.' For almost 50 years, research has been investigating the paradox of why public opinion rewards its leadership, despite the failure of the latter to protect the citizens. This review aggregates and critically revisits recent literature on the rally 'round the flag effect. To provide a systematic account of the literature, a classification is proposed, which accounts for the top-down and bottom-up interpretations that are offered from a rational choice perspective, and political psychology. This study highlights the significance of applying an integrative approach to advance a comprehensive understanding of the rally 'round the flag effect.

## *Introduction*

In early 1970s two seminal studies of Mueller (1970, 1973) redirected scholarly attention away from why citizens discredit politics to *when* and *why* they increase their support in political institutions and actors. In his studies, Mueller has sought

* Dual PhD candidate in Political Science at Columbia University, NY and Sciences Po, Paris. <gng2109@columbia.edu>

to define the constituents of presidential popularity, and identify the impact of a series of factors on the U.S. president's job approval ratings. Under the label of 'Rally 'Round the Flag' effect (as of now, simply *rally*), he describes periods of inflated trust in the president following an '*international, (…) specific, dramatic and sharply focused*' event (dubbed '*rally point*'), which directly involves the head of state (Mueller 1970: 21).

After the 9/11 terrorist attacks, scholarly interest in rallies rose sharply as a major rally took place when George W. Bush's popularity rates skyrocketed from 51% to 86%, (Gallup online database). Since then, the proliferation of Islamic terrorism has powerfully influenced American and European politics. Whereas the bulk of the American literature investigates such phenomena in its homeland, a growing amount of scholarly works tries to apply the principles of this analysis on European study cases. Indeed, terrorist attacks in Europe have been challenging European political life for at least 15 years, with the most notable incidents taking place in Madrid in 2004, and in London in 2005. While a decade of relative security succeeded those attacks, since 2015 Islamic terrorism has become once again a salient threat for the EU, and prominently for France.

This review explores how the literature on the rally 'round the flag effect has evolved over time and across the various subdisciplines of political science. For greater clarity, I organize the presentation of the literature in three sections. In the first section, I offer an overview of the existing literature. In the second section, I review top-down and bottom-up explanations emanating from rational choice theory. Accordingly, in the third section I revisit the main interpretations of the rally 'round the flag phenomenon from a political psychological viewpoint. I conclude by discussing the methodological peculiarities and pitfalls of current literature, and the challenges that need to be addressed in future studies.

## *Overview of approaches*

Ever since the end of World War II, scholars of public opinion have been seeking to understand how and why popularity and trust dynamics manifest themselves in modern, liberal democratic systems. Democratic theory holds that public trust in political institutions and actors is a condition *sine qua non* for representative democracies to thrive and produce systemic outputs that correspond to citizens' needs.

Mueller's seminal studies (Mueller, 1970, 1973) address this exact question, namely why citizens choose to close ranks behind the US President. Ever since, the literature on the rally 'round the flag effect has sought to give persuasive, empirically backed answers. A number of scholars (Ostrom and Simon 1985; Ostrom and Smith 1992) try to identify *when* the public increases its support for the president by including in their analyses events related to president's health issues, inauguration ceremonies and honeymoon effects. Others investigate *how* rallies occur as a by-product of international security crises following terrorist attacks and military action (Baker and Oneal 2001; Brody 1992). This review focuses on the latter strand of literature.

I organize the literature drawing on and adjusting Baum and Groeling's (2010a) categorization of approaches. Baum and Groeling differentiate between *event-based* and *opinion leadership* explanations of the rally 'round the flag effect. While the latter correctly communicates the pivotal role of elites, the former is less intuitive. I understand *rally events* or *points* merely as the stimulus of individual attitudinal change; they do not constitute a specific viewpoint by themselves.

