

# In One Ear and Out the Other? Electoral Issue Salience and Elite Withdrawal from the Iraq War Coalition

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## Abstract

Why do states withdraw from military coalitions? Such decisions often involve tension between distinct sources of pressure. Some member states must balance requests from coalition leaders to stay deployed with domestic political demands to pull out, particularly if the coalition in question is having difficulty achieving success. The author finds that in this context, domestic elections play a paramount role in influencing elite foreign policy choices when a country's participation in a military coalition is a highly salient issue for its public. From constraining to empowering political leadership's desired agenda, voters with foreign policy priorities are among the players with a seat at the decision-making table. This research thesis explores the conditions under which electorates prioritizing an international affairs issue will induce their respective leaders into adopting their position. The case study is the Iraq War Coalition, assessing whether the existence of anti-war electoral issue salience was a major factor compelling elites to withdraw. The research model ultimately produces the key finding that high relative anti-Iraq War electoral issue salience was a primary inducer of coalition exit among democratic states in the absence of elite consensus.

## 1 Introduction

Among the most palpable misconceptions concerning foreign relations is that politics stops at the water's edge. Elite decision-makers in democratic states face considerable domestic pressure with respect to policies they pursue abroad (Putnam 1988). Periodic election cycles,

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in particular, substantially augment leadership accountability and help dictate the trajectory of global engagement (ibid.). Elite responsiveness to electoral outcomes has historically served as a decisive factor in eventual withdrawal from military entanglements, especially when voters prioritize their anti-war views (Pilster, Böhmelt, and Tago 2013). Few contemporary cases highlight this phenomenon better than member-state exit from the Iraq War Coalition. Popular discontent with participation in the Multi-National Force - Iraq was a near ubiquitous experience among its major contributors (Berinsky and Druckman 2007), culminating in significant political consequences (Wilder 1997). A sizable proportion of pro-war leadership was punished electorally, bleeding crucial demographic constituencies, dramatically underperforming at the polls, or suffering outright defeat (ibid.). The degree to which post-hoc electoral pressure within an anti-war issue salient environment translated into explicit policy modifications, however, remains a subject of debate. The precarious terrain of international affairs requires elites to balance the priorities of the homefront with those of the geopolitical. Elite ideological preferences also play a significant role in the decision-making process. Therefore, this thesis seeks to answer the primary research question: To what extent did electoral issue salience influence political elites to withdraw from the Iraq War Coalition?

The following sections shall evaluate the degree to which anti-Iraq War electoral issue salience determined whether/how elites decided to implement a coalition withdrawal policy. The evaluation of issue salience shall be balanced with other geopolitical/ideological concerns of elite leadership, with the conclusion breaking down the precise relevance of the x-variable.

## 2 Literature Review

Relevant scholarship regarding elite responsiveness to domestic political pressure during the Iraq War remains largely confined to public opinion's constraint on coalition *entry*. Existing assessments of coalition *withdrawal* mostly explore pre-hoc (anticipating an election) rather than post-hoc (after that fact) electoral pressure, largely neglecting the role of issue salience.

Chapter 7 of Matthew Baum and Philip Potter's groundbreaking 2015 book *War and Democratic Constraint: How the Public Influences Foreign Policy* fleshes out the role of democratic institutions (i.e., the press and public opinion) on shaping elite Iraq War policy (Baum and Potter 2015). Baum and Potter conclude that limited press accountability toward elite policy coupled with a low-information political environment enable pro-war leadership to more easily sidestep anti-war popular sentiment in the short term (ibid.). The text falls short of answering this author's primary research question, however. Their x-variable concerns public opinion generally, evaluates the role of the *runup* to an election on elite policymaking as opposed to its *aftermath*, and exclusively addresses elite decision-making regarding *entry* into the Iraq War Coalition.

Arnaud Dellis's *The Salient Issue of Issue Salience* (2009) fleshes out the theoretical backdrop of the issue salience variable: Elites maximize salience of electorally advantageous issues and "defuse" salience of an electorally weak issue (Dellis 2009). This framework nonetheless

fails to address the primary research question at hand, focusing exclusively on coalition entry and pre-hoc, rather than post-hoc, electoral pressure (Baum and Potter 2015).

The literature specifically pertaining to Iraq War Coalition withdrawal is extensive, though it either fails to emphasize or outright neglects the dynamic of electoral issue salience. Jason Davidson's *Heading for the Exits: Democratic Allies and Withdrawal from Iraq and Afghanistan* (2014) offers the most pertinent examination of domestic pressure's inducement of Iraq War Coalition withdrawal, comparing it alongside geopolitical considerations (Davidson 2014). Davidson draws three relevant conclusions: Withdrawal is likely when anti-war opposition is popular; government-opposition consensus reduces withdrawal likelihood; and government-opposition consensus diminishes when alliance fallout and national security risks are minimal (ibid.). He acknowledges Iraq issue salience, though fails to thoroughly explore its impact on withdrawal (ibid.).

