AN INFORMATIONAL THEORY OF MIDTERM ELECTIONS: THE IMPACT OF IRAQ WAR DEATHS ON THE 2006 ELECTION

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There has been much scholarly attention directed at the Iraq war's role in determining voter choice. I attempt to extend that research into voter turnout to determine what role the Iraq war played in 2006 voter turnout. This paper argues that turnout at the state level could be explained by the number of US deaths each state had sustained from the Iraq occupation at the time of the election. A theory of voter activation based on information availability is put forth to explain the relationship between national events and voter turnout wherein national events like the Iraq war will raise the amount of information voters have at their disposal, which will increase the likelihood of their voting on election day.

Regression analysis comparing the turnout rates of the 50 states to their casualties in Iraq revealed no relationship between the two factors, indicating that something else is responsible for the high turnout of the midterm.
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CHAPTER 1

AN INTRODUCTION

The 2006 midterm represents a prime opportunity to study political information role in voter turnout. Following the 2004 election, the Republican party controlled both houses of Congress and the presidency. This period also saw increased destabilization within Iraq, as US casualties continued to mount with no clear end in sight. Republicans continued to support it and offered no significant alterations to the president’s policies. Then in 2006 voters turnout in droves to punish the Republican party and turn control of both Congressional houses over to the Democrats. Moderate Republicans in marginal districts like Rhode Island’s Lincoln Chaffee, first term Senator and son of longtime Senator John Chaffee, were swept from office due in large part to their support of the Iraq war.

The 2006 election saw record turnout rates across the country for a midterm race. According to the Federal Elections Committee, over 80 million people voted in 2006, 43% of the voting age population. The last midterm election to have turnout over 40% was 1970, with 1982 coming close with barely 40%. Following that there was a two decade long period where voter turnout stayed around 35%, as show in Figure 1-1, settling at around 36% for most of the 80’s and 90’s. Voter turnout in the 2006 midterm election was the highest seen since the 1960s, with national turnout levels reaching 45% of the voter eligible population. Prior to 2006, midterm turnout rates had held steady at around 35% of eligible voters.
The number of voters who came out on election day is striking both for giving control of both houses of Congress to the Democrats and in reversing a decade long trend of minimal voter participation. In studying the results of the 2006 midterm, Cohen (2007) and Kriner and Shen (2007) found that Republican senators were more likely to be voted out of office in 2006 if more US soldiers from their states were killed in Iraq. Using data from SurveyUSA, Cohen analyzed the 2006 midterm with controls for the partisanship of the state as measured by the distribution of partisan and ideological identifiers throughout the state, Bush’s approval ratings, the presence of an incumbent candidate in the race, economic factors and the size of the state. Cohen includes a variable for the per-capita number of Iraq War deaths from the states, theorizing that as deaths increase voters will become dissatisfied with Republican candidates, who will
then see their election returns diminish. The statistical analysis found that the presence of a Democrat incumbent, unemployment, battle deaths, the population measures and the percentage of Republican identifiers in the state all had statistically significant effects on the Senate races. The Iraq War deaths variable also have a demonstrable impact on Senate votes. Cohen found that for every additional death per 100,000 lessens the Republican vote by 14 points (Cohen 2007 551-555).

Kriner and Shen (2007) expanded on Cohen’s findings by investigating the change in voter share at the county level for the Republican Senate incumbents from 2000 to 2006, and by analyzing the electoral results for the 14 incumbent Republican senators ran for re-election. Their analysis was structured in three tiers: the effect of Iraq casualties on all senatorial election results at the state level, the same at the county level, and the third focused exclusively on the county level returns for the 14 Republican incumbents seeking reelection in 2006. The change in Republican senatorial votes was modeled as a function of state-level casualties and other control variables, including the economic health of the nation, the popularity of the president, the amount of campaign spending and the quality of the challenger in the election. They found that the voting population was highly casualty sensitive, even in counties that had sustained no casualties in the Iraq War.

Cohen (2007) and Kriner and Shen (2007) found that, once other factors like the economy were controlled for, Iraq War deaths had a clear impact completely separate from Bush’s popularity with voters. These findings showed that there was a voter referendum on the Iraq War, though as Cohen discusses in his conclusion the mechanism is indirect. Senators are viewed as national policy makers, and are thus
held accountable for the local impact of national policies. Republican Senators who supported Bush’s foreign policy were left to face voter anger when those policies proved unpopular with the voting public.

While the above research has attempted to demonstrate a relationship between the Iraq war and voter choice in the booth, they did not provide any indication of how the war affected the raw voter turnout. The 2006 election offered voters a situation where the dominant issue of the day provided voters with a binary distinction: Republicans had been in charge of prosecuting the occupation in Iraq and had seen the situation deteriorate. Researchers are presented with an election whose major issue had clear proponents and responsible actors. This helps to reduce the complexity of assigning blame to public policy we would usually find when researching voters appraisal of political actions. I theorize the voter turnout in 2006 with US casualties in Iraq to demonstrate such a connection.

As shown in Figure 1-1, voter turnout in the 2006 midterm election was the highest seen since the 1960s, with national turnout levels reaching 45% of the voter eligible population. Prior to 2006, midterm turnout rates had held steady at around 35% of eligible voters. What cause the sudden surge in voter turnout? I argue that when one national issue dominates an election, that election will have higher turnout. This is because dominant national conditions can become so pervasive that they will lower the cost of gathering information for voters. This makes voting less costly an action, which will increase turnout. I argue that Iraq war does this in 2006, and led to the high turnout we saw. This is because the Iraq war received constant coverage by the news media in both the lead up to the conflict and the rebuilding efforts following the US victory.
However, the impact of the Iraq war is not uniform across the United States because casualty rates vary from state to state. I argue that the states that have been hit hardest by the Iraq war will have higher numbers of disgruntled voters, who are more likely to vote during the election to demonstrate their frustration at the state of affairs. Therefore states with higher number of Iraq deaths will have a higher turnout rate than states with lower Iraq deaths, once statistical controls are put into place for population.

During an election season voters are presented with a choice: to vote or not to vote. After they chose to vote they still have to decide who they will vote for, but that question is outside the scope of this project. I am only concerned with why they chose to vote. The factors that effect that decision will be covered in the next chapter when I review the state of the literature, but in general more educated, urban citizens are more likely to turn out than rural, uneducated voters. Campaigns are able to influence citizens to turnout at the margins, by reaching out to those non-habitual voters who require more coercion to go to the polls. The common thread through these determinants of voting is information. Educated citizens have a greater baseline of knowledge about politics to draw from when making their decision. Voters in large cities are more easily contacted by campaigns because they are clustered together, meaning they are exposed to a greater amount of political campaigning. Campaigns are able to increase voter information through their contacting operations and staging of campaign events. All of these examples leave these hypothetical voters with more information and awareness of the political environment.

This paper attempts to fill the gap in the literature regarding voter turnout by applying Cohen (2007) and Kriner and Shen’s (2007) research dealing with the impact
of Iraq War deaths on voter choice in 2006 to states turnout rates. Cohen (2007) and Kriner and Shen (2007) show that Republican candidates in states that had a higher number of casualties in the Iraq war did worse in the electoral totals than Republicans in states with lower Iraq casualties. I theorize that 2006’s high turnout is the result of the increasing numbers of Iraq war deaths within a state changing the informational environment of the electorate. If the Iraq war is responsible for the increase in turnout, then when the war is concluded in the future we would expect turnout rates to return to their previous levels. If the war is not responsible for the increased turnout, then we must look elsewhere for an explanation of the high turnout. For the purposes of this paper the decision to vote or abstain is based on the amount of information available to the voter during the campaign period. Using Downs’ (1957) rational voter concept as a basis, I theorize that voters who do not regularly vote in midterms are choosing to not do so based on the cost of information gathering. Midterm elections are frequently low information events, as there is no national race to increase the availability of political information. Voters who lack the information needed to make an informed vote will most likely abstain from the election, either through choice or by not being aware of the election at all. My argument in this paper is that the Iraq War became a national issue that achieved widespread attention such that it increased the available political information because of the high number of US deaths in Iraq. These deaths, and the continuous coverage by the news media, will lower the cost of information for those potential voters who, for whatever reason, do not seek it out.