As can be seen in Table 1, on the horizontal axis I identify two large families of explanations about why rally periods emerge, stemming from the rational choice theory, and political psychology. The vertical axis represents the applied direction of analysis. The first row incorporates bottom-up analyses of the rally 'round the flag phenomenon, which investigate

Table 1. *The main conceptualizations of the rally 'round the flag effect.*

| *Theoretical Approach* / *Agency* | *Rational Choice Theory* | *Political Psychological Approach* |
|---|---|---|
| Public | *Rational agent*<br>• Collect information about the rally event<br>• Perform rational judgments estimating losses (e.g. casualties)<br>• Account for the positive effects of anticipating a successful outcome from antiterrorist policies<br>• Justifications of military interventions matter | *Motivated agent*<br>• Threatened public<br>• Terrorist threat as emotional stimulus<br>• Emotions moderate decision-making processes<br>• Mostly focused on negative emotionality<br>• Authoritarian attitudes spur rallies |
| Elite | *Elite consensus*<br>• Public opinion leadership<br>• Information asymmetry<br>• Indexing and cascade models<br>• Institutional consensus about the preferred course of action | *Crisis containment*<br>• Framing various aspects of the rally event<br>• Use of political symbols |

the attitudinal changes of citizens toward national leaders and policies. The second row aggregates top-down explanations that stress the critical role of opinion leaders in influencing the public in times of security crises.

Arguably, the rational choice approach offers the most numerous and well-known explanations of why public support

for the head of state increases in threatening times, and under which conditions this support is expected to fade away. From a utilitarian point of view citizens are conceived as rational agents, who collect information about the ongoing security crisis; calculate the costs and benefits of their nation's involvement in military action; and subsequently perform political judgments in favor of or against the head of state and her policies. Moreover, rational choice highlights the information asymmetry that exists between the elites and the citizens, and holds that because of this fact political elites are able to manipulate the masses in order to reaffirm their status and societal position.

On the other hand, literature coming from a political psychological standpoint is more fragmented but increasingly influential. The core argument is that in times of war and security crisis, citizens' perceptions of threat mobilize them to join forces with national leaders, and back counter-terrorism policies. However, there exists no agreement on the causal mechanism lurking behind such attitudinal change.

Some scholars identify the mere perception of terrorist threat as a powerful catalyst that increases the propensity to trust the head of state. Others note that it is rather previously held attitudes, like authoritarianism and national identification, which trigger the rising of presidential job approval ratings. In recent years, scholarship has also started exploring the role of emotions in reinforcing such phenomena. Emotions have been found to affect powerfully the way individuals react to how political elites and the media frame terrorist incidents.

Even though these approaches may seem competing with one another, I would argue they are rather complementary. Indeed, the scope of each theoretical paradigm is substantially different. As Hetherington and Nelson (2003) argue, rational choice approaches do a fairly good job in explaining the *duration* of rally periods. In contrast, the political psychological approach and the patriotism school offer a more profound and persuasive view of the *origins* of rallies.

## 1. *The rational agent*

Since the late 1950s, rational choice theory has been the dominant paradigm in political science. Scholarship on the rally 'round the flag effect makes no exception. Citizens are seen as rational information processors who support the head of state and his initiatives after meticulously balancing the costs (number of casualties) and the individual benefits (reestablishing social order and security, defeating terrorist groups).

The *casualty hypothesis* argues that as the number of fatalities accumulates in the context of a war, the public opinion loses its trust in the head of state (Gartner & Segura 2000; Larson 1996; Milstein 1974; Mueller 1973). Reifler et al. (2006) refer to public's disaffection for war fatalities as 'casualty sensitivity'. In this framework, casualty sensitivity defines public tolerance for increasing the human death toll in order to win the war. Reifler and colleagues identify a continuum that ranges from minimal sensitivity (describing the view that, naturally, human lives are the price the nation has to pay in order to win the war) to maximum sensitivity, which permits support for war actions only under the condition that no casualties will occur.

A primary source of discomfort about this argument derives from its methodological flaws. Estimating the impact of a cumulative number of casualties over time on presidential job approval ratings over time generates time correlations that could seriously distort empirical results (for similar arguments see Gartner & Segura 1998; Sidman & Norpoth 2012). To overcome these drawbacks, some scholars have put aside the cumulative measurement of casualties, and turned their attention to the rate of casualties (Slantchev 2004), their trend (Gartner 2008), and their marginal change over time (Gartner & Segura 1998).