Additionally, Sarah Croco's *The Decider's Dilemma: Leader Culpability, War Outcomes, and Domestic Punishment* (2011) makes the astute observation that coalition defection rarely occurs under the same leaders who chose to join the coalition in the first place (Croco 2011). Croco concludes that "culpable" elites (i.e., those presiding over the initiation of a military conflict) are less likely to withdraw due to higher likelihood of electoral punishment (ibid.). She also deals with post-hoc electoral pressure by arguing that non-culpable leaders are more likely than culpable leaders to withdraw after a given election-cycle (ibid.). Her work's neglect of Iraq issue salience represents a key limitation with respect to the primary research question at hand.

This study seeks to fill gaps in the existing literature, assessing the impact of anti-war post-hoc electoral issue salience (x) on elite decision-making concerning withdrawal from the Iraq War coalition (y). A new model integrating the x variable with Croco's elite culpability hypothesis best characterizes the theoretical roadmap the author envisions. In the framework Croco describes, the drivers of coalition withdrawal—which have solid empirical support—depend crucially on electoral issue salience. Importantly, it helps resolve an apparent empirical puzzle because in some cases, the drivers of coalition withdrawal work significantly better than in others, and accounting for electoral issue salience as a key condition enables more accurate understanding of select cases.

### 3 Definitions and Key Terms

Electoral issue salience is by nature a multifaceted dimension that itself necessitates a conceptual breakdown. A political issue is defined as highly electorally salient if considered of importance to determining a given election outcome. For the issue to be classified as 'important' in this sense, it must either have been a top-five concern among the electorate as a whole or at least of 'influence' to a plurality in deciding their vote, as indicated by pertinent polling data. Additionally, electoral issue salience may be expressed in relative or absolute terms. The former involves a plurality of voters classifying an issue as either of influence or

a top-five concern in their electoral decision, while an outright majority is required for the latter.

The author postulates that policymaker acquiescence to electoral issue salience, or elite responsiveness, characterized the dynamic of withdrawal from the Iraq War Coalition. In this thesis, the Iraq War Coalition is dually referenced as both the Multi-National Force - Iraq and the Coalition of the Willing, the respective military alliances involved in the initial regime change phase (2003) and post-Saddam stabilization/reconstruction period (2003-2011). A recurring theme of foreign policy deference or public acquiescence to elite decision-making acts as something of an inverse to elite responsiveness and is also discussed.

## 4 Methods and Research Design

*Variables.* As alluded to in the prior subsection, electoral issue salience, represented in this case study as anti-Iraq War/pro-withdrawal sentiment, serves as the independent variable. Elite responsiveness, expressed as the elite decision to withdraw from the Iraq War Coalition, serves as the dependent.

*Data Collection.* This thesis employs mixed methods data acquisition, analyzing largely quantitative statistical analysis for anti-Iraq War issue salience and qualitative references for elite coalition withdrawal policy.

- *Anti-Iraq War Electoral Issue Salience:* Analysis of anti-Iraq War issue salience will incorporate a combination of public opinion metrics from a variety of databases and evaluations of the public record on popular sentiment.
- *Elite Responsiveness:* Elite responsiveness via coalition withdrawal policy will examine direct quotations and references regarding official positions of elites, largely extracted from primary source texts such as news articles and government press releases.

*Hypothesis.*

- *Anti-Iraq War Electoral Issue Salience (H1):* Political Elites Were More Likely to Cite High Anti-Iraq War Electoral Issue Salience in their Decision to Withdraw from the Coalition

*Alternative Explanations.*

- *Alliance Dependence (H2):* Political Elites Were More Likely to Cite an Alliance Framework in their Decision to Withdraw from the Coalition
- *Elite Ideology (H3):* Political Elites Were More Likely to Cite Ideological Preferences in their Decision to Withdraw from the Coalition

## 5 Case Selection

Here I evaluate the dynamics of withdrawal pertaining to three democratic member-states from the Iraq War Coalition (2003-2011): Spain, Australia, and the United Kingdom (Carney 2011). The political elites of each were among the coalition's staunchest defenders and most dedicated partners. Each sought to sidestep differing levels of anti-Iraq War public opinion, with varying degrees of success. Each faced some form of electoral backlash for their commitment to coalition participation, though the magnitude of anti-war issue salience ranged between them. Elites in Spain and Australia implemented a coalition withdrawal policy in response to post-hoc electoral pressure, while direct elite responsiveness was significantly reduced for the United Kingdom.

