

what the public really wants on Iraq

by ruy teixeira

March 21, 2008

Fifth Anniversary Edition!

Last week was the fifth anniversary of the U.S. invasion of Iraq. It's a good time to ask: what does the public really want on Iraq? There is considerable confusion about the answer to this question, despite an abundance of public opinion data that suggest the public has a clear and consistent viewpoint on the Iraq situation.

If one tried to infer the public's current views on Iraq from media coverage and especially the pronouncements of conservative politicians and activists, one might conclude that the public's attitudes have gone through some kind of transformation. Before the alleged success of the surge, the public was ready to give up on the war. Now, with the improved situation, they say the public is reluctant to leave and is embracing the possibility of success in Iraq.

Yet as the data below show, this transformation is a myth. The public made up its mind on Iraq quite a while ago, and the surge has had no effect whatsoever on the public's basic verdict on the war. They believe that the war has been a huge mistake and that we should move expeditiously to remove U.S. troops from Iraq and end the conflict.

The Public's Verdict on the Iraq War

Many polling organizations ask questions that tap the public's basic judgment on the Iraq war. The wording of these questions varies, but the story they tell is consistent and clear: The Iraq war, in the public's view, has been a mistake, with the costs of the war far exceeding its benefits. Here are the latest readings on these questions.

- In a mid-March CBS News poll, 64 percent said the war with Iraq was not “worth the loss of American life and other costs of attacking Iraq,” compared to just 29 percent who said it was.
- The mid-March CBS News poll also found that 59 percent think, looking back, that the United States should have stayed out of Iraq rather than taking military action, compared to 36 percent who think the United States did the right thing.

Ruy Teixeira is a joint fellow at The Center for American Progress and The Century Foundation. This feature is published bimonthly at www.tcf.org and www.americanprogress.org.

- In a mid-March CNN poll, two-thirds (66 percent) said they oppose the Iraq war; just 32 percent support it.
- In the same CNN poll, the public, by a 62-36 margin, thought the situation in Iraq was not worth going to war over.
- In an early March ABC/Washington Post poll, the public, by 63-to-34, said that, “considering the costs versus the benefits to the United States,” the war with Iraq was not worth fighting.
- In a late February Gallup poll, 59 percent said, “in view of developments since we first sent our troops to Iraq,” the United States made a mistake in sending troops to Iraq, compared to 39 percent who thought sending troops wasn’t a mistake.
- In a late February Pew poll, 54 percent said the United States had made the “wrong decision in using military force against Iraq,” rather than the right decision (38 percent).
- In a late January NBC News/Wall Street Journal poll, 59 percent said, “removing Saddam Hussein from power” wasn’t worth “the number of U.S. casualties and the financial cost of the war,” compared to 32 percent who thought Saddam’s ousting justified these costs.

A War Worth Fighting?

The public, by **63-34 percent**, said that “considering the costs versus the benefits to the United States,” the war with Iraq was not worth fighting.

March 2008 ABC/Washington Post poll

These results indicate that the public solidly believes that the war was a mistake and not worth its associated costs regardless of question wording. The public has made a judgment on the war, and it is a negative one.

Two points are worth making about the change in these views over time. The first is the enormous shift since the war began five years ago. Take the first question above—the one from the ABC/Washington Post poll about whether the war in Iraq was worth fighting given the associated costs and benefits. Right after the invasion, in late April 2003, the public thought, by 70-to-27, that the war in Iraq was worth

fighting. One year later, in April 2004, those figures were down to 51-to-47. And now, of course, the corresponding figures are 34-to-63, almost a complete reversal of public opinion from the war’s start.

A similar trend can be observed on the Gallup question about whether the war has been a mistake or not. Right after the war started, just 23 percent thought sending troops to Iraq was a mistake. One year later, that figure had almost doubled to 42 percent, and today it is just under 60 percent.

The Surge Has No Effect on Support for the War

In February 2007, **34 percent** thought the war with Iraq was worth fighting; **64 percent** did not.

In March 2008, **34 percent** thought the war with Iraq was worth fighting; **63 percent** did not.

*February 2007 and March 2008
ABC/Washington Post polls*

The second point about change over time is that these negative judgments have been completely unaffected by the surge. That is, whatever the benefits of the surge—and these are highly debatable—the public’s basic verdict on Iraq has not changed since the surge began. They thought the war was a mistake when it started; they still think so today. They thought the war was too costly and not worth fighting when the surge started; they still believe that today.

