Foreign Policy in a Time of Polarization: Evidence from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action

by

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Class of 2019

A thesis submitted to the faculty of Wesleyan University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Bachelor of Arts with Departmental Honors in Government
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgements .................................................................................................................. 3

## Chapter One: Introduction and Methodology ................................................................. 4
  1.1 Introduction .................................................................................................................... 4
  1.2 Brief Historical Context and The Three Key Events ................................................. 6
  1.3 The JCPOA ..................................................................................................................... 8
  1.4. Literature Review and the Basic Model for Framing Contests ................................. 11
  1.5. The Cascading Activation Model Applied to the JCPOA .................................... 15
  1.6 Methodology ............................................................................................................... 18
  1.7 Conclusion .................................................................................................................. 21

## Chapter Two: Key Events and Polling Data ................................................................. 23
  2.1. Introduction ................................................................................................................ 23
  2.2. Netanyahu’s Speech .................................................................................................. 28
  2.3. The Letter .................................................................................................................. 32
  2.4. The Iran Nuclear Agreement Review Act: May 14, 2015 .................................... 36
  2.5. Opinion in April through July 2015 .......................................................................... 38
  2.6. Conclusion ................................................................................................................. 41

## Chapter Three: Media Coverage .................................................................................. 46
  3.1 Introduction ................................................................................................................ 46
  3.2 Netanyahu’s Speech .................................................................................................... 47
  3.3 The Letter .................................................................................................................... 53
  3.4 The Iran Nuclear Agreement Review Act ................................................................. 58
  3.5. Coverage of the JCPOA: July 14, 2015 .................................................................. 59
  3.6. Conclusion ............................................................................................................... 62

## Chapter Four: Conclusion ........................................................................................... 64
  4.1. Introduction ............................................................................................................... 64
  4.2. The Cascading Activation Model and the Three Events ....................................... 65
    4.2.1. Netanyahu’s Speech ......................................................................................... 65
    4.2.2. The Letter ........................................................................................................ 68
    4.2.3. The Iran Nuclear Agreement Review Act ....................................................... 71
    4.2.4. Comparison ...................................................................................................... 75
  4.3. Implications .............................................................................................................. 77

Bibliography .......................................................................................................................... 79
Acknowledgements

In February 2018, I called my father to talk about whether I should write a thesis in Government. We wound up talking for over an hour about the JCPOA, specifically about the infamous Ben Rhodes “echo chamber” interview. Over the past year, this project has changed dramatically from the original idea I discussed with my father. I wish he could be here to see the finished project. I would not have submitted that initial proposal if he hadn’t been around to encourage me. I would not have developed such a strong interest in foreign affairs if he hadn’t brought up current events at dinner every night. I would not be the person I am without him, in so many ways. Thank you, Dad.

To the rest of my family – Mom, Melanie, and Jillian, for your endless love and support over my life, and especially during these past four years at Wesleyan – for also making me who I am.

Thank you to Professor Douglas Foyle for your invaluable advice throughout this process, and for taking every step you could to make my completion of this project a reality when I encountered unforeseen difficulties. Thank you for teaching some of my favorite classes at Wesleyan, the classes that affirmed my interest in international politics.

Thank you to the Government Department at Wesleyan University for an incredible and well-rounded academic experience. I am especially grateful for Professors Donald Moon and Nancy Schwartz, for sparking my interest in political theory, and Professor John Finn, for teaching the course that prompted my academic interest in law.

Thank you to the Wesleyan Mock Trial team, for your friendship, for helping me succeed, for giving me confidence.

Thank you to the wonderful ladies of 84 Home – Julia, Emma, Jackie, and Sarah. Thank you for listening to me worry about this thesis and everything else, for always standing by me and sticking up for me, for being the best friends I could have asked for.