Regarding the alternative explanations, each countries' elite leadership exhibited levels of alliance dependence and ideological motivation for their foreign affairs conduct. The degree to which such variables influenced their respective coalition withdrawal policy (including whether they overshadowed electoral issue salience) will be examined alongside elite responsiveness.

## 6 Analysis

*Aznar, Zapatero, and the 2004 Spanish General Election: Background.* Almost immediately after President George W. Bush announced his intention to form a "Coalition of the Willing" seeking the removal of Saddam Hussein's Ba'athist regime in Iraq (King 2002), Spanish Prime Minister Jose Maria Aznar emerged as among the U.S. commander-in-chief's staunchest allies in the effort. Aznar had actively thrown weight behind American war aims even prior to the Multi-National Force's inception; he was a signatory to a January 2003 statement demanding that "Europe and America Must Stand United" on Iraq (The Irish Times 2003). He and his center-right People's Party government committed what would amount to 1,300 troops to the coalition (Carney 2011), in addition to assembling a 1,200-force miscellaneous contingent from Central America known as the Plus Ultra Brigade.

Madrid's contributions were limited from the start; intense anti-war attitudes within nearly all levels of the Spanish body politic dramatically constrained the prime minister's ability to pursue his ambitious foreign policy agenda (Elmundo.es 2003). General opposition to participation in the Iraq War Coalition reached 91% just prior to the invasion's initiation and was consistently over two-thirds throughout its duration (ibid.), the most measurable anti-war sentiment in all of Europe (Baum and Potter 2015). Protests were frequent and palpable, with a 1.5 million-person crowd in mid-February 2003 serving as Spain's largest political demonstration up to that point (ibid.).

Despite the seemingly politically suicidal nature of Aznar's chosen course with respect to Iraq, his calculus was not entirely unsound. The People's Party had scored a landslide victory in the 2000 Spanish General Election, acquiring one of few absolute parliamentary majorities in Europe (ibid.). This, coupled with the Spanish public's historic foreign policy

deference concerning low-cost military engagements within a diverse multilateral coalition (Arias 2013), made him feel he possessed leeway to buck the trends.

Aznar's approach ultimately backfired in stupendous fashion. The People's Party endured an unprecedented electoral defeat on March 14, 2004, losing 35 seats and the Congress of Deputies to the left-of-center opposition, the Socialist Workers' Party (PSOE) (IFES Election Guide 2016). PSOE Leader Jose Luis Rodriguez Zapatero had capitalized aggressively on dissatisfaction with the government's Iraq policy amongst the Spanish electorate throughout the campaign (Dannenbaum 2011). As newly elected Prime Minister, Zapatero removed Spain entirely from the Multi-National Force by the end of April 2004 (Arias 2013).

*Electoral Issue Salience: Zapatero, Out by April.* Though negative public perception of Iraq War participation amongst the Spanish populace was evident from the onset, the degree to which this translated into anti-war issue salience in the 2004 election requires a more comprehensive data breakdown. A state prohibition on conducting official polling data during the campaign's final week (arguably the most critical period) makes analysis of election-eve developments difficult (Dannenbaum 2011). However, exit polls and quantifiable salience-inducing events serve as effective substitutes.

Measures of anti-Iraq War issue salience indicate an undulating trend over the course of the election cycle. CIS University Madrid's official polling data identified that likely Spanish voters prioritized their concerns surrounding elite Iraq policy as early as February 2003 (same timeframe as the 1.5 million-person demonstration), with 27.5% of survey respondents "deem[ing] the prospective [entry into the Iraq War Coalition] as one of Spain's top three problems" (ibid.). By mid-2003 through early 2004, however, Iraq's issue salience had substantially diminished. 14.8% of survey respondents listed the "war in Iraq" as among Spain's three most pressing problems in April 2003 and only 2.4% in the February 2004 edition of the CIS survey (ibid.). Around this timeframe, the People's Party began to undergo modest reputational recovery, with many commentators predicting the March 14 election in their favor (Torcal and Rico 2004).

By the immediate lead-up to election day, the tables appear to have decisively turned. According to the official April 2004 exit polls conducted by Opina, "41.8 percent said that the [People's Party] government's policy to support the intervention Iraq [sic] influenced their vote," a 37.5% jump from the final poll conducted prior to the mandatory week-long hiatus (Dannenbaum 2011). Within that seven-day span, a development of some kind had breathed new life into anti-Iraq War issue salience.