The rock steady nature of these public judgments can be illustrated with several of the questions cited above. In February 2007, when the troop buildup began, 34 percent of the public thought the war with Iraq was worth fighting, compared to 64 percent who did not (ABC/Washington Post). Today, as referenced above, that figure is an almost identical 34-to-63.

Gallup’s question on whether the war is a mistake or not also has remained strongly negative since the surge began. In February 2007, 56 percent thought the war was a mistake; today that figure is actually slightly *higher* at 59 percent. A CBS/New York Times poll also asked whether the United States should have stayed out of Iraq: 55 percent thought we should have stayed out in February 2007, a figure that is, again, slightly higher today at 58 percent. Or take the NBC/Wall Street Journal question on whether removing Saddam Hussein from power through the Iraq war was worth the casualties and other costs of the war: 57 percent said that this was worth costs in January 2007; a year later, that figure was a little bit higher at 59 percent.

So not only are the public’s negative judgments on the war extremely stable, if anything they are becoming slightly more negative, not more positive.

What Is to Be Done?

What do you do when you’ve made a big mistake and you’re caught in a bad situation? Why, you try to get out of it, of course. And that’s exactly what the public wants to do. Consider these recent data from a wide range of polls. Again, there is a wide variety of question wordings, but a consistent story about what the public wants.

In the mid-March CNN poll, 61 percent wanted to see the next president “remove most U.S. troops in Iraq within a few months of taking office,” rather than keep the same number of troops in Iraq that are currently stationed there (33 percent).

A mid-March CBS News poll also found that 68 percent of respondents said they were willing to have large numbers of U.S. troops in Iraq for either less than a year (46 percent) or

for one to two years (22 percent). Just 20 percent expressed willingness to see large numbers of troops in Iraq for two to five years (14 percent), or longer than five years (6 percent).

An early March NBC/WSJ poll asked the public what the “responsible thing” to do was: withdraw most of the troops from Iraq by the beginning of 2009 or remain in the country until the situation is stable. By a 52-43 margin, the public felt it would be more responsible to withdraw troops by the beginning of 2009.

A late February Gallup poll asked respondents: “If you had to choose, which do you think is better for the United States: to keep a significant number of troops in Iraq until the situation there gets better, even if that takes many years, or to set a timetable for removing troops from Iraq and to stick to that timetable regardless of what is going on in Iraq at the time?” The verdict, by 60-to-35, was that the United States should set a timetable for withdrawal and stick to it. (Of those who supported withdrawal, there was roughly a 70-30 split between those who wanted to withdraw gradually and those who wanted to withdraw as soon as possible.)

A late February Pew poll found that a 49-47 plurality favored bringing “troops home as soon as possible” rather than keeping “military troops in Iraq until the situation stabilizes.” This result is by far the closest of any of the recent results on whether to withdraw troops from Iraq (as has typically been the case with the Pew question in the past, as well). This is probably because the Pew question counterposes keeping troops in Iraq to leaving right away, when most respondents want a gradual rather than sudden withdrawal from Iraq.

In a mid-January *L.A. Times* poll, 63 percent said they want our troops withdrawn either right away (20 percent) or within a year (43 percent), and just 31 percent want troops to stay as long as it takes. Note the contrast with the Pew question, traceable to the middle option that the *L.A. Times* question provides to respondents.

How have these sentiments supporting troop withdrawal been affected by the surge? The short answer is: little to none. Just as we saw with the public’s basic judgment on the Iraq war, the public’s support today for leaving Iraq rather than staying the course is remarkably similar to what it was when the surge started.

Should the United States Withdraw from Iraq?

63 percent want our troops withdrawn either right away (**20 percent**) or within a year (**43 percent**).

31 percent want troops to stay as long as it takes.

January 2008 L.A. Times poll

Surge Has Little Effect on Support for Troop Withdrawal

In April 2007, **59 percent** wanted to set a timetable for withdrawal and stick to it; **38 percent** wanted to keep a significant number of troops in Iraq until the situation got better.

Today, sentiments for withdrawal have actually strengthened slightly to **60-to-35**.

*April 2007 and February 2008 Gallup
polls*

Take the Gallup question cited above. In April, 2007, shortly after the surge began (no data are available for 2007 prior to that date), 59 percent wanted to set a timetable for withdrawal and stick to it, compared to 38 percent who wanted to keep significant numbers of troops in Iraq until the situation gets better. Today, sentiments for withdrawal have actually strengthened slightly to 60-to-35.

