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THE AMERICAN PUBLIC ON INTERNATIONAL ISSUES

Study Finds Widespread Misperceptions on Iraq Highly Related to Support for War

Misperceptions Vary Widely Depending on News Source

Fox Viewers More Likely to Misperceive, PBS-NPR Less Likely

For release: 12 Noon, October 2, 2003

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College Park, MD: A new study based on a series of seven nationwide polls conducted from January through September of this year reveals that before and after the Iraq war, a majority of Americans have had significant misperceptions and these are highly related to support for the war with Iraq.

The polling, conducted by the Program on International Policy (PIPA) at the University of Maryland and Knowledge Networks, also reveals that the frequency of these misperceptions varies significantly according to individuals' primary source of news. Those who primarily watch Fox News are significantly more likely to have misperceptions, while those who primarily listen to NPR or watch PBS are significantly less likely.

An in-depth analysis of a series of polls conducted June through September found 48% incorrectly believed that evidence of links between Iraq and al Qaeda have been found, 22% that weapons of mass destruction have been found in Iraq, and 25% that world public opinion favored the US going to war with Iraq. Overall 60% had at least one of these three misperceptions.

Such misperceptions are highly related to support for the war. Among those with none of the misperceptions listed above, only 23% support the war. Among those with one of these misperceptions, 53% support the war, rising to 78% for those who have two of the misperceptions, and to 86% for those with all 3 misperceptions. Steven Kull, director of PIPA, comments, "While we cannot assert that these misperceptions created the support for going to war with Iraq, it does appear likely that support for the war would be substantially lower if fewer members of the public had these misperceptions."

The frequency of Americans' misperceptions varies significantly depending on their source of news. The percentage of respondents who had at least one or more of the three misperceptions listed above is shown below.

	FOX	CBS	ABC	NBC	CNN	Print Sources	NPR/PBS
None of the 3	20%	30%	39%	45%	45%	53%	77%
1 or more misperceptions	80	71	61	55	55	47	23

Variations in misperceptions according to news source cannot simply be explained as a result of differences in the demographics of each audience, because these variations can also be found when comparing the rate of misperceptions within demographic subgroups of each audience.

Another key perception—one that US intelligence agencies regard as unfounded—is that Iraq was directly involved in September 11. Before the war approximately one in five believed this and 13% even said they believed that they had seen conclusive evidence of it. Polled June through September, the percentage saying that Iraq was directly involved in 9/11 continued to be in the 20-25% range, while another 33-36% said they believed that Iraq gave al-Qaeda substantial support. [Note: An August Washington Post poll found that 69% thought it was at least “somewhat likely” that Saddam Hussein was personally involved in 9/11—a different question than the PIPA/KN question that asked respondents to come to a conclusion.]

In the run-up to the war misperceptions were also highly related to support for going to war. In February, among those who believed that Iraq was directly involved in September 11, 58% said they would agree with the President’s decision to go to war without UN approval. Among those who believed that Iraq had given al Qaeda substantial support, but was not involved in September 11, approval dropped to 37%. Among those who believed that a few al Qaeda individuals had contact with Iraqi officials 32% were supportive, while among those who believed that there was no connection at all just 25% felt that way. Polled during the war, among those who incorrectly believed that world public opinion favored going to the war, 81% agreed with the President’s decision to do so, while among those who knew that the world public opinion was opposed only 28% agreed.

While it would seem that misperceptions are derived from a failure to pay attention to the news, in fact, overall, those who pay greater attention to the news are no less likely to have misperceptions. Among those who primarily watch Fox, those who pay more attention are more likely to have misperceptions. Only those who mostly get their news from print media have fewer misperceptions as they pay more attention.

The level of misperceptions varies according to Americans’ political positions. Supporters of President Bush and Republicans are more likely to have misperceptions. However, misperceptions do not appear to only be the result of bias, because a significant number of people who do not have such political positions also have misperceptions.

For the entire study of seven polls the total sample was 9,611 respondents, and for the in-depth analysis for the polls conducted June through September the sample was 3,334 respondents. The polls were fielded by Knowledge Networks using its nationwide panel,

which is randomly selected from the entire adult population and subsequently provided internet access. For more information about this methodology, go to www.knowledgenetworks.com/ganp. Funding for this research was provided by the Rockefeller Brothers Fund and the Ford Foundation.