This research is important in that it provides a way in which scholars may track the impact of political policies on the electorate. In combining empirical research (Cohen
2007; Kriner and Shen 2007) with the theoretical insights of information gathering experiments (Lassen 2005; Gimpel, Dyek and Shaw 2004) I aim to provide a theoretical explanation for how voters may be activated by a national issue. Further, by investigating the effect of the Iraq war I hope to provide some evidence as to the nature of the increased turnout we saw in 2006. Is the high turnout levels a reaction to the US occupation and the resultant US casualties, or are we seeing something else occurring with voter turnout? If the source of the surge in turnout is the Iraq War, will we see a return to previous levels when we remove our troops from the country? If it is not Iraq, then we are still faced with an increase in turnout without explanation.

If my expectations are upheld, the implications would be that the high turnout in 2006 is a one time fluke tied to the specific factors of that election. We would then expect that once the US involvement in Iraq is concluded turnout levels would return to their historic levels. If I find no impact on turnout from the Iraq war, then the high turnout levels are not contingent on election specific forces, and we may be looking at a change in the historic voter turnout trends. If that is the case, then we must direct future research towards determining what is making more people decide to vote.

This thesis is organized along the following schema: Chapter 2 summarizes the literature on midterm elections and voter turnout out of which I synthesize my theory. I argue that the turnout for a given election is dependent upon the available political information during the campaign, which is influenced by the candidates, the media coverage, the demographics of the populace in question, and the impact of political policies upon the state. In Chapter 3 I will build my theoretical model for how the Iraq War affected turnout rates. It is based on voter’s reaction to the increases in easily
available information during an election season. I argue that an increase in Iraq war
deaths for a given state increases the political awareness of the population through both
media coverage and personal connections. I will tie this theory with research on voter
activation research as an explanation for the 2006 turnout levels. Chapter 4 will discuss
the research methods used to test the hypothesis developed in the theory section and
explain the results found. The final chapter will be a more in-depth discussion of the
implications of the results, with some suggestions as to how future research could
proceed.
CHAPTER 2
PREVIOUS RESEARCH

In order to better understand the meaning and potential impact of the 2006 midterm turnout figures, I present the following overview of the literature to date concerning voter choice theory and midterm election literature. I discuss both voter turnout and voter choice, as the two areas have a high degree of overlap between the two. One does not decide to vote without at least some idea of who to vote for, at least for the highest offices on the ballot. In doing so I hope to illustrate the scholastic background I will be drawing upon for this paper. I also include some research on voter choice, as the bulk of research on midterm elections has focused on that topic, and can provide context for voter behavior necessary for understanding turnout. These studies are included because my research attempts to explain why the Republican party lost seats in 2006, and I want to include alternative explanations for midterm loss in my review of the literature.

Finally, having presented an overview of the general findings of the field, I summarize the general state of the literature and the gaps I see within, place my research within that larger context, and provide some framework with which to view my research. These different approaches to voter turnout are addressed in detail below.

Aggregate Theoretical Explanations

This literature review is divided into two sections of research, aggregate theories for voter turnout and research into marginal influences on turnout that can explain variance between elections. Aggregate theories of voter turnout derive from work
started in the 60’s and 70’s that attempted to create theoretical frameworks that explain why turnout declines from presidential elections to midterms. Political scientists came up with a number of explanations, ranging from the effect of the economy on voter turnout and choice, voter mobilization by national and local campaigns, to voter reaction to previous election results. I will deal with this research in the first section, outlining the competing explanations for midterm turnout decline and the presidential midterm loss in detail.

Surge and decline. Scholarship on midterm elections has produced several theoretical models of midterm elections that attempt to explain the dynamics of midterm elections. The most prominent explanation has been that there is a surge and decline in voter turnout between presidential and midterm elections. This theory originated with Hinckley (1967) and Campbell et al. (1966) research into the party of the president loses congressional seats in the following midterm election. The theory is based on the idea that there is a electoral mean for the partisan composition of Congress. With this as the underlining assumption, surge and decline theory argues that presidential races activate voters who are not strongly involved in politics through the increased media attention generated by the election, the nationwide campaign efforts of both candidates, and the importance of the office itself. This increase in voter turnout caused by the presidential elections artificially increases the congressional victor’s margin of victory.

Campbell et al. (1966) and James Campbell (1985, 1991, 1997) argue this increase in support for congressional candidates comes from straight ticket voting by less politically sophisticated voters. They argue that citizens who do not pay attention to politics are less likely to know anything about down ticket races, but will vote for them
anyway because they have already shown up to vote in the presidential race. As a result, they will use information shortcuts like straight ticket voting for the party of their presidential candidate. In off year elections candidates voting shares return to their equilibrium point because the occasional voters who were activated by the presidential election stayed home. As a result voter turnout will be lower than the previous presidential election. This decline in turnout results in congressional candidates than won by thin margins to be more likely to lose, as they will be missing a key part of the voting coalition that got them into office two years previous.

Surge and decline theory provides an extremely useful conceptual framework for understanding midterm elections, but it does have some weaknesses that limit its usefulness. It’s predictive power is limited to the central claim that members of the president’s party will be more likely to loss in the following election, but it offers no way to predict which members will be more vulnerable than others. It also offers no insight into variance in the size of midterm loss. The Democrats’ midterm loss in 1994 was sizeable, much more so than the Republican’s losses in the 1990 midterm. Surge and decline theory is unable to explain this, which is a major failing of the theory. In order to explain this variance we will have to look elsewhere.

Economic impact. Other research into voter behavior and midterm elections has focused on retrospective voting. First posited by Tufte (1975, 1978), the theory puts forth that midterms are a referendum on the state of the nation and the first two years of the sitting president’s time in office. Retrospective voting is based on two assumptions, that voters will use the midterm election as a way to express frustration with the sitting president, and that voters will respond to pre-election shifts in the economy. The
The president's role in midterm elections is based on the theory that, because Congress is a decentralized body where blame and credit are difficult to assign, voters' assessments of the two parties' performances are likely to rest on their evaluations of the president. The economy works in much the same way, with Congressional incumbents being rewarded or punished for the state of the economy as an expression of voter satisfaction with the president's handling of the economy. Tufte (1975, 1978) analyzed survey data from the Gallup polling agency to determine how voter evaluation of those two topics affected midterm loss for every midterm from 1938 to 1970. He found that midterm elections where the president had low approval ratings and the economy was perceived as doing poorly led to heavy losses for the president's party. While both evaluations proved significant to midterm loss, the economy had the greater impact on voters' evaluation and midterm loss. Voters chose to reward or punish their representatives based upon their retrospective evaluation of the state of the economy. Depending on the partisan makeup of Congress at the time of the election, this can shape the magnitude of the midterm loss by the president's party.

Later research developed along two distinct theoretical strands: voters make political choices based on their own economic well being, sometimes referred to as the pocketbook hypothesis (Kramer 1983, Rosenstone 1982) and voters react based on the economic health of the nation, the sociotropic hypothesis (Kinder and Kiewiet 1981). Kramer (1983), Rosenstone (1982) and other scholars who put forth the pocketbook hypothesis claim that voters are most influenced by their own economic standing when they decide whether and how to vote on election day. When voters' personal financial situation is good, they will vote for the president's party as a reward for their economic
prosperity. When their economic standing is shakier, they will punish the president’s party. Sociotropic voting takes the opposite approach, where voters consider the larger economic state of the country when making their decisions whether to and how to vote. It assumes voters will pursue enlightened self-interest when evaluating economic conditions. If the country is in economically prosperous times, even if the specific individuals are poor they will reward the president’s party, in part because they think they will be able to benefit from the prosperity. Conversely in times of recession they will punish the incumbent party even if they are still prosperous, because they are concerned the recession will eventually impact their lives. (Kinder and Kiewiet 1981)

Debate within the field has bounced back and forth between proponents of either approach, with new research offering a new statistical approach with which to validate one side or the other. Recent scholarship has attempted to breach this impasse by attempting to create a merging of the two approaches, arguing that the degree of sophistication on the part of the voter will dictate whether they use pocketbook or sociotropic evaluations in their decision to vote. Gomez and Wilson (2003) insight was that voters are not a monolithic voting group, that people have different levels of political sophistication and that those different levels will manifest themselves in different voting strategies. They argue that politically sophisticated voters will have the necessary amount of political referents to divide credit or blame between a variety of sources, allowing them to include Congress in their judgments of economic circumstances. Less sophisticated voters will lack the necessary knowledge to make this distinction, and will focus their assessments on the most visible political actor, the president. As a result economic concerns will not play a part in their decision of who to vote for in
congressional elections. Thus Gomez and Wilson (2003) claim that economic considerations will only factor into congressional elections amongst politically sophisticated voters. They tested their theory using the 1998 midterm election, choosing a midterm to avoid contamination from a presidential campaign for fears that less sophisticated voters would bias their attribution responses due to the campaign efforts of the presidential candidates. Using survey data from the National Election Survey and logit analysis, Gomez and Wilson (2003) were able to demonstrate support for their theory. Political sophistication dramatically increases the likelihood that respondents will credit Congress, both Congress and the president, or neither with credit, rather than assigning credit solely to the president. Despite their results, critics like Godbout and Belaner (2007) have argued they were unable to replicate Gomez and Wilson’s results if the dependent variable is changed to the postelectoral reported vote. Their results indicate that highly sophisticated voters continue to use sociotropic evaluations in their voting decisions, but only in incumbent elections, and that there is important variance in economic voting effects among low sophisticates.