In the Pew question, the number wishing to bring the troops home as soon as possible rather than keep troops in Iraq until the situation stabilizes was 53 percent to 42 percent in February 2007. In this question, sentiment for withdrawal has weakened modestly over the past year to 49-to-47. Note, however, that Pew's reading from January 2007 was, at 48-to-46, almost identical to the current reading.

Finally, on the *L.A. Times* question, in January 2007, 65 percent wanted either to withdraw troops right away (19 percent) or begin withdrawing within a year (46 percent), compared with 30 percent who wanted troops

to stay as long as it takes to win the war. One year later, in January 2008, 63 percent wanted our troops withdrawn either right away (20 percent) or within a year (43 percent), and 31 percent wanted troops to stay as long as it takes. These figures are, for all practical purposes, identical.

The conclusion is inescapable: The surge has had very little effect on the American public's support for troop withdrawal from Iraq. The public has wanted, and continues to want, our troops withdrawn from Iraq on some sort of reasonably expeditious timetable. Apologists for the Iraq war may believe that the so-called success of the surge has made the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Iraq unnecessary, but the public clearly does not agree.

Less Pessimistic, But Not Optimistic

It's not that the surge has had no effect on public views of the Iraq situation; it's just that there has been no effect on the most important part of these views: support for the war and preferences on troop withdrawal. As violence has declined in Iraq—considerably down from its peaks in late 2006 and early 2007—the public has become less negative on some specific aspects of the Iraq situation, particularly where military issues are involved. This does not mean they have become generally optimistic about the Iraq situation—that would imply a positive assessment that the public does not hold. But it is certainly true that, depending on what indicators one looks at, the public is less negative and pessimistic than it once was.

Take the question of how well things are going in Iraq. In the late February CBS/New York Times poll, 54 percent thought things in Iraq were going either somewhat badly (30 percent) or very badly (24 percent) for the United States in its efforts to “bring stability and order to Iraq,” compared to 43 percent who thought things were going somewhat well (37 percent) or very well (6 percent). In an early February 2007, the corresponding figures were 72 percent badly and 25 percent well.

The mid-January CNN poll similarly asked how “things are going for the U.S. in Iraq” and recorded a 54 percent badly/46 percent well split. This compares to a 67 percent/39 percent split in March 2007.

Finally, the late February Pew poll asked, “How well is the U.S. military effort going in Iraq”? This received a 48 percent not too well or not at all well/48 percent very or somewhat well split (the more positive result here is probably attributable to the Pew question wording, which focuses on the military effort rather than the overall situation). This compares to Pew’s reading on the same question back in June 2007 where they recorded a 61-34 split.

Closely related to the well/badly questions are better/worse questions, which tend to show more pessimism. In an early March *Newsweek* poll, respondents were asked whether “the situation in Iraq” was getting better, worse, or staying the same. Just 29 percent said the situation was getting better, compared to 68 percent who thought it was either remaining the same (43 percent) or getting worse (25 percent). On the other hand, sentiment was even more negative in August 2007, where the split on the question was 16-to-79.

The late January NBC/Wall Street Journal poll included a question asking whether “the military situation and fighting against U.S. troops in Iraq” has gotten better, worse, or stayed the same in the last six months. The result here was 39 percent better vs. 57 percent the same or worse. The poll also asked a similar question about “the political situation and Iraq’s ability to form a coalition government.” This received a more negative assessment: 29 percent better vs. 66 percent the same or worse.

Several questions have been asked directly about the effects of the surge. A mid-March CBS News poll found 42 percent saying that the surge had made the Iraq situation better, and 47 percent saying it had made things worse (13 percent) or had no effect (34 percent)—up from a 30-65 split last September. The late February Gallup poll had somewhat more negative results: 40 percent of the public thought “the surge of U.S. troops in Iraq” had made the situation better, compared to 58 percent who thought it had not made much difference (38 percent) or made things worse (20 percent). But that’s up from a 22-76 split in July 2007.

Is the Situation in Iraq Getting Better, Worse, or Staying the Same?

29 percent say it is getting better.

43 percent say it is remaining the same.

25 percent say it is getting worse.

March 2008 Newsweek Poll

Has the Surge Made the Situation Better?

40 percent thought “the surge of U.S. troops in Iraq” had made the situation better.

38 percent thought it had not made much difference.

20 percent said it made things worse.