The elephant in the room has largely been identified as the 2004 Madrid train bombings, often referred to as 11-M, the deadliest terrorist attack in Spanish history and Europe's deadliest since 1988 (ibid.). Considering the attack's timing (just three days before the election) coupled with its perpetrators being al-Qaeda affiliates, the dramatic spike in issue salience as detected by the exit polls serves as a process-tracing smoking gun, though some scholarly disputes persist (ibid.). The best evidence available to justify this proposition

concerns the issue salience intersection of international terrorism and support for Iraq War coalition withdrawal. 64% of respondents in a Real Elcano exit poll expressed the opinion that “the Madrid bombings would not have occurred if Spain had not supported the Iraq War” (ibid.). In short, having reliably established a high degree of anti-Iraq War issue salience in the 2004 election, the subsequent question concerns whether this phenomenon influenced Prime Minister Zapatero’s coalition withdrawal policy.

Available evidence from the public record appears to validate an answer in the affirmative. Zapatero and the PSOE condemned the People’s Party’s Iraq policy throughout both the duration of the campaign and the early weeks of his premiership, publicly emphasizing a strong, sustained, and unambiguous opposition to Spanish participation in the Coalition of the Willing. He embarked upon a mission to ensure the issue’s salience, routinely chastising the Aznar government’s pro-war agenda as “a fiasco” (Al Jazeera 2004), “a disaster” (Russell 2004), and “an error based on lies” (Efron and Wallace 2004) as well as calling for a complete withdrawal of all Spanish forces by June 30 unless a United Nations Security Council resolution formally endorsed the operation (Goodman 2004).

By April 27, 2004, all 1,300 troops (including the entirety of the Plus Ultra Brigade) had been unilaterally withdrawn, making Spain the first major partner to exit the Multi-National Force - Iraq (NBC News 2004). Only a month into Zapatero’s tenure and roughly 10 weeks prior to his initial self-imposed deadline, the prime minister asserted that no Security Council mandate was in sight and participation had proven far too costly (Simons 2004). Evidence that high elite responsiveness to anti-Iraq War issue salience played an enormous role in this decision is considerable. Nearly every public reference Zapatero made regarding his withdrawal policy was qualified by underscoring the priorities of a war-weary Spanish populace. In a local newspaper interview several months after the coalition exit, he stated “that withdrawing the troops from Iraq was a result of the will of the electorate, reflected by 75-80% of the Spanish voting public,” adding “[i]n a democratic country, it is important to respond to the aspirations of the majority, the general feeling of the public and the society” (Arias 2013). The exceedingly rapid and early withdrawal coincided with the release of the Opina exit poll indicating high anti-Iraq War electoral issue salience, the latter of which served to reinforce the former substantially.

*Alliance Dependence: Zapatero Pulls the Plug on U.S.* In addition to testing the power of Spain’s isolationist tradition (ibid.), participation in the Iraq War Coalition sparked domestic debate over the country’s geopolitical realignment. Prime Minister Aznar had been an adherent to the burgeoning position of a Spanish-American alliance pivot, abandoning Madrid’s extensive legacy of European solidarity (ibid.). Zapatero, however, firmly rejected his predecessor’s “Atlanticist” philosophy of taking foreign policy cues from Washington as opposed to Brussels (ibid.). A devoted adherent of traditional European alliance dependence, he routinely emphasized the value of continental autonomy and foreign policy coordination (Powell 2009). “Spain is going to be more pro-Europe than ever” was a pledge he made just days following his election victory (Efron and Wallace 2004). He promptly aligned with fellow anti-Iraq War stalwarts within the European community, namely President Jacques

Chirac of France and Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder of Germany (Powell 2009). However, Zapatero's soft anti-Americanism did not constrain him from actively aligning with Washington's agenda when validated by institutional norms and protocol, as indicated by his strong support for the NATO war effort in Afghanistan (Dannenbaum 2011).

However, evidence that alliance dependence overshadowed or overrode electoral issue salience is scant. None of Zapatero's frank public statements on withdrawal bear any significant mention of strategic reliance on Europe. Additionally, his internationalist outlook considerably matched the predominant views of the Spanish public, thereby actually augmenting the issue salience hypothesis.

*Elite Ideology: The Prime Minister's New Groove (To an Old Beat)?* Zapatero embraced a vision of Spanish liberal internationalism championing humanitarian ideals, transcendent borders, and prioritization of soft over hard power (Powell 2009). Despite his monolingualism, years of political obscurity in the parliamentary backbench, and considerable inexperience/lack of interest in the foreign affairs domain prior to assuming the premiership, the new prime minister had quickly arrived at the center of a seismic globalist pivot in his country's history (Field 2011). Zapatero's internationalist orientation has been characterized as simply a revival of the PSOE line adopted by the party's first post-Franco prime minister, Felipe Gonzalez: commitment to multilateral institutionalism (Powell 2009).

