

Outstanding Graduate Student Paper Award competition of the ASA Sociology of Emotions section:

**War that Feels Good: A new explanation for the rally-round-the-flag phenomenon**

ABSTRACT

Rally-round-the-flag (RRTF) is a phenomenon of abrupt and sharp increases in public support for sitting U.S. Presidents and their policies, which emerges primarily in response to wars and other international crises. While starting abruptly, rally effects can last for a long period. Despite being an important political phenomenon, the RRTF phenomenon is not well understood for at least three reasons. First, existing explanations are generally hyper-rationalistic, ignoring the crucial role of emotions. Second, when existing explanations do consider the role of emotions, they tend to focus on negative ones such as fear and anger, thereby overlooking the role of positive emotions. Third, some approaches focus on the role of elite rhetoric in war time, but miss the fact that the rally phenomenon is co-produced from below. The paper proposes a new theoretical explanation for the RRTF phenomenon, weaving together elements from appraisal theory in psychology, social identity theory in social psychology, and social constructivist approaches in the study of nationalism. It argues that in the context of war the RRTF effect emerges when established nationalistic frameworks become more salient, and individual citizens experience widespread feelings of nationalist pride, hope with respect to the outcomes of war, and confidence in the government. In order to test this argument, data from surveys collected during two rally periods – the first following the 9-11 terrorist attack and the second at the beginning of the 2003 invasion of Iraq – are analyzed using logistic regression. Then, Structural Equations Modeling is used to fit a model based on survey data with a special focus on emotionality, which were collected shortly before and after the invasion of Iraq. The article concludes by attributing the rally around Bush's "war on terrorism" and the invasion of Iraq to individuals' sense of hope fueled by nationalist pride and confidence with respect to the government and its execution of the war. More generally, this study illustrates how micro-mechanisms that affect individual perceptions and feelings can explain larger scale political phenomena.