**Voter reaction.** Scholars have also looked to voters’ interpretation of the previous election results to understand the role voter appraisal plays in midterm election outcomes. Scheve and Tomz (1999) argue that the degree of surprise felt by the electorate at the results of a presidential election is inversely related to the amount of midterm loss faced by the president in two years. The less surprised an electorate is at the results of a presidential election, the higher the probability they will support candidates belonging to the president’s party and vice versa. An important difference between Scheve and Tomz’s study to those already mentioned is that Scheve and
Tomz build their study around individual voter reaction to national elections. Using NES survey data, the pair operationalize electoral surprise based on respondents answer to the questions “Who do you think will be elected president in November?” and “Do you think the election will be close?”

Their results support the theoretical expectations, with moderate voters who are surprised by presidential election results being more likely to vote against the president’s party in the midterm election. I should note that while their results are compelling and methodologically sound, the theoretical background is flawed. Scheve and Tomz model their study on the idea that all median voters are strategic in their voting and seek to maintain split governance. This assumption needs to be established as actually occurring before it can be used as the basis for further study, and undermines some of Scheve and Tomz’s work as a result.

Exposed seats. Oppenheimer, Stimson and Waterman (1986) theorize that the actual number of seat changes in a congressional election may be explained by the number of seats a party has prior to an election. They find that the more seats a party has going into an election the more likely it is for that party to lose seats, as it is more difficult for that party to hold onto all of those seats at once. A party with few seats in the House can only gain in an election, while a party with a larger number of seats is more likely to lose them due to the difficulties of maintaining diffuse voting coalitions with limited campaign resources.

Oppenheimer, Stimson and Waterman (1986) regress all elections from 1938 to 1984 using the above model, finding the exposure variable to be highly significant, and that any seat won in excess of the equilibrium will be lost in the next. This finding is
problematic in light of the findings of incumbency literature, which states gains in one
election will lead to greater election advantages in the next campaign. The most likely
reading is that races that were close in the previous election will be close in the current
election, as huge shifts in the population demographics are unlikely. Thus, even with
incumbent advantages, politicians who won by close margins are likely to remain
vulnerable from in each election cycle, and more likely to loss than incumbents with high
margins of victory.

Individual Level Influences

In broad strokes aggregate theories seek to explain how turnout in elections is
more similar than dissimilar. Put in statistical terms, macro theories can explain the
location of the mean turnout levels during a midterm, but they cannot explain variability
around that mean. Research into the individual level influences allows us to explain that
variance between election turnout rates, understand the different mechanisms through
which the aggregate theories operate on the individual level, and give us insight into the
behavior of politicians seeking public office. This is the area of scholarship to which this
study will make its contribution.

Education. Scholastic literature on voter turnout has found that the level of
education voters possesses has a direct relationship with their decision to vote.
Education increases people’s political awareness and provides them with more tools
with which to gain information about political issues. (Jacobson 2004, Rosenstone and
both regress data from the Roper Survey using a longitudinal analysis to chart the
month-to-month changes in political involvement from late 1973 to the end of 1990. Both found that as the level of education of the respondent increased, so to does the likelihood of the respondent voting in an election.

Wattenberg (2002) agrees with Jacobson (2004) and Rosenstone and Hansen (2003) on the impact of education on voting, but he provides a different explanation for how education impacts voting habits. Wattenberg (2002) theorizes that the decline in voter turnout that started in the 70’s is most pronounced in the least educated members of the voting population. To back up his claims Wattenberg provides figures from the US Census Bureau to demonstrate that educated individuals have the same likelihood to vote as older voter with less education. Put another way, a thirty year old voter with a college degree is just as likely to vote as a fifty year old with just a high school diploma. Wattenberg (2002) argues that education acts as a stand in for life experiences. Education provides voters with the insight to realize the benefits of voting that otherwise take the accumulation of experience to understand.

Structural effects. Most contemporary research has accepted that voter turnout in midterms will be lower than presidential races. Scholars have focused on how individual candidates affect the margins of victory in different campaign seasons. Campbell and Sumners (1990) and Cohen, Krassa and Hamman (1991) provide evidence of national political actors effecting Senate elections. They look at Senate races and discover that presidential visits during the campaign can increase voter turnout for Senate candidates. The increase in voter support is marginal, and will only have an impact on election outcomes in close Senate races. Similar results are present by Jackson (2002), who finds that statewide elections, specifically senate and governor
races, have a significant effect in activating voters during midterm elections. The more hotly contested and well financed a campaign is, the more likely an increase in voter turnout will result. This effect is swallowed up in on year elections, as presidential campaigns will turn on any citizens who can be activated.

Turnout is not uniform throughout the US, or even within one state. Research into how geographic location affects the turnout rates has provided some insights into how where voters are located impacts the types of information they are exposed to and the voting habits that result. Gimpel, Dyck and Shaw (2004) present the case that the geographic location and demographic of a given district will influence the demographic makeup of the electorate. Their theory is based around the notion that the context of a neighborhood may influence turnout by limiting the acquisition of information otherwise available to resource rich voters. They specify this sort of information as socialized and localized information. This includes voters who have different political preferences to their neighbors avoiding political discussions as a means of avoiding conflict. To test the neighborhood effect Gimpel, Dyck and Shaw (2004) use the 2000 US Census to provide block level information and analyze the turnout demographics of 16 counties from Florida, Iowa, New Mexico and Pennsylvania. These states were chosen because they were considered key locations in the battleground states in the 2000 election. The results show that partisans who are surrounded by voters for the other party are less likely to vote, though Democrats differed from Republicans in how they were affected by the neighborhood demographics. Republicans are less likely to vote when they are surrounded by Democrats, while Democrat turnout is not affected at all by Republican dominance. More broadly Gimpel Dyck and Shaw demonstrate that the area voters
find themselves in will have a marked impact on the type of information they receive regarding political events and policies, which in turn will influence how and whether they vote in elections.

Their regression work was corroborated with experimental research from an experiment in municipal governance in the Netherlands. Lassen (2005) investigated neighborhood effects and the decision to vote through a pilot point experiment conducted in Copenhagen, Denmark. In 1996 the municipality attempted a decentralization experiment with the city administration. The authors divided the city into fifteen city districts, with four districts chosen to be representative of the city. These four districts were classified as pilot city districts (PCD) and introduced local administration for a four year term, complete with a city district council. The election for council members was characterized with low turnout, and at the end of the four year period the municipality held a referendum to determine whether the decentralization should continue. Lassen uses data from a telephone survey of the voters that was commissioned by the four PCDs as a way of analyzing the voting patterns in the referendum. He found that voters how lived in the PCDs were more likely to vote than those who lived in the normal city districts, indicating that something about the neighborhoods that were compiled into the PCDs helped improve turnout. Lassen (2005) was able to provide a concrete example of neighborhood effects, and demonstrates a secondary effect where those voters who were informed were also more likely to vote.

Income. Another area of research has delved into how increases in income affect the likelihood of voting. Cross sectional studies have found a positive association
between income and voting. There have been a number of explanations for why this relationship exists. First, they have greater access to political candidates in the form of direct mailing contacts, political events, and most importantly they are more likely to move in the same social circles. Secondly they are more likely to be targeted by the campaign for mobilization. This will increase their likelihood of voting by informing them of the campaigns existence and reminding them of their civic responsibility. In addition they are more likely to be contacted by campaigns because the campaign staff knows where they will be, at their jobs, and what sort of issues they will care about, those related to their jobs (Rosenstone and Hansen 2003, Filer, Kenny, and Morton 1993, Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980).