Notwithstanding the fact that the casualty hypothesis has been the primary explanation of rallies from a rational choice standpoint, it fails to capture the rally effect *per se*. Intuitively, this hypothesis could explain the drop in presidential popula-

rity after a rally has occurred, but it falls short of predicting or explaining why rallies emerge in the first place. For this reason, Reifler, Gelpi, and Feaver (2006, see also Eichenberg, Stoll, & Lebo 2006; Larson 1996; Sidman & Norpoth 2012) propose that it is public's confidence in/anticipation for a successful war outcome that spurs public trust in the president.

However, the *wartime morale thesis* has also received serious criticism over the fact that it implies that the public can translate battleground events into a more or less accurate estimation of the probability of winning the war (Berinsky 2007; Berinsky & Druckman 2007; but also Gelpi & Reifler 2008). Berinsky's basic criticism is that it is too unrealistic to believe that citizens can assess the advancement of a war by themselves. Instead, the focus should be shifted to the impact of framing on public perceptions of war.

In the same line of thought, a number of scholarly works suggest that it is important to focus on how the political elite and the media justify the need to begin a war (Eichenberg 2005; Jentleson 1992; Jentleson & Britton 1998). Indeed, Jentleson's 'pretty prudent public' (1992, 1998) seems to favor wars perceived as defensive (e.g. restoring national prestige, counter-terrorism raids), but opposes aggressive military actions when they aim to merely impose 'internal political change' on another nation's state.

Taking into consideration the aforementioned arguments, a certain uneasiness may occur regarding some crucial points. First, it is hard to picture a 'real-life' individual who is capable of accounting for the accumulation of war fatalities, let alone their marginal changes. Using approximate estimations of casualty rates and trends as heuristics seems more plausible, although this still requires contextual knowledge about a nation's foreign policy, and international affairs, a fact that is largely disputed in the literature (Baum & Groeling 2010b; Brody 1992; Feldman, Huddy, & Marcus 2015; Lippman [1922] 2007).

Second, even if the 'average' citizen had information about the losses, how could she calculate her individual benefit? One

could argue that enhancing the feeling of personal security would be an adequate indicator. Nonetheless, there is evidence that egocentric assessments are weak predictors of attitudinal change after a terrorist attack. In contrast, sociotropic judgments about the national well-being perform much better (Huddy et al. 2002).

Third, if the casualty thesis holds when it comes to war, one would expect a similar effect of casualties on presidential job approval ratings when terrorist attacks take place. Namely, the larger the number of human lives that are lost in a terrorist attack, the more deceived and unprotected the public opinion should feel. However, research suggests that the exact opposite is true; the larger the death toll due to a terrorist attack, the larger is the rally that follows (Feinstein 2012).

## 2. *Elite consensus*

Scholars advocating for the *elite consensus thesis* often criticize the existence of rational agents, who base their cost-and-benefit calculation on information they get directly from the scene of a terrorist attack or a battlefield. Instead, they argue that opinion leaders and the media have a pivotal role in diffusing information and shaping public opinion. In short, the argument asserts that knowledgeable and well-informed elites influence the citizens who may have a varying degree of knowledge (from none to perfect) about domestic and foreign affairs, and possess limited information when a terrorist incident occurs or when a war starts. This asymmetry shuts down divergent voices as 'unpatriotic' or 'naïve' resulting in a compulsive spiral of silence (Noelle-Neumann 1993).

Explanations of rally effects from the elite consensus standpoint share, but also qualify, the basic assumptions of rational choice. These models are influenced by three theoretical traditions. First, they draw on theories of communications from the 1920s-1930s, such as Lasswell's analysis of WWI propaganda

([1927] 2013), the *hypodermic needle theory*, and the *magic bullet theory*, which all describe the direct, powerful, and inevitable effects of media messages on the audience.

Second, this approach understands the influence of politics on media and the public as a cascading process (Entman 2003). Once this 'snowball' procedure is activated, the head of state, who possesses privileged access to information concerning a terrorist or war incident, leverages this information asymmetry to influence other members of the political elite (e.g. members of the Congress, field experts, foreign leaders). They, in turn, take positions that influence the media coverage and framing of news, which is then consumed by public opinion. A feedback loop then starts (e.g. through polls, political activism) and has the exact reverse direction.