Regardless of Zapatero's precise ideological preferences, their impact on withdrawal from the Iraq War Coalition did not appear to trump electoral issue salience. The interplay between ideology and degree of elite responsiveness was prominent, as his philosophical positions on foreign affairs mirrored much of the public rationale for coalition exit. Additionally, his Iraq policy cannot be fundamentally boiled down to individualist considerations. Many of his personal attributes, namely a political history of avoiding offense, simply did not apply (McLean 2006).

## 7 Howard, Rudd, and the 2007 Australian Federal Election

*Background.* Australian Prime Minister John Howard's policy of Iraq War Coalition entry mirrored that of Spain's Aznar, in many ways representing the latter's ideal model. Apart from Tony Blair's government in the United Kingdom, Howard's Australia was unquestionably the United States' closest international partner during the quest to affect regime change in Iraq. The prime minister had the unparalleled experience of being the only foreign leader to witness the attacks of September 11, 2001, with his own eyes, having been in Washington, D.C., the morning American Airlines Flight 77 struck the Pentagon (Grubel 2011). Observing the ordeal firsthand only hardened his neoconservative internationalist resolve and cemented a firm commitment to Bush's Global War on Terror (Johnston 2007). Australia was among the four countries committing combat forces to the Coalition of the Willing, providing the third largest contingent (*ibid.*). The Australian Army, coupled with the Royal

Navy and Air Force, were supplied as part of what was codenamed Operation Falconer (Carney 2011).

The prime minister's unabashed and unwavering advocacy for Iraq War participation and the Bush Doctrine initially required significant sidestepping of Australian public opinion. According to a Newspoll survey, Australian opposition to military action against Iraq in the absence of a United Nations Security Council resolution reached as high as 76% in the runup to the invasion (Doeser and Eidenfalk 2015). This anti-war fervor took a three-year hiatus, however, beginning with Howard and his Liberal-National coalition's landslide reelection in 2004 (S. Bennett, Newman, and Kopras 2005). Opposition to the government's Iraq policy tamed sufficiently so as to enable a second round of military support, codenamed Operation Catalyst (Parliament of Australia n.d.).

Howard's enjoyment of strong foreign policy deference from the Australian public did not last forever. Liberal-National were soundly defeated in the 2007 Federal Election, shedding 22 seats to the Labour Party Opposition under Kevin Rudd (S. Bennett, Newman, and Kopras 2005). *Electoral Issue Salience: Howard Goes Down Under*. Staunch anti-Iraq War views amongst the Australian population appeared to stage a comeback by 2007, with that year's Lowy poll indicating 57% opposition to 37% support (Lowy Institute 2007). The electoral issue salience of this position also increased dramatically, as demonstrated via a comprehensive breakdown of pertinent political data from the period.

According to the 2007 Australian Election Study (AES), when asked how important the war in Iraq was to them personally as an election issue, the overwhelming majority of respondents ranked the concept highly. 36% classified their position as "extremely important" and 39.2% as "quite important," with only 24.8% answering "not very important" (Bean, McAllister, and Gow 2008). Additionally, when asked which party's position on the war in Iraq came closest to their own, a resounding 43.1% of respondents selected Labour, with Howard's Liberal-National coalition trailing by nearly 20 points (*ibid.*). Of the 44.2% who stated they approved of Prime Minister Howard's handling of the war in Iraq, only 7.6% approved strongly (*ibid.*). Alternatively, of the 55.7% who disapproved, 24.6% did so strongly (*ibid.*). As many as 76% of respondents stated that the Iraq War had not been worth the cost, versus only 24% who expressed otherwise.<sup>1</sup> The aggregate of AES exit polls largely affirm the claim of high anti-Iraq War electoral issue salience.

A variety of explanations exist for the precipitous decline in approval of elite Iraq policy. Failure to achieve key war objectives, namely stabilizing the Middle East and minimizing the proliferation of militant jihadists, likely dampened faith in the efficacy of coalition participation (Council on Foreign Relations n.d.). The most empirically demonstrable cause surrounds lower confidence in Howard's leadership qualities, thereby reducing the propensity for foreign policy deference (Bean, McAllister, and Gow 2008).

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<sup>1</sup>See Judith Anne Betts' *The Battle of the Narratives: Australian Media Agendas and the Iraq War* for an assessment of changing media portrayal's impact on shifting public opinion.