Partisanship. Scholarship has wrestled with the role of partisanship in electoral turnout in a number of ways. Research has argued that voters who identify themselves as partisan tend to have more political knowledge than those that are non partisans, and this knowledge makes them more likely to vote in elections than non partisans (Jacobson 2004, Campbell, Converse, Miller and Stokes 1960). Beyond their political knowledge, voters who identify as strong partisans are more likely to be contacted by political campaigns. Campaigns have limited resources with which to mobilize supporters, and so must choose strategically who they contact. Contacting independents and non partisans is dangerous for political campaigns, as they do not know how those people will vote, and could easily be mobilizing voters who will support their opponent. This causes partisans to receive a greater share of attention from political campaigns than non partisans. (Jacobson 2004, Holbrook and McClurg 2005)
And as mentioned above, contact from political campaigns increases the chances of turnout on the part of the voters in question.

There are other interpretations of how partisanship impacts voter turnout. In contrast to the idea of partisanship increasing voter turnout, Wattenberg (2002) posits the decline in traditional party id and the loss of party machines through which candidates would organize voters is responsible for the lowered turnout rates from the 1960’s. Wattenberg observes that the states that had the highest decline in turnout rates over the last few decades were those states that had strong party organizations that worked to get their supporters out to the polls on election day for both presidential and midterm elections.

At the turn of the century party organizations were responsible for providing potential voters with information about the candidates to use in the voting booth. Here partisanship is important in an organizational/party sense, where the individual ideology of a voter is less important than the larger party organization that individual belongs to. Party members would vote based on information received from the party leaders. With the advent of television these grassroots political organization were significantly weakened such that they were no longer able to drive voter turnout. Before the advent of television, voters were dependent upon local precinct captains and grassroots organizing to bring the campaign to them. Television changed the way voters gained information, eliminating the personal contact with the campaign (Wattenberg 2002). With the decline and homogenization of party institutions these mobilizing forces have fallen by the wayside, causing voters to seek out political information on their own, which has resulted in more people deciding to either chose not to vote or forget about
the election entirely. In presidential elections this loss of voter mobilization is negligible due to the other mobilization forces present. As midterm elections are lower information events than presidential races, the decline of the mobilizing abilities of party organizations are more pronounced.

Summation

Taken in total we see the following pictures presented by the literature. We see in the broad midterm election literature different attempts to understand why the presidents’ party usually losses control of Congress at the midterm. Most of these studies have focused on systemic explanations for midterm loss. These include midterm loss as a function of too many races for the party to adequately fund, voter reaction to the economy, and voter surprise at the presidential election results. The most important for my paper is Campbell’s decline in voter turnout in midterm elections.

The baseline of voter turnout is influenced by the education and income levels of individuals, the degree of partisanship they exhibit, and their geographic location. Certain actions can lead to an increase in voter turnout, such as the amount of campaign money spent on a race and the degree of competitiveness of the election under consideration. The first group of explanatory factors is demographic in nature, and describes the sort of individual who is more likely to vote in any given situation. The second deals with the informational environment voters operate in during an election. The literature argues there exists that presidential elections and midterm elections are asymmetrical in the amount of information available to voters. Presidential races generate nationwide attention, while the level of information available to a voter
during a midterm election will fluctuate depending on the state. The literature does not address how changes in the amount of information voters possess in different elections is reflected in the final turnout figures. This raises the question of whether increases in the informational environment that are not directed by campaigns will lead to a similar increase in turnout that is not directed by any specific political actor.

Campbell’s surge and decline theory is based on the assumption that in presidential races voters will have easy access to information and will be more highly mobilized as a result. Since his theory is aimed at explaining the decline of voter turnout from a presidential race to the following midterm, it is not specified enough to give any indication for why midterm turnout may vary. This paper will attempt to deal with that question by focusing on the effect of the Iraq war on voter turnout in the 2006 midterm election. I am not arguing that surge and decline must be rejected as an explanation for why the decline from 2004 to 2006 was so slight. In order to understand this situation, I argue we must look at other possible explanations along the margins of 2006’s electorate, which I will expound upon more in the next chapter.
The literature I reviewed in the previous chapter provides the foundation from which I will build a theoretical explanation for the role national events can play in influencing turnout levels. I will first outline my theory by discussing why information lowers the cost of voting and how a national event can do so. From there I will derive four hypotheses that are testable manifestations of the logic of my theory that will be tested statistically.

Information Impact on Voter Turnout

Anthony Downs (1957) argued that voting is an irrational action for individuals who seek to maximize their utility. Rational voters will seek to expend the least amount of resources possible when making a voting decision. The returns an individual can expect to see from his or her vote are very low, making voting a high cost/low return activity. The likelihood of one vote determining an election is slim, and the costs associated with voting are considerable. Further, voters lack the necessary knowledge to make sense of the political process with which to assign blame or credit to their candidates. Even if the physical costs of voting and the minimal utility their vote grants them were mitigated, the lack of political knowledge leaves voters with little ability to distinguish between potential candidates, increasing the incentive to stay at home on election day. Downs’ argues this is the reason over half the country chooses not to vote. A voter must gather information about the different candidates’ policy positions,
be able to understand the implications of the candidates’ positions, and accept the opportunity cost of going to a polling location and waiting in line. Voters are faced with uncertainty regarding their voting decisions, which cause them to look for any source of information to help ease that uncertainty.

Voters who decide not to go to the polls during an election, Downs (1957) argues, chose to do so because the high cost of making an informed voting decision exceeded whatever personal incentives they had to vote. Voters are also aware that even if they do not vote, other people will vote during an election. This allows potential voters to choose to free ride, avoiding the costs of voting while gaining the benefits associated with it (Olson 1965). As mentioned in the preceding chapter, midterm elections are lower information elections than presidential races. This means that potential voters who would be mobilized during a presidential race do not have access to that information in a midterm. In presidential elections the attention focused on the presidential candidates creates a baseline of information for voters across the country. Most of the population is aware of the existence of the campaign season. Part time voters will turnout to vote for the president, and while they are in the voting booth will vote in other elections. This does not happen in midterms. Downs’ (1957) rational voter utility maximizing theory argues that a large proportion of the country does not vote because the cost of gathering information is too high during midterms, implying that if the costs associated with voting are changed or lowered for the voter, they would be more likely to vote. There will still be some people who chose to free ride, but their number should decrease with lowered informational costs. The one aspect of voting voters have any control over is how much information they have about the election at
their disposal. This logic indicates that if people were able to become informed more easily, they would turnout to vote in higher numbers. More knowledge allows voters greater leverage in understanding political issues. Said leverage can be used to help voters distill the aggregation of political issues that arise during a campaign into a coherent binary distinction between candidates. If that is the case then in elections where there are issues that are easy to understand and have clear causes and effects, like the 2006 midterm that is the focus of this paper, voters would become informed about it and be able to include it in their decision making process. There are many different shortcuts voters can use to make their decisions. What follows is a discussion of the different conditions that may change the amount of available information for voters, and increase turnout as a result.

*Political competition.* Political competition is one way in which the cost of information is lowered. More competitive races generate more media coverage because competitive races provide journalists with more stories to cover. News media is drawn to stories that have greater dramatic potential and there is greater drama in a close race than one that has been decided months before the election (Baum 2003, Bennett 2007). Both campaigns will engage in more public events and voter outreach. Papers will have the opportunity for their editorial board to endorse a candidate. The more attention press pay to an election the more likely voters are to be made aware of it. (Rosenstone and Hansen 2003, Gilliam 1985). A study by the Lear Center Local News Archive titled “Local News Coverage of the 2004 Campaigns; An Analysis of Nightly Broadcast in 11Markets,” found that in 2004 44% of news stories by local media that involved a campaign race were focused on the horserace aspect of the campaign.
If a race is not considered competitive then local media will devote that time to other stories, which eliminates almost half of the coverage campaigns can expect to receive. Voters are more likely to be aware of a race that is competitive for that reason. When either one candidate or political party has an overwhelming advantage, voters have less interest in the election because they already know what the outcome is likely to be. Free riding becomes the easiest choice for voters because they expect their expected utility from voting to be almost non-existent. Competitive races increase turnout indirectly by attracting more financial contributions. Political donors are strategic in choosing which elections they will contribute to (Holbrook and McClurg 2005, Cox and Munger 1989). Races that are completely one sided are not attractive to donors as their donation is unlikely to change the outcome of the election. Competitive races receive more donations because their outcome is uncertain (Holbrook and McClurg 2005, Rosenstone and Hansen 2003).