Third, the elite consensus thesis is influenced by the *hegemony* and *indexing* traditions that perceive the media as too deferential to government, and advocate for greater democratic deliberation regarding foreign affairs (Entman 2003). The most crucial principle of hegemony theories in political science is that elites restrict the diffusion of knowledge and information to the public in strictly defined ideological boundaries in order to reproduce the power they possess in the framework of the existing capitalist system. Indexing theories make the juxtaposition that it is not a carefully planned systemic cooperation that exists between political elites and the media, but rather that the media simply 'index' opinions that are already expressed by politicians. For instance, the media will report criticism about a given political decision only if a part of the political elite expresses concern.

Larson (1996; also Larson & Savych, 2005; Berinsky, 2007; Reifler et al., 2006; cf. Baker & Oneal, 2001) highlight the role of US Congress members as opinion leaders who can effectively influence public opinion and attitudes in supporting military interventions. However, the focus of the scholarship is often redirected to how the media behave in the wake of terrorist attacks and wars.

Baum and Groeling (2010a) distinguish between two types of indexing that link politicians to the media, and the media to citizens. On the one hand, the *Media Indexing hypothesis* holds that during times of security crisis the media depend heavily on official political sources in order to collect and frame their news. This dependency is a corollary of the fact that information about security issues is not easily accessible, and journalists have to rely on trustworthy insiders that possess solid and extensive insights into the issues at stake.

On the other hand, the *Opinion Indexing hypothesis* suggests that citizens, having no immediate access to the scene of action or other direct information, tend to react in a positive way when they perceive that all major players in the political and public arena agree on the manner in which the government should address a national challenge (Brody 1992). When the elite shows a high degree of consensus, then a dynamic bandwagon effect is generated.

Empirical findings largely qualify the universality of the elite consensus thesis. First, ideology and partisanship moderate how individuals perceive the content and framing of the news (Baum & Groeling 2008, 2009, 2010a; Gartner & Segura 2000). Furthermore, there is evidence of certain 'mechanical effects' taking place. For instance, right-wing governments, when in power, tend to be better evaluated, and receive greater support than their left-leaning counterparts for the way they address terrorist threats (Albertson & Gadarian 2015).

Zaller's (1992) seminal work on public opinion delves deeper into this screening effect of political dispositions. Zaller's Receive-Access-Sample (RAS) model offers a comprehensive conceptual framework of how news consumers digest information, and how information affects previously established *cognitive schemata*. Cognitive schemata describe the organizational structure of information stored in the brain (Lodge & Taber 2005; Morris et al. 2003). Indeed, Zaller stresses that political predispositions and cognitive involvement, defined as political

awareness, are critical for paying attention to, accepting or rejecting, and responding to new information.

Second, it seems that elite consensus does not generate greater support in an automatic way; that is to say that even if elite consensus occurs, it does not necessarily affect public opinion in a uniform manner (Brody 1992). Instead, for elite consensus to be influential, there needs to be a divided government in place. In other words, the executive and legislative branches need to be controlled by opposing parties, both of which should passionately extoll the president's actions in order for a rally to emerge.

The effect of elite consensus significantly drops when one party controls both branches. Further, its influence becomes negative when popular members of the Congress belonging to the president's party are critical of him, even in the case of an existing, broad inter-partisan coalition (Baum & Groeling 2008, 2009, 2010a; Brody 1992). The dramatic changes that such cacophonies can create are also amplified by the fact that public opinion tends to place greater trust in elites regarding foreign affairs than it does concerning domestic policies (Brody 1992; Zaller 1992).

A final remark made by Baum and Groeling is also of special interest. Slightly deviating from the original indexing thesis, they argue that media outlets and journalists can also play a proactive role in the shaping of public perceptions of threat and counter-terrorism policies. More specifically, they hold that journalists are not simply reporters of news, but function as 'strategic, self-interested gatekeepers of public information regarding foreign policy events' (Baum & Groeling, 2010a; Groeling & Baum, 2009).

While these three qualifications of the original argument make the overall approach more tenable, this interpretation falls short of grasping the complexity of rallies in two ways. First, the indexing thesis limits the media to only having a weak impact on the government's decision-making procedure. Nevertheless, literature on international crisis management presents numerous cases where media outlets did not confine themsel-

ves to simply indexing or skewing already expressed opinions. As an example, the widely known 'CNN effect' places the media at the heart of political decision making in times of crisis (Livingston 1997; Robinson 2002).