Additionally, the role of Opposition Leader Rudd in amplifying anti-Iraq War issue salience in the runup to the 2007 election cannot be discounted. Such active efforts became a fixture of the campaign, at one point characterizing entry into the conflict as the “greatest single error of Australian national security and foreign policy decision making since Vietnam” (Al Jazeera 2007). He routinely chastised the Howard government’s “no end in sight” approach to coalition participation and called for a “responsible withdrawal” of all Australian combat units by mid-2008 (ibid.).

Upon his victory in the November election, Rudd maintained his commitment to coalition withdrawal. Days before formally assuming the premiership on December 3, he unveiled a concrete plan of action for extracting the remaining 550 combat troops from Iraq by the following year (Guardian staff reporter 2007). This promise was largely fulfilled, with complete pullout of all forces beginning June 1, 2008 (Carney 2011). The final 12 Australian Defense Force operatives were withdrawn on July 28, 2009, three days ahead of schedule (Daily Express 2009). The degree of alignment between his strategic pre-election Iraq promises and subsequent withdrawal policy indicates a high level of elite responsiveness.

*Alliance Dependence: Bush’s Forgiving Mood.* Australia’s extensive geopolitical dependence on the United States cannot be ignored when evaluating the rationale for its Iraq War coalition entry, as well as the dynamics of its exit. Upon ratification of the Australia, New Zealand, United States (ANZUS) Security Treaty in 1951, Canberra obtained an indispensable privilege from Washington: a collective security framework (Australian Treaty Series 1997). Importantly, its non-binding nature and lack of an explicit collective defense clause has served to induce considerable ingratiating diplomacy on Australia’s part, hoping to remain in the United States’ good graces (Henry 2020).

Evidence that this factored into Howard’s calculus regarding entry into Iraq is ample. The Liberal PM repeatedly emphasized the necessity of coalition participation for strengthening the U.S.-Australian alliance. The first mention of his “stay the course” policy took place at a joint press conference with President Bush in 2004, symbolizing Iraq’s significance to enhancing Washington-Canberra ties (White House Archives 2004).

There exists little evidence that Rudd’s impetus for withdrawal was seriously informed nor inhibited by U.S. alliance dependence, however. He presented himself politically as a skeptic of Howard’s deference to the Bush foreign policy agenda, repeatedly chastising the Liberal-National government for basing its “national security policy on one pillar alone—the United States Alliance” (Davidson 2014).

However, the Labour PM was far from a Zapatero-style unilateralist. He actively coordinated Canberra’s staged withdrawal policy with the Americans, resulting in limited backlash on the part of the Bush administration. The president went out of his way to clarify for the record that he was not “mad at the prime minister for fulfilling his campaign pledge” (White House Archives 2008b). Though alliance dependence considerably influenced the nature of Rudd’s exit from the Iraq War Coalition, indicated by his modest degree of collaboration

with the United States, the evidence suggests that it had minimal impact on the *decision* to withdraw itself.

*Elite Ideology: International Rudd.* Much of Rudd's rhetoric surrounding the necessity of leaving Iraq could just as easily have reflected his own personal misgivings with the policy's substance, as opposed to elite responsiveness. Some indications in his political profile and personal background lend credence to this theory. A career diplomat by training, Rudd served as Second Secretary at the Embassy in Beijing during a remarkably tumultuous period for the Eastern Bloc (Weller 2014). The resulting value he placed on the robustness of liberal institutionalism over preemptive militarism (Gyngell 2008), coupled with a belief in the impending shift of the geopolitical center of gravity to the Asia-Pacific (ibid.), may very well have dictated his staunch aversion to Iraq War participation.

A deeper analytical dive largely disputes this contention. Claims that a well-developed internationalist vision shaped his anti-war perspective are undercut by the reality of Rudd's initial support for the Multi-National Force in its early stages (Wright 2007).

## 8 Blair, Brown, and the 2005 U.K. General Election

The U.K. case diverges considerably from Spain and Australia. The United Kingdom never instituted a formal coalition withdrawal policy until after the United States announced the beginning of the Multi-National Force-Iraq's termination in 2008 (White House Archives 2008a). The evidence indicates that a lack of early coalition exit reflected low elite responsiveness despite moderately high anti-Iraq War issue salience in the 2005 General Election. *Background.* From the onset, U.K. Prime Minister Tony Blair emerged as indisputably the most loyal and steadfast international supporter of Bush administration policy in Iraq. The extent of British dedication to the American war effort was demonstrated upon the Multi-National Force's creation. At 46,000 combat troops (Carney 2011), the United Kingdom's Operation Telic represented the second largest contribution to the entire Iraq War Coalition following the United States and a far bigger contingent than any other country (ibid.).