Campaign spending allows for a greater degree of information about the race to reach the voting population. Money acts as a medium through which campaigns reach out to voters. Campaigns that have access to more money during the race are able to hire full time staff, buy more ad time on local media outlets, invest in voter contact programs, hire canvassers for get out the vote activities, and send out campaign mailers. All of these have been found to increase turnout, and all require funds from the campaign in order to happen. (Holbrook and McClurg 2005, Cox and Munger 1989) The more money a campaign has available, the more it is able to do of all of these outreach activities, and buy more campaign ads in newspapers and television programs. Research has shown that voter contact by campaigns increases the total
turnout on election day. Scholars have argued that there are three groups of people in the electorate: the habitual voter, the occasional voter, and the people who never vote. (Nickerson, Freidrichs, King 2006, Holdbrook and McClurg 2005, Jackson 2002). Habitual voters will vote in every election regardless of how much information is available. Increases in information through competitive races and other factors will impact voter turnout by lowering the costs to occasional voters. These are the people who will vote if given enough reason or when faced with lowered costs of voting. Based on this logic I present the following hypothesis:

H1: Elections that are highly competitive will have higher levels of voter turnout than races that are not.

National events. Research on news reporting has demonstrated that reports favor stories that are attention grabbing and contain some form of human interest. They will tend to favor a dramatic or personalized presentation of events, and downplay the complex underlying political realities. If an event occurs that is large enough and has a national scope, it will become a part of the national discourse through continued exposure (Baum 2003, Bennett 2007). These national events would include the Clinton impeachment, the Iran-Contra hearings, the Contract with America campaign by the Republicans in 1994, the Watergate hearings and any other large political story that the media cover in detail during an election season. These significant national events will lead to more interest in the election by the population because of the political element of the event and the coverage by the press; with an added interest should the event happen within some proximity to an election. Campaigns will also seek to use the issue
to promote themselves to their constituents, both in campaign mobilization and
donations from constituents that were inspired by the event.

There will be more consistent information available due to the increase in attention
to the issue by both the national media and public interest. Voters will be more likely to
become engaged with the issue as a result, particularly if the issue impacts their locale
in some specific way. The more impact the national issue has on a specific region, in
this paper's example the Iraq war, the higher the saliency of that issue for the citizens of
the effected area. If they have a direct connection to the issue at hand, they are more
likely to seek out information regarding that issue. In a similar manner to competitive
races, a national event will activate the occasional voters who require some kind of
external motivation to vote in an election. On this logic I present my next hypothesis:

H2: States that are directly affected by a national issue will have higher turnout
than states that are not affected.

Volunteerism. As Wattenberg noted (Wattenberg 2002), citizens who are more
involved in their community are more likely to vote. He points to research indicating the
positive relationship between regular church attendance, length of time spent living in a
specific area, whether the voters are married or members of a union and the likelihood
of voting in an election. Another way in which individuals become involved in their
community is through volunteering. People who volunteer do so because they value
making contributions to their community or find enjoyment out of the work itself, putting
aside those who volunteer to fulfill a court order. Downsian theory states that citizens
will vote when the utility they receive from doing so outweighs the cost associated with
voting. Volunteering by definition does not provide any immediate material reward for people who choose to do so. Consequently the work itself must be the motivating force that inspires people to do so, and provide the person who is volunteering with enough utility to continue. We would expect people who regularly volunteer to be more likely to vote based on this logic, where the voting act is one more aspect of responsible citizenship volunteers demonstrate. As a result, in states where a higher percentage of the population volunteers in some form, we would expect to see higher turnout in midterm elections. From this I derive my final hypothesis:

H3: States that have a higher rate of volunteerism will have higher turnout rates in midterm elections.

*Presidential popularity.* The final hypothesis I put forward is that of the popularity of the sitting president. I would expect a negative relationship between presidential popularity and voter turnout. The reasoning behind this concerns information shortcuts voters use to make decisions. Just as economic voter theory considers the decision to vote to be a reflection of voter satisfaction with the state of the economy and the nation at large, (Godbout and Belanger 2007, Abramowitz 1985, Kinder and Kiewiet 1981, Tufte 1975, 1978) I argue that voter satisfaction with the president operates in the same manner. As the president is the most visible political actor in the nation, less sophisticated voters will use their perception of the current officeholder as a recipient of their views of the nation. Presidents who are in office during difficult times are blamed for the state of the nation, and can be used as a measure of voter satisfaction with the state of the nation as a whole. I argue this relationship is one way, where presidents are punished for unfavorable national conditions such as economic downturns, but are not
rewarded for improvements. This will be reflected in midterm turnout, where an unpopular president corresponds with unhappiness with the state of the nation. This discontent will lead some non-habitual voters to go out to the polls when they otherwise would not because they were satisfied with the status quo. Thus we have my final hypothesis:

H4: A decrease in presidential popularity will lead to an increase in voter turnout.

Now that I have described my theory and generated hypotheses, the next step is creating the methods by which to test my expectations against reality. The next chapter will explain in detail how I will operationalize the theoretical concepts described above, and the statistical analysis I will be using to verify my hypotheses.
CHAPTER 4
RESEARCH DESIGN

Having outlined the causal mechanism I believe is at work in midterm election voter turnout levels, I must now build a methodological test with which to demonstrate my theory. As my hypotheses deals with the degree of difference between different states’ turnout levels, I will be using OLS regression as my methods test. OLS will allow me to observe how the different variables influence voter turnout throughout the nation and the variance in the effects based on their relative strength.

Case Selection and Choice of Analysis

*Unit of analysis.* I argue in my theory that since states have experienced different casualty rates in the Iraq conflict, their turnout levels will be impacted by the casualty figures of each state. Because of this, my unit of analysis will be the state, with each state in the nation being treated as individual units. According to my theory, the impact of a soldier’s death will not be limited to the district or county they came from, but will be covered by local media throughout the state. Therefore it matters less where within a state the soldier lived compared to the fact that he was a citizen of the state.

There are a number of reasons for this beyond the requirements of my theory. Voter registration and election laws are the responsibility of state governments, and as such there is considerable variation in those laws between states. Further, citizens are only able to vote in the states they are registered in, offering clear lines of separation between different geographic regions. There are also data considerations that make
state level analysis the optimal approach for this paper. My source for Iraq war deaths separates casualties based on their state, as does my turnout data. In order to maintain compatibility within my regression, the state level analysis is required.

Hypothesis Variable Operationalization

In order to test my hypotheses, I need to operationalize several concepts that have been shown to influence voter turnout in order to demonstrate any sort of causal connection between the Iraq war and the 2006 turnout figures. The different variables need to be broken down further to ensure they are carefully specified.

*Turnout.* Using data from the United States Elections Project (USEP), which constructs a measure of voter turnout based on the population of a state that is eligible to vote, I operationalize *Turnout* as the total voter eligible population (VEP) turnout for each state. Spearheaded by Dr. Michael McDonald, the USEP calculates the population of each state that is old enough to vote based on the July 1 Census Bureau population estimates by age-sex-race. From that figure McDonald adjusts for non-citizens and non-voting felons based on the laws of the state. McDonald’s data covers every national election dating back to the 1980 elections, and allows a precise measure of the percentage of citizens who are eligible to vote and chose to do so. This is an important distinction, as other voter turnout data sets have used the over 18 population of a state as their basis for calculating turnout. In doing so their figures report lower turnout figures than those of the actual electorate, as citizens who are barred from voting would count in estimations based on the of age population as choosing not to vote. Using the eligible voter population as a base avoids this problem, and provides a
more accurate representation of turnout rates (McDonald and Popkin 2001, Popkin and McDonald 2000).