February, 2008 Gallup poll

And, in the January NBC/Wall Street Journal poll, 39 percent of the public thought the surge was helping the situation in Iraq, compared to 57 percent who thought it was making no difference or hurting the situation. The comparable figures from April of 2007 were 24 percent to 70 percent.

Other questions ask about whether the United States is making progress in Iraq. The March ABC/Washington Post poll phrased the question as “making significant progress toward restoring civil order in Iraq.” They found 43 percent saying the United States was making progress, compared to 51 percent saying we were not. Back in early June, that question

elicited a 32-64 split.

Pew asked about “making progress” or “losing ground” (rather than making progress or not, as in the above question) in a number of specific areas. Here are the figures from their February poll on making progress in the different areas: making progress in preventing a civil war (35 percent, up from 18 percent in February 2007); reducing the number of civilian casualties (46 percent, up from 20 percent in February 2007); getting Iraqi political leaders to work together (47 percent, up from 35 percent in September 2007); rebuilding roads, power plants, etc. (47 percent, up from 40 percent in February 2007); establishing democracy in Iraq (49 percent, up from 40 percent in February 2007); defeating the insurgents militarily (49 percent, up from 30 percent in February 2007); preventing terrorists from using Iraq as a base for attacks against the United States and its allies (52 percent, up from 43 percent in February, 2007); and training Iraqi security forces so they can replace U.S. troops (57 percent, up from 51 percent in February 2007).

Finally, consider results from questions that ask, in one way or another, about the ultimate outcome of the Iraq war. Results are mixed depending on how the question is posed. For example, just after the start of the surge last April, the NBC/Wall Street Journal poll showed that only 36 percent of the public believed “victory in Iraq” was still possible and 55 percent believed it wasn’t. Ten months later (February 2008), the same poll still showed only 40 percent believed victory was still possible and 53 percent believed it wasn’t.

The late February Gallup poll asked respondents how “in the long run...history will judge the U.S. invasion and subsequent involvement in Iraq.” Fifty-four percent thought history would judge our involvement as mostly a failure (36 percent) or a total failure (18 percent), compared to 42 percent who thought it would be seen as mostly successful (38 percent) or a total success (4 percent).

The Surge's Effect on Possible Victory in Iraq

In April 2007, **36 percent** of the public believed victory was possible in Iraq; **55 percent** believed it wasn't.

In February 2008, **40 percent** of the public believed victory was possible in Iraq; **53 percent** believed it wasn't.

*April 2007 and February 2008
NBC/WSJ polls*

The most positive readings in this area come from questions posed by Pew and CNN. In the February Pew poll question, respondents were asked whether the United States will “definitely succeed, probably succeed, probably fail, or definitely fail in achieving its goals in Iraq.” This question has historically elicited relatively optimistic assessments from respondents: last February, when the surge started, it was actually net positive (47 percent succeed to 46 percent fail) and the preceding November (2006) it was even more positive at 53 percent succeed/41 percent fail. The latest reading from this February is nearly identical to that November 2006 reading at 53 percent succeed/39 percent fail. Thus, the Pew question shows improvement from the beginning of the surge but, curiously, not from November 2006.

The March CNN question asked respondents whether the United States is certain to win, likely to win, unlikely to win, or certain not to win the war in Iraq. On this question, 57 percent chose certain (27 percent) or likely (30 percent) to win, and 40 percent chose unlikely to win (23 percent) or certain not to win (17 percent).

But in the same poll CNN also asked a direct question about whether right now the United States is actually winning in Iraq: “Who do you think is currently winning the war in Iraq: the United States and its allies, the insurgents in Iraq, or neither side?” Less than a third of respondents (32 percent) said the United States is winning, 5 percent said the insurgents are winning, and 61 percent said neither side is winning. Again, this is less pessimistic than the April 2007 reading of 21-to-15-to-63 percent, but still not terribly optimistic.

Finally, a March CBS News poll asked whether the United States is safer from terrorism as a result of U.S. military action against Iraq. A little over a third (36 percent) said the United States is more safe compared to 62 percent who said we were less safe (24 percent) or it has made no difference (38 percent).

It therefore appears that reports of a tsunami of optimism on Iraq washing over the United States public are considerably exaggerated. In fact, the public remains generally pessimistic and, most importantly, believes the Iraq war has been a tragic mistake and that we should move expeditiously to remove U.S. troops from Iraq and end the conflict. Policymakers and politicians take note.