Comparable to Aznar in Spain and Howard in Australia, Blair's decision to enter the Iraq War Coalition required significant sidestepping of public opinion. The final pre-war Ipsos poll showed 63%-26% opposition on the eve of the Iraq invasion's commencement (Ipsos 2003). Despite this, Blair continued to pursue an uncompromising stand in favor of coalition participation, enormously emboldened by his domestic political circumstances. Like Aznar and Howard, he enjoyed a sizable parliamentary majority following a substantial victory in the most recent national elections (the 2001 General Election having been dubbed the "quiet landslide") (BBC News 2010). Yet, Blair departed from the aforementioned cases in that he was serving as leader of a center-left Labour government (Rentoul 2013). As such, the mass of anti-war sentiment arose predominantly from within his own party. 52% of Labour voters reportedly disapproved of invading Iraq in August 2002, while 139 of 410 Labour MPs in the House of Commons voted against formally sending troops on March 18, 2003 (Baum and Potter 2015). Alternatively, the center-right Opposition was supportive of the

prime minister's Iraq policy, with the then-Conservative Party Leader Ian Duncan Smith at one point accusing Blair of not being expeditious enough in preemptively striking Baghdad (ibid.).

The internally partisan nature of resistance to Blair's position on coalition participation made anti-war sentiment seemingly easier to absorb. This mindset undergirded the prime minister's prolonged interventionist tenacity throughout the remainder of his tenure.

*Electoral Issue Salience: Blair without Care.* Public opposition to U.K. participation in the Iraq War Coalition remained potent throughout the runup to the 2005 General Election, with 47% of British respondents viewing the government's decision to use force against Iraq as "wrong" versus 43% who perceived it as "right" (Pew Research Center 2004). Despite this, Blair's government was reelected by a comfortable margin on May 5, 2005 (The Electoral Commission 2006). Labour successfully retained its majority with 355 seats, as opposed to the Conservative Opposition only acquiring 165 (ibid.). This nonetheless constituted a dramatic underperformance for Blair compared to his 2001 and 1997 landslides (The Electoral Commission 2006). Labour shed 48 seats, while Conservatives gained 33 and the third-party Liberal Democrats increased their share by 11 (ibid.).

Blair stood firm in his commitment to coalition participation both during the campaign cycle and in the aftermath of the election. Just three months after the election result, he delivered remarks insisting he would not retreat from Iraq and defending his partnership with President Bush (Al Jazeera 2005).

The prime minister's lack of elite responsiveness to an increasingly war-averse populace coupled with an electoral underperformance begs the question of why. Exit polls incorporated into the British Election Study (BES) indicate dramatically declining approval of continued coalition participation, with 47.8% of respondents rating the policy "badly" compared to a meager 14.2% rating it "well." Such anti-Iraq War sentiment did translate into moderately high relative electoral issue salience, with respondents listing it as their fourth most important issue overall. Opposition to elite Iraq policy was amplified amongst Labour defectors, with the plurality of those surveyed citing the issue as their top reason (MacAskill 2005). This was to the benefit of left-splinter groups like the Liberal Democrats, whose consistent criticism of Blair's entry into the Coalition of the Willing without U.N. authorization enabled them to leech off historically pro-Labour constituencies (i.e., university student and Muslim voters) (Fisher et al. 2005).

A secondary question must, therefore, be asked concerning low elite responsiveness to the moderately high degree of relative anti-Iraq War electoral issue salience established by the data. The answer appears two-fold. The first part reflects a comparable phenomenon facilitating Blair's policy of coalition participation from the beginning: elite consensus. Anti-war constituencies were deprived of a major pro-withdrawal party in the 2005 election, as both Labour and Conservatives were fundamentally supportive of Operation Telic (CNN

2005). Blair's only real liability from standing his ground on Iraq was potentially shedding Labour votes to minor political parties.

The second regards a crucial caveat to the issue salience explanation. According to the BES, opposition to government policy on Iraq was only reported as the number one concern for 5.6% of respondents, a rather minute raw percentage. Although there was high relative anti-war electoral issue salience, absolute salience was rather limited. This indicates that despite being sufficiently high to induce electoral damage for the incumbent party, it was not all-encompassing enough to require imminent elite responsiveness for the sake of political survival.

The prime minister persisted in sustaining coalition participation throughout the duration of his third term (2005-2007). Though he agreed to initiate the evacuation of 1,600 troops in February 2007, he remained resolute on retaining a 5,500-person combat presence (Sturcke 2007). The political costs of his recalcitrance eventually reached a boiling point. With 60% of Labour Party membership expressing discontent with his war policy and upwards of half demanding his resignation, the prime minister announced he would step down by June 2007 (Rawnsley 2010).