*War deaths.* As mentioned in the literature review, there has been some scholastic work tying the Iraq War to the election results in 2006 (Cohen 2007, Kriner and Shen 2007). While those efforts have provided intriguing results, they have mainly been exercises in data mining, with little theoretical explanation for why their results have any impact on the election results. I shall attempt to correct that by treating the Iraq war as a significant national event, allowing for a test of the national event hypothesis from my theory. According to a Gallup poll conducted in July of 2006 found that a combined 85% of the respondents ranked the Iraq war as either extremely important or very important to their decision of who to support in the upcoming election (Saad 2006). Based on the findings of Cohen (2007) and Kriner and Shen (2007), I infer that more Iraq War deaths will generate more news coverage focusing on reporting those deaths. These will take various forms, ranging from reporting the actual deaths, human interest coverage of the dead soldiers lives, interviews with family members, and retrospective pieces on the total losses incurred over the course of the war. The manner of coverage is not as important to this paper as the effect the coverage has on the electorate. Because journalists are more likely to report bad news, US fatalities in Iraq will attract a great deal of media coverage. This coverage will inform readers about the realities of the Iraq War and expand the information they can access in deciding to vote in the election.

The effect of Iraq War deaths will vary from state to state, as each state in the nation has suffered different casualty levels. Those states that have had a higher number of their population killed in Iraq will have a higher amount of media coverage.
More dead soldiers means there are more opportunities for journalists to tell human interest stories about the dead and their families. To test the impact of US casualties in Iraq I created a database organized by state of US fatalities in Iraq as of November 2006. The data comes from http://icasualties.org/oif/StateCity.aspx, a website that provides a breakdown of Iraq deaths by state from the beginning of the war to the current day based on fatality reports from the US military (Cohen 2007). I went through their listings, omitting any deaths that occurred after November of 2006. I was left with a total number of Iraq war deaths for each state up to the midterm election that I converted into a per capita measure per 100,000. While there might be better measurements for the impact of the Iraq war I am using the casualty figures because I want to replicate as closely as possible Cohen’s (2007) research in my study. Therefore I am employing his design for measuring the impact of the Iraq war.

*Competitive race.* Creating an operational measure of competitive races presents a number of conceptual problems for researchers. Scholars have tried to different methods to measure competitiveness, from taking the difference between the Democratic and Republican votes in a race (Cox and Munger 1989, Gilliam 1985, Caldeira and Patterson 1982), using the winner’s percentage of the vote (Settle and Abrams 1976), and creating dummy variables for competitive races based on polls taken during the election (Herrnson and Morris 2007). The problem with using election results as a measure for how competitive the race is that such a justification is both post hoc and tautological. Using a measure of competitiveness taken after the campaign has ended deprives researchers of any insight into the dynamic nature of campaigns. Races are labeled as competitive because they were close after the race has ended.
Under this operationalization the degree of closeness in the final vote tally does not reflect the information available to voters when they decide to vote. By using a measure of competitiveness taken during the campaign, I hope to capture the impression voters have of the campaign as they are going through the decision making process. As outlined by my theory competitive elections only increase turnout by increasing media attention on the race and forcing campaigns to pour more resources into voter outreach.

Every election CQ ranks all Senate and Congressional races as either “Leaning Democratic,” “Leaning Republican,” “No Clear Favorite,” or “Safe.” (CQ Weekly Oct) If a race is listed as Safe I code it as non competitive. Every other category is considered competitive. Leaning races are included because even though they have a favored candidate, they are still considered a close race with the possibility of an upset. This means the candidates’ campaigns will continue to battle it out until the final days of the race, attempting to mobilize their supporters, which is the same behavior we would expect to see in a race that has no clear favorites. For that reason, I consider leaning races to considered competitive races. To avoid a conflict with my state level unit of analysis, each state will have the total number of competitive states divided against the total number of congressional and senate races in play for the 2006 season. By creating a percentage of competitive races for each state I ensure that highly populous states do not bias the results of my analysis. This operationalization is based on Cohen’s (2007) competitive measure, and was used to maintain as much continuity between his study and this work.

Volunteerism. My measure for state volunteer stats comes from the Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS), a government body that oversees
Americorps, Senior Corps, and Learn and Serve America. Their figures come from survey results of the Current Population Survey (CPS). The CPS is a monthly survey of about 60,000 households (approximately 100,000 adults), conducted by the U.S. Census Bureau for the Bureau of Labor Statistics. The CPS focuses on obtaining information on employment and unemployment for the nation’s civilian non-institutionalized population ages 16 and older. CNCS took the total number of citizens per state who reported that they performed unpaid volunteer activities at any point during the 12-month period, from September 1 of the prior year through the survey week in September of the survey year. A three year moving average is used based on the survey results to calculate the volunteer rates of each state. After calculating the moving average the results were converted into the percentage of the population who volunteer.

*Presidential popularity.* The economic voter theory considers the decision to vote to be a reflection of voter satisfaction with the state of the economy and the nation at large. (Godbout and Belanger 2007, Abramowitz 1985, Kinder and Kiewiet 1981, Tufte 1975, 1978). In my regression I use presidential approval as a stand in for this retrospective voter evaluation. My popularity figures come from Survey USA, an independent polling group that measures public opinion on a wide variety of subjects in all 50 states. They conduct monthly polls tracking presidential popularity in all states. I have included their popularity reports for the month of October 2006 in my regression, under the same logic that I used in coding the Iraq war casualties. October is the final month of campaigning, and the point where the election is on the most minds in the
electorate. Therefore the popularity of the president in October will have the most impact on turnout in that election, if it is to have any impact at all.

Control Variable Operationalization

*Education.* The amount of education a person has revived will affect that individual's likelihood of voting (Rosenstone and Hansen 2003). The higher education level attained, the greater the degree of socialization the individual is exposed to. Higher education also provides more sophisticated tools with which to base voting decisions upon. To control for this factor I include a measure for the general educational level of a given state. Using the figures are taken from the US census 2006 American Community Survey, I code *Education* as the proportion of the voting-age population who earned a bachelor's degree from a 4 year college. I use the attainment of BA figures as a baseline for education for a number of reasons. Primarily, attaining a BA serves as a better indication of educational ability than a high school diploma, because of both the higher quality of instructor and the additional commitment on the part of the student. That said, it is not so great a commitment as a post graduate degree that it is considered out of reach or unnecessary by the bulk of the population.

*Income.* Income is the median income of the voting-age population as gathered from the US Census 2005-2006 Annual Social and Economic Supplement Report. I chose the states median income figures to maintain consistency with the state level unit of analysis. The variable is coded at the state level and provides a measure for both the effect of rich versus poor state turnout and the degree of difference between income levels.
Citizens with higher incomes are more likely to vote for a number of reasons. They have the economic means with which to gain more sophisticated political information like internet access, newspaper subscriptions, and other media sources that cost money. Further they will be able to afford the opportunity cost of a lost day at work waiting in line to vote, whereas a potential voter that is below the poverty line does not have that luxury. Higher income voters are more likely to be approached by political campaigns seeking contributions, which increase the likelihood of turnout in a number of ways. Individuals who contribute to political campaigns are more likely to go out and vote for that candidate, as they have already made a financial investment in the candidate. Second, even if the individual declines donating any money, the act of being contacted by a campaign makes the person being contacted aware of the political campaign’s existence. Lower income level citizens are cut off from this interaction, limiting their access to the candidates and the avenues through which they can be activated for Election Day (Rosenstone and Hansen’s 2003).

**Senate and gubernatorial races.** As mentioned in the literature review (Jackson 2002, Cohen, Krassa and Hamman 1991), state wide elections tend to increase the total turnout of a state during a midterm. To control for this phenomena, I use two separate dummy variables for each state to test the effect of Senate and Gubernatorial races on turnout. States that had a Senate race were coded with a 1, and those that did not were coded as 0. The same coding was used for the presence or absence of gubernatorial races.

**Previous election turnout.** Comparisons to previous elections turnout levels can provide a good base to ground expectations for what the turnout levels will be in the
current election. (Rosenstone and Hansen 2003, Campbell et al 1960). There are many reasons why this occurs: while the candidates may change from election to election, the greater party organization in the region is largely stable, meaning current candidates will largely make use of the same mobilization outreach programs previous candidates had access to. While citizen migration can change the demographics of a region over time, within the relative short time between two elections the population will not have shifted so far away from where it was in the previous election. For these reasons I have taken the midterm VEP turnout rates McDonald calculated for 2002 and included them in my regression as a lagged variable in my regression.