Thank you, Will, for always supporting me, for making me laugh when I’m at my lowest – for everything.
1.1 Introduction

“I want to thank you, Democrats and Republicans, for your common support for Israel, year after year, decade after decade. I know that no matter on which side of the aisle you sit, you stand with Israel.”\(^1\)

So began Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s speech to Congress on March 3, 2015. That day, the Prime Minister spoke about ongoing negotiations between the United States and Iran, negotiations whose intended outcome was a nuclear deal. Netanyahu began his speech searching for common ground across partisan lines in Congress, but in the case of the Iran nuclear deal, such efforts to create a bipartisan consensus were largely in vain. On July 14, 2015, when Iran, the United States, and five other countries reached the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), commonly referred to as the Iran nuclear deal, 59% of informed Democrats approved of the deal, compared to only 14% of informed Republicans.\(^2\)

This controversy is remarkable, especially because foreign policy rarely grips the American public’s attention as much as issues of domestic policy. Usually, Americans are more concerned about their taxes or health care than they are about the United States’s dealings with another country. When the JCPOA was reached, though, 79% of Americans reported hearing at least a little about it. Of those who had heard about the deal, 86% ventured an opinion in favor or against it.\(^3\) This data raises two questions: first, why did the JCPOA capture public attention in the way that it

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\(^3\) Ibid.
did? And second, how did the public become so polarized around this issue, specifically?

This study argues that traditional models of understanding the way the media influences public opinion are useful, but that in some cases, the effects of media coverage on public opinion outcomes are only comprehensible if we imagine two distinct publics: a Republican one, and a Democratic one. By tracking news coverage and public opinion polling data over time, this study maps out the story of the JCPOA. The news coverage and polling data demonstrate how the way an issue is framed by the media relates to the way the public perceives that issue. This study hypothesizes that an interaction between elite interests and media coverage influenced the public’s perception of the JCPOA, both in holding the public’s interest and in sparking support for and opposition against the deal along partisan lines. Ultimately, the deal’s opposition successfully activated the Republican public but was unable to stop the JCPOA from going through in 2015. However, the JCPOA was easily reversible, due to its features as an executive agreement and possibly due to the opposition’s success in activating the Republican base.

The JCPOA is a case study for the relationship among the views of political elites, media coverage, and public perception. The average American does not experience most political issues firsthand, especially in the case of foreign policy, so he or she is forced to rely on the media in forming opinions. As Danny Hayes and Matt Guardino point out in their book Influence from Abroad: Foreign Voices, the Media, and U.S. Opinion, there is no objective reality that Americans experience to

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form their opinions; everything is filtered by the media, granting journalists a good
deal of power and influence in triggering support and dissent from various segments
of the population.

For the JCPOA, the most important population segmentation is by political
affiliation. From the early stages of the deal’s negotiations, Republicans and
Democrats were opposed. As negotiations progressed and the United States and Iran
ultimately reached a deal, the public became increasingly polarized. Democrats
remained in favor of the deal, and Republicans became more strongly against it. This
shift suggests a role for political elites and the media in solidifying the partisan
divide. This study examines the role of political elites and the media through three
key events, each of which was an effort by those opposed to the deal to sway public
opinion in their favor.

1.2 Brief Historical Context and The Three Key Events

Negotiations for a deal with Iran regarding its nuclear ambitions can be traced
back to 2006, as the United States, China, France, Germany, Russia, and the United
Kingdom (the P5+1) started trying to incentivize Iran to slow or halt nuclear
development. Since 2003, the United States imposed economic sanctions on Iran,
which became an important bargaining chip in the negotiations that would ultimately
lead to the 2015 JCPOA.

In August 2013, Hassan Rouhani was elected President of Iran. Much
mainstream Western media proclaimed that Rouhani was a moderate. In the context

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7 Greg Bruno, “Iran’s Nuclear Program,” Council on Foreign Relations, March 10, 2010
8 Ibid.
of his rival politicians, and compared to the rest of the Iranian government, it is reasonable to say that Rouhani is more moderate, but to say that he is moderate by a Western standard would be an overstatement. Still, just three months after Rouhani’s election, The P5+1 reached an interim nuclear agreement called the Joint Plan of Action with Iran.\(^9\) Only 43% of Americans approved of the interim agreement – 14% of Republicans, and 50% of Democrats.\(^10\) These numbers, reflecting a public that mostly did not support the interim deal, were what the administration and domestic and foreign opposition to the deal were starting out with in their efforts to sway the American public throughout 2014 and 2015.