Furthermore, research suggests an inverse causality between media slant and public opinion. There is evidence that media outlets tend to conform their position about numerous issues to the dominant public opinion in order to maximize their profits (Gentzkow & Shapiro 2010). Lastly, the elite consensus thesis assumes that a minimum degree of public trust in the media exists in order for the latter's messages to be persuasive. The increasing public disaffection for mainstream media, and the rising of fake news and conspiracy theories put this assumption into question.

Second, scholars of political communication have fiercely criticized the strength of media effects since the early 1950s. Empirical studies provide evidence that the impact of media messages on the majority of the population is minimal both because of the low credibility of media outlets, and the relatively low cognitive capacity of the 'average' individual to follow the perpetual refreshing of her news feed (Katz 1957; Katz et al. [1955] 2005; Lazarsfeld et al. 1948; Lodge & Taber 2007; Taber & Lodge 2006).

Support for this thesis has also been provided in a series of experimental studies on motivated reasoning and cognitive psychology (Lodge and Taber 2005, 2007, 2013; Morris et al. 2003). These studies find that an individual's capacity to process information is moderated by her predispositions and her emotional mood. Information that fits well with pre-established beliefs (e.g. ideology, values) is efficiently digested, whereas contradictory views are discounted. Moreover, Marcus and colleagues (2000; also Huddy, Stanley, & Cassese 2007) highlight the impact of emotional states in dealing with information flows. Anxiety is found to boost information seeking, while anger shuts down the brain's capacity to absorb new pieces of information.

## 3. *The motivated agent*

While approaches from a rational choice standpoint are more or less solid regarding the origins and consequences they attribute to rallies, the same cannot be told about the interpretations stemming from the broader field of political psychology. Works in this field display high heterogeneity in the way they understand, describe, and analyze rallies that occur after terrorist attacks. In this section, I offer a classification of the relevant literature in two broad categories, explanations that highlight the role of authoritarianism, and emotional accounts of the rally effect.

### a. *Authoritarianism*

Authoritarianism is widely conceived as an attitude that promotes oneness and sameness through the endorsement of strong leadership, especially during troubled times (Stenner 2005). Indeed, Adorno's initial studies on authoritarian personality aimed to answer why large segments of the German population closed ranks behind Hitler during the 1930s (Adorno et al. [1950] 1993).

Two of the most well known approaches of authoritarianism are Right-Wing Authoritarianism (RWA) and Social Dominance Orientation (SDO). Right-wing authoritarians (Altemeyer 1981, 2008) conform with social norms and submit themselves to higher authorities in order to make sure that the existing sociopolitical status-quo will be maintained. In this sense, they endorse coercive and punitive actions in order to enforce social conformity and oneness.

On the other hand, Social Dominance Orientation measures an individual's inclination to support rigid, hierarchical social structures as a means to preserve and even expand social inequalities (Sidanius & Pratto 2001; Sidanius et al. 2003; Rubin & Hewstone 2004). Ranking high in SDO is often associa-

ted with pursuing aggressive and coercive behaviors against members of minority groups, being intolerant to those who do not belong in the same social or ethnic group, and displaying reduced empathy toward individuals who are considered to be 'weak'.

Right-wing authoritarianism and social dominance orientation predict many post-9/11 attitudes. Crowson (2009; also Crowson, DeBaker, & Thoma 2005) reports a positive association of both measures with endorsing President Bush and his administration; supporting the war in Iraq; having fewer concerns over war casualties; advocating restrictions on human rights in favor of more draconian security measures; and even demanding the US to leave the UN. Authoritarianism is also associated with backing policies such as the reestablishment of death penalty; endorsing racial stereotyping; and prioritizing social order over human rights (Feldman & Stenner 1997).

An interesting question is who becomes more authoritarian in the wake of a terrorist attack. While some scholars (Adorno et al. 1993; Stenner 2005) argue that authoritarians could pose a threat to democratic regimes, Suhay and Hetherington (2011) suggest that it is not them who constitute the greatest danger. Instead, they claim that we should shift our concern toward situational authoritarianism.