Upon his formal exit, he was replaced by his chancellor of the exchequer, Gordon Brown (NPR 2007). A far less enthusiastic champion of coalition participation than his predecessor, Brown unveiled a complete withdrawal plan on December 17, 2008 (Watt 2008). All U.K. forces left by May 2011 (Hopkins 2011).

*Alliance Dependence: The U.S.-U.K. Extra-Special Relationship* Among the most apparent factors in determining the United Kingdom's sustained participation in the Iraq War Coalition was its Special Relationship with the United States. Blair's close coordination with and unwillingness to abandon the United States likely contributed to his insistence on remaining (Arab News 2023). The latter dynamic was even more potent in molding Prime Minister Brown's exit strategy. He notably did not implement a single troop pullout until *after* President Bush's announcement of the first American withdrawal in September 2007 (NBC News 2007) and did not produce his complete withdrawal plan until after the president declared his intention to gradually terminate the Iraq Coalition in its entirety (Watt 2008).

Though the aforementioned evidence indicates that the Special Relationship shaped the nature of Brown's exit, its role in driving Blair's pro-participation stubbornness was moderate at best. The prime minister's good faith partnership with President Bush, in addition to the mass exodus of various other high-profile allies by 2005, would likely have provided him the political cover necessary to justify a gradual pullout plan in a manner comparable to Australia's Rudd (Carney 2011).

*Elite Ideology: Tony Blair's Liberal Flair.* The single most crucial influence on Blair's staunch commitment to sustained Iraq War Coalition participation was his ideological predisposition. The prime minister positioned himself unambiguously as a staunch post-Cold

War liberal internationalist, envisioning a progressive world order bound by Western values of democracy, universal self-determination, humanitarianism, and respect for national sovereignty (Livesey 2021). In a 1999 speech before the Chicago Economic Club, Blair outlined his “Doctrine of the International Community,” a call for liberal nations to collectively organize and ostracize violators of established geopolitical norms (H. Bennett 2014).

Blair had long perceived Saddam Hussein’s Iraq as among the principal threats to this international community (Baum and Potter 2015). He was particularly alarmed by its continued expulsion of U.N. weapons inspectors, fearing its possible intentions to enrich a diverse WMD profile (ibid.). Blair’s government authorized a joint four-day bombing campaign with the United States against Iraq beginning on December 16, 1998; the strategically coordinated targeting of both munitions and bureaucratic centers lent credence to the theory that the two allies were setting the stage for a gradual regime change policy (ibid.). By the time the Bush administration had announced its plans to pursue a military course against Saddam in 2002, the British PM was on the record envisioning an Iraq without him in power (White House Archives 2002). “I will be with you, whatever” represented Blair’s even stronger private endorsement of President Bush’s prospective policy in a July 28, 2002, letter, adding that a multilateral coalition could be assembled and deployed by the following January.

Liberal interventionism was a rampant theme embedded in his pro-war rhetoric. In a March 2004 speech on the subject, he expressed the sentiment that “[the West] should do all we can to spread the values of freedom, democracy, the rule of law, religious tolerance and justice” (Guardian staff 2004). He routinely clarified that his sustained belief in Iraqi regime change reflected a broader dedication to this geopolitical liberalization project, summarizing his view in a 2006 speech that he was “ardently in favour of spreading democracy around the world” (Tempest 2006).

## 9 Discussion and Conclusion

Based on a comprehensive analysis of the available evidence, high anti-Iraq War electoral issue salience likely played an at least moderate role in inducing coalition withdrawal. Hypothesis 1 (H1) was readily affirmed by the first two cases, as Spain and Australia electorally punished a culpable elite in a highly anti-war issue salient political environment and replaced them with non-culpable leadership in favor of exit from the Multi-National Force. The United Kingdom diverged from this conception, as though a culpable elite was electorally punished in a moderately high anti-war issue salient environment, the degree of elite responsiveness remained minimal. The likely explanation for this deviation was that the low proportion of absolute anti-war issue salience, when coupled with elite consensus on Iraq policy, enabled reduced responsiveness. This discovery requires minor qualification of the primary research question, with the ultimate conclusion being that *relative* electoral issue salience did influence political elites to withdraw from the Iraq War Coalition *in the absence of elite consensus*.

All three cases were unified by their general adherence to Croco's model of elite culpability and coalition withdrawal. Spain, Australia, and the United Kingdom implemented an exit policy only under the aegis of a non-culpable leader following the refusal of culpable leadership to do so.

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