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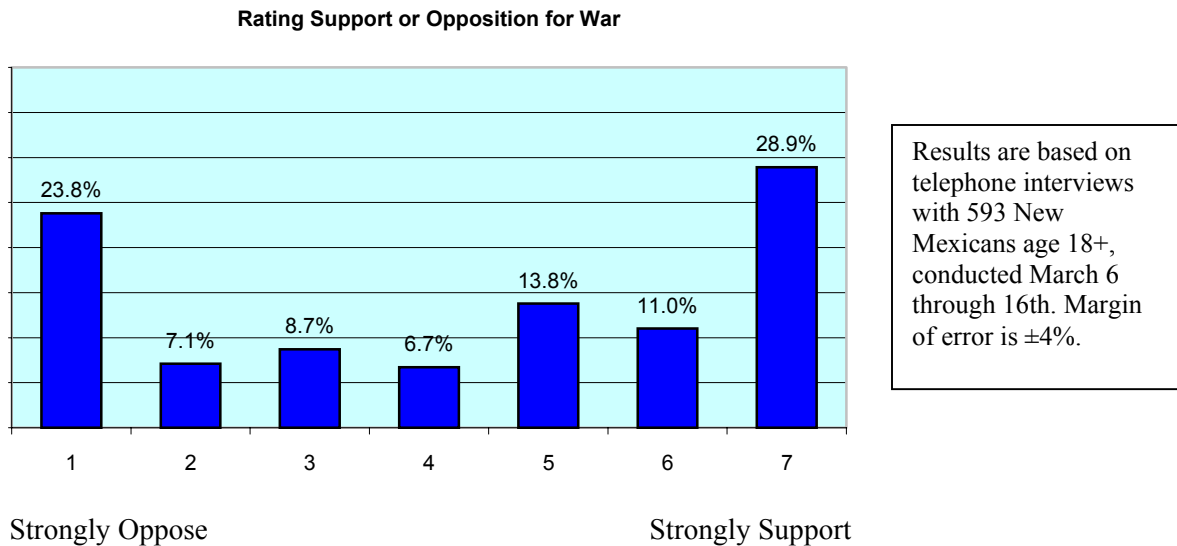
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New Mexicans Divided On Eve Of War

Albuquerque, NM 3/21/03 – New Mexicans’ opinions on war with Iraq were significantly divided on the eve of attack, according to a survey conducted by the Institute for Public Policy at UNM. A telephone survey before President Bush’s 48 hour ultimatum found New Mexicans had similar opinions to the rest of the country at that time: 56% approved of George Bush’s job as president; 40% strongly supported the decision to go to war, 31% were strongly opposed. 29% expressed either limited support or opposition.

A closer look reveals the polarization of these opinions. When asked to rate their support or opposition to war on a seven point scale where 1 was strongest opposition and 7 was strongest support, the most frequently chosen response was 29% for strongest support (7). The second most common response was 24% for strongest opposition (1).



This division within the U.S. population has been seen in many recent polls. To further examine people’s thoughts about conflict with Iraq we asked them to briefly describe the reason (or reasons) for their feelings and recorded their verbatim response. Responses were then placed into one of several categories.

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Among those expressing the strongest opposition, the most common reason expressed, by a nearly two to one margin (20% of all responses), was that there was no justifiable reason for going to war. Other common responses included: those questioning President Bush's motives or abilities (12%); those expressing that alternatives to war had not been sufficiently explored (11%), and those expressing pacifism, or opposition to killing under any circumstance (10%).

Among those expressing the strongest support, common responses included: those expressing that pre-emption was necessary in this case (15%); those expressing that Saddam Hussein is a bad or 'evil' character (14%); those supporting the Bush administration and US troops (12%), and those believing war was justified (12%). The next most common response (11%), either blamed Iraq or linked it to the events of 9/11.

The IPP has surveyed national public views on terrorism and proliferation of weapons of mass destruction for over ten years. We find strong public support for U.S. government responses including even military action.

Public support for diplomatic and economic actions against countries associated with terrorism or weapons of mass destruction has been very high (in the range of 90% support) in our surveys over the past ten years. Since September 11th, we have seen about two-thirds of the public supporting even military actions against countries associated with terrorism. However, nearly 50% of the public places the certainty of the evidence needed to justify military action at 10 on a scale of 0 to 10.

Given the public's general disposition to support actions against terrorism and proliferation, the current division of views on the war is likely a reflection of the limited evidence available to a public.

"In short," according to IPP Director Roger Hagenruber, "the government hasn't made a strong enough case to mobilize really overwhelming latent support."

Historically, public support for leaders tends to increase in times of war or crisis in what has been called a 'Rally round the flag' effect. Will public opinion behave as expected in this 'different kind of war,' or will factors such as casualties, length of war, and evolving evidence only heighten this polarization?

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This study is part of ongoing research on public opinion of national security issues. The Institute for Public Policy is a non-partisan forum for social scientific research and education. The Institute conducts survey research, focus groups and public meetings to help private and public decision makers design policies that are informed by the public's values and concerns.