Situational authoritarianism arises when citizens who are not authoritarian during peacetime react like authoritarians under the pressure of an imminent threat. Indeed, Suhay and Hetherington find that the propensity to support counter-terrorism policies and the restriction of civil liberties increases mainly amongst those who are characterized by an 'average' degree of authoritarianism in normal times. In contrast, dispositional authoritarians do not seem to be significantly influenced in their preferences. In the following section, I will return to this point to elaborate on the role of emotions in this attitudinal change.

## b. *Emotional reactions*

An emerging and promising approach to studying rallies examines the role of emotions in triggering attitudinal change in the aftermath of a terrorist attack. Whereas rational choice understands emotions as methodological 'noise', and questions their value in predicting political behavior, new findings from cognitive and affective neuroscience, and political psychology illustrate their explanatory power. Emotions are found to be key in decision-making processes (Bechara et al. 1997; Bechara, Damasio, & Damasio 2000), and in performing political judgments (Lodge & Taber 2007; Marcus, Neuman, & MacKuen 2000; Morris et al. 2003).

In the case of rallies, the bulk of the literature focuses mainly on two distinct emotions, anxiety/fear and anger,[1] and their role in changing political attitudes either directly or indirectly. Often, anxiety/fear and perceptions of threat are mistakenly considered to be equivalent. However, studies show that they are distinct concepts with substantially different effects on post-attack attitudes (Best, Krueger, & Pearson-Merkowitz 2012; Huddy et al. 2003, 2005).

In the aftermath of the 2015 Paris attacks, Vasilopoulos and colleagues find a series of intriguing results about the role of emotions. First, they provide evidence that anger —but not anxiety— mobilized French citizens to participate in demonstrations after the Charlie Hebdo attacks (Vasilopoulos 2017). Accordingly, anger increased the propensity to vote for the Front National, the French far-right party, in the 2015 regional elections that took place just after the November 2015 Paris attacks. Second, contrary to conventional accounts, fearful reactions were associated with voting for mainstream parties (Vasilopoulos et al. 2018). Finally, fear and anger have a differential impact on authoritarian attitudes. While anger reinforces authoritarian predispositions, fear increases the propensity

1. Huddy and colleagues (2003) also examine the impact of depression, which is only minimal and peripheral.

of liberals to become more authoritarian (Vasilopoulos, Marcus, & Foucault 2017).

A wide consensus exists that emotions experienced after terrorist attacks largely mediate risk appraisals and threat perceptions, which in turn affect how people choose to react. Appraisal tendency theory offers a compelling conceptual framework that understands emotions as both the consequence and the cause of performing cognitive appraisals of risk (Lerner & Keltner 2001). More specifically, in an experimental study Lerner and Keltner find that fearful subjects tend to perform pessimistic appraisals and adopt risk-aversive attitudes.

In contrast, anger promotes confrontational reactions as a result of risk-discounting appraisals. Angry subjects have similar behavioral responses with participants who feel happy under conditions of certainty. In a subsequent study, Lerner and Keltner (2003) provide evidence that after a terrorist attack fear increases demands for preventive measures, in contrast to anger that has a hindering effect. Another interesting finding is that the divergent emotional reactions between women and men account for 60%–80% of their difference in risk appraisals and support for antiterrorist policies.

In a series of experiments and studies that employ nationally representative samples of the US population, it has been found that the dynamics of this 'fight or flight' mechanism manifest themselves in various aspects of the rally 'round the flag phenomenon. Under terrorist threat individuals endorse aggressive reactions, and disapprove peaceful approaches (Giner-Sorolla & Maitner 2013). Moreover, angry individuals, who rank high in RWA, support the war against terrorism more enthusiastically (Skitka et al. 2006).

In contrast, subjects, who display inflated perceptions about how powerful out-groups are (high-risk appraisal), are more fearful, and avoid confrontation by fleeing or negotiating (Giner-Sorolla & Maitner 2013). In addition, feeling anxious significantly increases the propensity to back the deportation of threatening out-groups (Skitka et al. 2006).

Fear has repeatedly found to promote an isolationist agenda in the US, and to have a negative impact on supporting aggressive military action to fight terrorism (Huddy et al. 2003, 2005; Huddy & Feldman 2007). Furthermore, anxiety deteriorates the prospective evaluations of the US economy, undermines social trust, and spurs public suspicions that Arab-American minorities favor terrorism (Huddy et al. 2003).