Now that my model has been specified, I must not turn to what the model shows about voter turnout in 2006. The next chapter deals with my findings in detail, and attempts to make sense of that those results tell us about voter behavior in the 2006 midterm.
CHAPTER 5
FINDINGS

As outlined in the previous chapter, my theory of voter turnout rests on the informational environment voters find themselves in during an election. I maintain that elections that have a nationwide issue will create more easily available information for voters, leading to higher turnout. The 2006 election was selected to test this theory and to attempt to make some sense of the greater turnout experienced in that race. In this election the nationwide issue was the Iraq war and subsequent occupation. The impact of the Iraq war was operationalized through a breakdown by state of US fatalities. Thus, all else being equal, an increase in the number of dead US soldiers from a given state should be positively associated with the turnout levels for that state in 2006.

Having outlined the statistical model with which I intend to test my theory in the previous chapter, I now turn to the results of that regression to see what we can learn. First I present a breakdown by state of US casualties in Iraq in table 5-1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>State</th>
<th>War Dead</th>
<th>War dead per capita per 100K</th>
<th>Voter eligible turnout rate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>United States</td>
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</table>

*(table continues)*
Table 5-1 (continued).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>State</th>
<th>War Dead</th>
<th>War dead per capita per 100K</th>
<th>Voter eligible turnout rate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
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<td>Iowa</td>
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<td>1.54592934</td>
<td>0.49</td>
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<tr>
<td>Kansas</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>1.499383318</td>
<td>0.44</td>
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<tr>
<td>Kentucky</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>1.526015924</td>
<td>0.41</td>
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<td>Louisiana</td>
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<td>2.134870497</td>
<td>0.30</td>
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<td>Maine</td>
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<tr>
<td>Maryland</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>1.286714548</td>
<td>0.47</td>
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<tr>
<td>Massachusetts</td>
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<td>0.839238962</td>
<td>0.49</td>
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<td>Michigan</td>
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<td>1.442776721</td>
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<tr>
<td>Minnesota</td>
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<td>1.022483823</td>
<td>0.61</td>
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<tr>
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<td>1.725747342</td>
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<td>Nebraska</td>
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<td>Nevada</td>
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<td>Pennsylvania</td>
<td>139</td>
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<tr>
<td>Rhode Island</td>
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<td>2.89560657</td>
<td>0.58</td>
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<td>1.368335401</td>
<td>0.42</td>
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<tr>
<td>Texas</td>
<td>244</td>
<td>1.420763634</td>
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<tr>
<td>Utah</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>0.791194234</td>
<td>0.35</td>
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<tr>
<td>Vermont</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>3.669363196</td>
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<td>Virginia</td>
<td>83</td>
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<td>West Virginia</td>
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<td>Wyoming</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1.782883806</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: [http://icasualties.org/iraq/index.aspx](http://icasualties.org/iraq/index.aspx) and United States Elections Project (USEP)

We see from the breakdown that there is some variation between state turnout levels, with turnout levels varying from 28 percent (District of Columbia) to 61 percent.
(Minnesota). Also of note is that several states that have over 100 war dead have a turnout rate of 40 percent. There are also several states that have the same turnout level with less war dead, leaving the nature of the relationship in question. Similarly several states that have over 1 war death per capita per 100,000 people had turnout have a turnout rate of 40 percent or greater. More in depth analysis is required to understand the relationship, and so I present the findings of my regression analysis in table 5-2.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Model 1</th>
<th>Model 2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>War dead per 100k</td>
<td>0.006</td>
<td>0.015</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.011)</td>
<td>(0.015)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Competitive Races</td>
<td>0.000</td>
<td>-0.003</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.002)</td>
<td>(0.003)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presidential approval</td>
<td>-0.300*</td>
<td>-0.442*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.106)</td>
<td>(0.137)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Volunteer Rate</td>
<td>0.005***</td>
<td>0.009***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.001)</td>
<td>(0.001)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>0.012</td>
<td>0.038</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.220)</td>
<td>(0.293)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Income</td>
<td>-3.49e-07</td>
<td>-2.72e-07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(1.31e-06)</td>
<td>1.74e-06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Governor</td>
<td>0.008</td>
<td>0.033*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.013)</td>
<td>(0.016)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\*(table continues)
Table 5-2 (continued).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Model 1</th>
<th>Model 2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Senate</td>
<td>0.0417**</td>
<td>0.032*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.012)</td>
<td>(0.016)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2002 turnout</td>
<td>0.623***</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.109)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>0.09</td>
<td>0.24*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.072)</td>
<td>(0.089)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F Statistic</td>
<td>19.54*</td>
<td>10.11*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R squared</td>
<td>0.814</td>
<td>0.663</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: Cell entries are regression coefficient values and, in parentheses are standard errors. Model was tested for heteroscedasticity using white’s test statistic, with no evidence found.

*** Significant at < .0001 ** Significant at <.001 * Significant at < .05

Hypotheses tests

As I mentioned in the methods section, I use the Iraq war as a test for the role of national events in influencing turnout. Contrary to my theory though, increases in Iraq war deaths for a given state failed to impact the turnout in the election. In a one tailed test that excluded a lagged variable for the previous years turnout, the Iraq war proved to have a statistically insignificant relationship with turnout. These findings were robust, with the war dead variable having a mean of 1.465, a standard deviation of .544, a min of .629 and a max of 3.669. I had expected the Iraq war to be the reason for the increased turnout in 2006, the fact that it had no relationship to turnout presents a challenge to that specific goal of my research. One possible explanation for why I could find no relationship between Iraq deaths and turnout is that Cohen’s (2007) operationalization is a poor proxy for voter appraisal of the Iraq war. His study was
limited to the 33 states that had Senate elections in 2006, and focused primarily on those states that had Republican incumbents. This could have introduced some selection bias into his model that is unaccounted for in his paper. Putting aside questions of variable operationalization, if the Iraq war was not driving turnout in 2006 then something else caused the high turnout levels we saw, something that is not connected to the specific issues of that election. If that is the case then we could be looking at a new trend of higher turnout in elections for the next few election cycles. Future elections and further research is required in order to understand electoral turnout in contemporary US elections.

Volunteerism proved to have a highly significant relationship to voter turnout, though with the caveat that the magnitude of its impact is incredibly small. Unlike the war deaths variable, volunteerism is shown to impact turnout levels in a highly statistically significant way, and in the expected direction. Despite that, the coefficient impact is still slight, though larger than that of national issues variable. Every increase in the volunteer rate by a state sees an increase in turnout by .0056 or .0093 of a percentage point. As with the national election measure, I am left with statistically significant findings that are still so slight as to be essentially null.

The competitive races measurement managed to achieve significance in the permutation of the model that excluded the previous midterm turnout in a similar manner as the national issue variable. The competitive measure acted in much the same way the Iraq war variable behaved, where one-tailed significance was achieved, but the coefficient is very small and in the opposite directing I was anticipating. There are many reasons why this could be the case. In competitive races there is a higher
chance of potential voter burnout, where the constant campaign activities overload potential voters, who then consciously chose to sit out the election in protest over the constant outreach activities. Competitive races could also enter into a state where the public relations battle between the candidates becomes so much white noise to the non-habitual voter, negating the mobilization effects of campaign contact. Alternatively, the competitive nature of certain Congressional seats will carry over from election to election. Congressional seats are set every ten years, and congressional districts that are competitive in one election cycle will likely remain so in the next. If this is the case then perhaps residents of those competitive districts absorb over time the information that is made available by the competition, or learn to tune out the increased attention paid to competitive races. In either case, perhaps voters over time either internalize the effects of competitive races or become immune to their effects. All of these assume competitive races can impact turnout the way I theorize they do, which is not a given. One way to test this more fully in future research is to perform a time series analysis on competitive versus non-competitive districts to chart the change in time of turnout. Further research and refinement of my methods will be necessary to understand these findings.

Finally the level of President Bush’s popularity in each state had a highly significant relationship with the level of turnout witnessed in each state. States where Bush had high polling had lower turnout rates than states where Bush was unpopular. For every increase by one point in Bush’s popularity, the turnout figures for that state decreased by .348. This finding could be used to justify views of 2006 as a referendum on Bush’s time in office, something which would lend support to the retrospective voting theory of
midterms. Further as mentioned in my introduction President Bush sought the invasion of Iraq, and made a very public case for why the invasion was necessary. It was his administration that was responsible for the post war occupation and rebuilding, and bore the responsibility for the entire affair. Because of the close relationship between Bush and the Iraq occupation, the close relationship between his popularity in states and the turnout within that state provides support for the argument that the 2006 election was a referendum on the actions his administration and the Republican controlled Congress had pursued over the years.