However, when it comes to the role of anxiety in generating trust in the U.S. president after a terrorist attack, existing research encounters ambiguous results. A strand of the literature offers evidence that fear of terrorism is positively associated with approving the president's job (Albertson & Gadarian 2015; Kinder & D'Ambrosio 1996 in Marcus et al., 2000; Sinclair & LoCicero 2010). On the other hand, other works suggest the opposite effect: anxious citizens believe less in their leadership's capacity to overcome challenges related to national security (Huddy et al. 2003, 2005).

Anger has received relatively less attention than anxiety/fear. Along with fear, anger has been found to corroborate ethnocentrism and authoritarianism (Albertson & Gadarian, 2015; Marcus, Neuman, & MacKuen, 2000). Moreover, a number of scholarly works find that anger has a direct, strong impact on fueling rallies. The most compelling evidence for the catalytic role of anger in rallies comes probably from Lambert and colleagues (Lambert et al. 2010; Lambert, Schott, & Scherer 2011). They propose an anger-based model of the rally 'round the flag effect by conducting a series of experiments. After priming subjects with a video about the 9/11 attacks, or evoking memories related to the event, Lambert and colleagues find that while subjects experienced both anger and fear, only angry individuals increased their support for President Bush, patriotic symbols, and the war in Iraq. In addition, angry individuals favored pro-war candidates in opposition to fearful ones, who were more reluctant.

## 4. *Crisis containment*

Perhaps the least advanced explanations of the rally effect are those included in the category of *crisis containment*. This approach often overlaps with the three aforementioned interpretations of rallies. In fact, this strand of literature differentiates itself mostly by putting the emphasis on framing effects. While extensive research has been done on examining the role of political and media framing in the aftermath of terrorist attacks, little has been done to link these findings to the upsurge of public trust in the political system.

Framing in its simplest form is a way to present pieces of news in a meaningful way. A coherent frame has to address a problem from scratch. Frames define the issues at stake (agenda setting), unravel and interpret their causes and consequences (cognitive priming), and offer potential remedies to overcome the challenges ahead (evaluation) (Norris, Kern, & Just 2003: Chapter 1).

Responses about casualty sensitivity have been found to be heavily dependent on how the initial question is articulated in a two-sided information flow (Chong & Druckman 2007; Zaller 1992: Chapter 9). In the case of the Iraq War, Boettcher and Cobb (2006) have empirically demonstrated that reporting the crude number of American casualties has a negative effect on supporting the war, and voting for President Bush. In contrast, reporting a casualty ratio of American to Iraqi body count has the very opposite effect. However, it is found that as a particular frame is integrated over time, more effort and greater number of 'reality indicators' are required in order for it to be modified (Baum & Groeling 2010a, 2010b).

Kuypers' (2006) notes that the Bush administration framed the War on Terror by employing frames that had been previously used in the Cold War. Through a series of contrasting notions, e.g. *Axis of Good vs Axis of Evil*, *civilization vs barbarism*, *freedom vs tyranny*, President Bush tried to emotionally

comfort American citizens, and encouraged them to be prepared for war.

Coe (2013) finds that the way in which television shows presented the War in Iraq had a significant impact on public support for military intervention. In particular, when the media highlight the sacrifices of American troops, the propensity of the American public to support the war increases. Similar results emerge when the news present terrorism as a threat to national values and security, or justify war as a means to defend freedom at home and abroad.

In the wake of the 9/11 attacks, the president repeatedly attacked the status of the terrorists (Kuypers 2006). Dehumanization of terrorists and out-groups has a negative effect on endorsing peace-making initiatives, and a powerful, positive impact on pursuing aggressive behaviors against them (Haslam & Loughnan 2014). Putting the blame on specific targets for challenging the national honor increases support for war (Feinstein 2012, 2016). When a nationalist frame is applied to military interventions, the American public increases its support for the president, and for conducting airstrikes.