Control Variables

The lagged 2002 turnout variable proved highly significant in predicting the turnout for 2006 as expected, where an increase in the previous elections turnout led to a .05 increase in the current elections turnout. In fact it proved so significant to turnout that it dominated the model, causing some variables that would otherwise have been significant to be swallowed up by the lagged measure. This led me to run the regression twice, once with the lagged variable included and once without it. Previous election turnout should affect the current election turnout incrementally, where the previous election set a mean level of voter turnout for the current election. There are a few other ways in which the previous election turnout will impact the current election that should be kept in mind. Political campaigns have access to the voter rolls from previous elections and can map who voted in what districts, and which party won which district in the previous election. This gives them a contact list of known voters and a partisan breakdown of each district within the race. This provides campaigns with
demographic data with which to base their mobilization efforts. The more people who voted in the previous election, the more information campaigns have with which to make their campaign more efficient and responsive to the electoral districts. Another way previous turnout can affect the current election comes from the simple fact that voters who have previously voted are more likely to vote again, having been through the process already. Therefore sudden drop offs in turnout levels from the previous election are unlikely, thus districts with high turnout are more likely to continue to have high turnout from one election to the next.

The presence of a Senate race proved to have a statistically significant impact upon state turnout during the 2006 election in both regressions. Having a Senate race during a midterm election marginally increased the turnout rate for the state. This is to be expected, given both the statewide level of the election and the high profile nature of the race. What is more puzzling is the impact of gubernatorial races on turnout. When a lagged variable for the previous midterm is included in the analysis, gubernatorial races did not achieve statistical significance. Removing the lagged measure from the equation causes the p value for the gubernatorial races dummy variable jumps from 0.526 to 0.017. This indicates that most likely gubernatorial races can impact turnout figures under certain conditions, but its effects on the electorate can be subsumed by other factors. One thing to keep in mind is that, while Senate races occur at fixed intervals, the timing of gubernatorial races varies from state to state. Some states have opted to hold their gubernatorial elections during odd numbered years, which complicate determining their effect on turnout.
Surprisingly, the level of education and income level within a state failed to achieve statistical significance in any of the permutations of the model employed. Assuming there is no coding error, this needs explaining. One possibility is an ecological fallacy in the construction of the model. While education and income has been proven to be a valid indicator of voting by individuals, perhaps attempting to carry that over to the state level is invalid. Ascribing a behavior to all individuals who have similar backgrounds could be a misconstruction of the way education and income impact turnout, leading to the results presented here. My coding could presuppose that all individuals with a bachelor’s and a certain level of income would behave in the same way, and fail to capture the way in which education impacts individual’s decisions to vote. My coding was based on the logic that as the number of people in the population who had bachelor degrees’ increased, the turnout figures would increase as well because a higher percentage of the people with bachelor’s would vote. My coding may have been inadequate in capturing this relationship, which would indicate I need to rethink how to operationalize the role of education. Should this be the case, a more rigorous coding for the role of education in my regression would have to be considered.
CHAPTER 6
CONCLUSION

This paper set out to investigate the way in which information impacts voter turnout in a midterm setting. The 2006 midterm election was chosen for a number of reasons. The first is the Republican loss of control of both houses of Congress. This appears to owe in part to public fallout over the course of the Iraq war (Cohen 2007, Kriner and Shen 2007). Based on this I argued that the election provides a unique opportunity to measure the impact of information on voter turnout. Republican control of both the Executive and Legislative branches of government diminished the political complexities of assigning blame or credit for political policies among the voting public. The Iraq war also had measurable policy costs, in the US soldiers who have been injured and killed in action during the occupation. I argued that these injured and dead soldiers act as an information amplifier, as each death leads to an increase in media attention both at the national and local level. These factors, reduced complexity of political policies and increased media attention, lowered the cost of gathering information for voters. Studies have shown that there is a percentage of potential voters that will vote if mobilized by an external force, usually campaign contact. I argued that the Iraq war and occupation was responsible for the increase in turnout we saw by mobilizing non-habitual voters through increased information availability.

To justify this claim, I put forth a theory that argued that changes to the utility/cost decision matrix voters experience can lead to changes in turnout levels. This included lowered costs of gathering information triggered by competitive campaigns, the impact
of the Iraq war on a state population, and the popularity of the sitting president within a state. I also theorized how voters could possibly change the utility they received from voting based on their civic actions, specifically volunteering. I theorized that people who regularly volunteered would be more likely to vote due to their commitment to civic engagement.

With my theoretical model specified, I outlined a methodology by which my theory could be statistically tested. My results were surprising, as the hypotheses all achieved statistical significance in a one-tailed test that excluded a lagged measure for the previous midterm turnout levels, but only the presidential approval measure had any kind of meaningful impact in the coefficient. All of the other hypotheses had coefficients that were too small to be considered important. On the other hand, my study did show that access to information bears a small but significant relationship to turnout in elections. I take this to mean that the larger theory of the study, that information can increase turnout by lowering costs, to be substantiated, though with a much smaller impact than I expected. That said, the Iraq war did not increase turnout as I theorized.

In the few permutations of the model where the war deaths variable achieved significance it actually decreased turnout very slightly. Thus, while Cohen (2007) and Kriner and Shen (2007) demonstrated that Iraq casualties directly impacted voter choice, it did not carry over to turnout. The impact of the presidential popularity measure seems to indicate that President Bush’s low popularity levels brought more people out to vote, indicating there may have been a referendum effect at work in 2006. This means that something else is driving turnout up, something not yet identified by political scientists. This brings me to what direction I see my future research taking.
Future Research

The final question of this paper is what future research avenues are opened by this study. Future research I foresee emanating from this study should focus on the nature of voter turnout and what the future holds for it. 2006, despite appearances, seems to have been a normal midterm with abnormally high turnout. If it was a unique occurrence, then Iraq should have mattered. It did not, so the question remains: why was turnout so high?

The most fertile area of research I see moving forward is in future turnout. Was 2006 an anomaly in the decades long trend of low turnout, or are we looking at a shift towards higher turnout levels in the future? The 2008 presidential election saw turnout rates of 62%. While presidential races are outside the scope of this paper, one of the underlining questions of this project was why turnout is increasing. As I mentioned in my intro my goal was to determine if the Iraq war could be responsible for the increase in turnout we have been experiencing. My analysis showed that it doe not.

There is the chance that the operationalization of the impact of the Iraq war through US casualties does not actually correlate with increased media attention as I thought. If that is the case then there is still a chance that the Iraq war increased turnout in the manner I theorized, but my measure did not capture that. Perhaps just viewing reports of US deaths is not enough to mobilize potential voters. Attitudes about the military might also play a role in how the voting population reacts to US casualties. A more media centered study would be necessary to determine that, perhaps one that analyzed the nature of media coverage in local markets and compared that to the turnout reported for those markets. I could not do that in this study due to data
limitations in my turnout data source, but if someone were to build a district level turnout database such analysis might be possible.

Putting aside that one caveat on media attention, my study showed there was no relationship between the Iraq war and 2006’s turnout. This means something else must therefore be causing this change in turnout. The larger question I see moving forward is whether we are looking at a reversal in turnout trends across the nation, and if so what is causing them. This question will have to wait until more elections have occurred, as we quite obviously lack the data necessary to draw any conclusions about the current status quo. Future research could look at whether this is a phenomenon that is limited to presidential elections or if turnout across the board is increasing. One possible explanation is the increase in partisanship identification we have seen over the last decade (Brewer 2005, Fiorina 2002). Perhaps the increase in partisanship has decreased the need for political information, making the decision to turnout at the polls easier. If an individual is only going to vote along straight party lines, then there is no need for gathering information with which to make an informed vote. I did not include a measure for partisanship as there does not exist accurate state level data for partisan identification. The traditional method of post election partisan breakdown are post-hoc, similar to my objection to using election vote tallies for determining competitive races. Further, as Krehbiel (2000) demonstrates, vote-based appraisals of partisanship are ineffective instruments of detecting genuine party based voting, party strength or leadership support, as the measure cannot distinguish between a partisan vote for a political candidate and a non-partisan vote. Creating a more accurate measure of
partisanship requires a study dedicated entirely to that end, and as such falls outside the scope of this paper.


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