## *Discussion*

In this review, I sought to critically revisit the most important recent works and approaches to the rally 'round the flag effect. To this end, I proposed a classification of the literature in four categories. First, I offered a presentation of approaches that emanate from a rational choice standpoint. Rational choice conceives individuals as rational agents, often with perfect knowledge, that are motivated to increase their utility income. Thus, citizens are found to increase their trust in the head of state when their confidence for a positive war outcome is high, and withdraw their support as the death toll in military operations increases. The main shortcoming of this approach derives from its assumptions.

Second, the elite consensus thesis was revisited. Scholars that offer explanations of rallies from this perspective usually focus on the power of political elites and the media to manipulate the public. The main argument states that public opinion turns more favorable to the head of state as a consequence of elite consensus and information asymmetry. In specific, the head of state, who has privileged access to classified information when national security is threatened, influences other members of the political elite, and the media. Since they lack access to relevant information, they adhere to her position. Citizens, then, perceive this elite consensus, and decide to reward their leadership with higher levels of trust. A major concern about this interpretation is that it assumes that elite and media messages have a powerful impact on public opinion. Indeed, a series of studies question the validity of this premise.

The third category comprises bottom-up approaches from a political psychological perspective. Studies in this field focus mainly on the effects of authoritarianism and emotions on rallying behind the head of state in the aftermath of terrorist attacks. After the 9/11 terror attacks, authoritarianism increased the propensity to support the U.S. president, endorse a strict counterterrorism agenda, and discriminate against minorities and immigrants. Moreover, there is rich evidence that anger and fear have a differential impact on rallies. While both have been found to drive the surge in support for the president, anger is associated with prioritizing confrontational tactics over peaceful negotiations. Conversely, fear affects positively preferences for preventive policies. Nevertheless, the relevant scholarship is still fragmented, and a more cohesive and integrative approach is needed.

The final category of crisis containment focuses mostly on the effects of framing. The principal argument is that the elite framing of terror attacks and war actions has an important role in how citizens evaluate the head of state and her policies. Nationalist frames are found to be particularly effective in persuading the public to support the head of state, and retaliatory

or preemptive strikes against targets that threaten national security. However, this strand of the literature is still underdeveloped relative to the aforementioned approaches

Although the theoretical richness of the relevant literature is rapidly expanding, the nature of the rally 'round the flag effect imposes significant methodological limitations to the study of the phenomenon. The fact that breaches of national security are not possible or ethical to randomize creates an almost insurmountable burden for strong, design-based causal inference. The problem becomes more severe when the explanatory variables of interest are stable characteristics (e.g. trait authoritarianism), and therefore cannot be randomly assigned to individuals. Under these constraints imposed by reality and ethics, experimentation is rarely used but notable exceptions exist particularly regarding the role of emotion and information (e.g., Lerner 2003; Best, Krueger, & Pearson-Merkowitz 2012; Gartner 2008).

Indeed, the bulk of the literature presented in this review employs observational data that are not suitable to disentangle the direction of causality. Often, the most sophisticated data that are available to reserachers are longitudinal (e.g., Huddy et al. 2003, 2005) or panel (e.g., Vasilopoulos 2017; Vasilopoulos, Marcus, & Foucault, 2017; Vasilopoulos, Marcus, Valentino, & Foucault 2018). While these data cannot alleviate problems related to unobserved heterogeneity, they can reveal time trends and offer a more dynamic understanding of rally effects.

Despite the overall abundance of evidence about the rally 'round the flag effect, more effort is needed to advance a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon. Four recommendations can be made. First, to examine the dynamics of rallies future research should try to integrate bottom-up and top-down approaches in a cohesive manner. Researchers should examine how the public interacts with elite messages, and how elite rhetoric is constrained by political culture and social demands. Second, because the bulk of the literature

comes from the U.S., more comparative work is needed. Comparative research could identify the degree to which these findings can be generalized in other liberal democracies or illiberal regimes (see Gleditsch, Tago, & Tanaka 2019; Kuijpers 2019; O'Loughlin & Toal 2019). Third, it is crucial to turn our focus beyond attitudes and investigate the behavioral footprint of rally effects (Urbatsch 2019). Finally, future research should delve deeper into the role of predispositions, such as personality traits and moral values in triggering rallies. Both factors have been found to be key in political decision-making, and have the potential to further enrich our understanding of the rally 'round the flag effect.

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