The purpose of the Joint Plan of Action was to keep Iran at the table and lay out a schedule for future negotiations. From the time the parties reached the Joint Plan of Action, the data suggests that Republicans were more strongly opposed to the deal than Democrats were in favor of it. This study focuses on three key actions by the Republican and foreign opposition to the deal throughout 2015, and tracks how each of these events may have influenced public perception of the deal.

The three key events are:

1. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu spoke in front of a joint-session of Congress in opposition to the deal on March 3, 2015 (“Netanyahu’s speech”)

2. Forty-seven Republican Senators wrote an open letter to Iran in opposition to the deal on March 9, 2015 (“The letter”)


3. Congress passed the Iran Nuclear Agreement Review Act on May 14, 2015 (“The INARA”)

These three events were, or were intended by Republican and foreign actors to be, the most high-profile actions by the deal’s opposition throughout 2015. In the case of Netanyahu’s speech and the letter, the news coverage and public response were largely what the opposition might have expected. Both prompted partisan controversy. In the case of the INARA, though, the media and public did not respond nearly as much as might be expected, and there was little partisan dispute. Through a systematic analysis of each event, this study seeks to answer an additional question: why did each effort affect the public in slightly, and sometimes significantly, different ways? An in-depth comparison of the three events sheds more light on the broader thesis that the opposition’s efforts successfully activated the Republican public.

1.3 The JCPOA

These three key events occurred only because there was fierce elite-level opposition to the JCPOA. Israel was strongly opposed to the deal, the deal was a choice of diplomacy over military action, and most believed that the deal would be ineffective in actually preventing Iran from developing a nuclear weapon. The purpose of the deal was a significant issue in the controversy that followed – was the deal meant to actually stop Iran from getting a nuclear weapon? Was it meant to just slow Iran’s progress? Would it be “good enough” if the deal created a stronger inspections regime, so that the international community could be ready and take further action if Iran did get close to building the bomb?
The Harvard Kennedy School’s Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs seeks to answer these and other questions in an in-depth guide to the Iran Nuclear Deal, published in August 2015.\(^{11}\) The authors assert that the JCPOA is “intended to stop Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons.”\(^ {12}\) Full implementation of the JCPOA, assuming no cheating by Iran, would physically prevent Iran from getting the necessary fissile material for nuclear weapons for at least ten to fifteen years.\(^ {13}\)

These physical constraints operate on two different methods of developing fissile material: plutonium production and uranium enrichment. The JCPOA effectively prevents Iran from producing plutonium by mandating that Iran stop construction on its heavy-water reactor and prohibiting the construction of additional reactors over the next fifteen years. Violations of this provision are relatively easy to detect, and it would take Iran “years” to build the heavy-water reactor necessary for plutonium production after the fifteen-year prohibition ends.\(^ {14}\)

The question of uranium enrichment is a bit trickier. The JCPOA’s restrictions are “less robust” when it comes to uranium enrichment, permitting Iran to retain much of their remaining uranium enrichment infrastructure, which could be expanded after the ten-year ban on development has elapsed. At that point, it would take sometime between a few months and a few years for Iran to enrich sufficient uranium to acquire the bomb.\(^ {15}\) Still, the deal requires Iran to dismantle two-thirds of their nuclear centrifuges and eliminate 98% of their current stock of uranium.

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\(^{12}\) Ibid, 3.

\(^{13}\) Ibid, 3.

\(^{14}\) Ibid, 5.

\(^{15}\) Ibid, 6.
All of these restrictions apply to every *declared* nuclear site in Iran, leaving open the possibility of Iran cheating on the deal in an undeclared nuclear site. To address that concern, the deal codifies a more substantial inspections regime, in partnership with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). Additionally, the JCPOA creates a “snapbacks regime”, through which the international economic sanctions that brought Iran to the table in the first place would be “snapped back” should Iran violate the terms of the deal. In this way, the deal increases both the probability that Iran would get caught developing a nuclear weapon and the cost associated with getting caught.\(^{16}\)

Advocates of the deal argued that it would physically prevent Iran from developing a nuclear weapon until the terms expired in ten to fifteen years, at which point Iran would be more integrated in the global economy and would therefore have a greater incentive to continue abiding by international norms of nonproliferation with or without a deal. Proponents of the deal highlighted the additional monitoring and verifications provisions, which could decrease the probability of any covert nuclear weapon development. Proponents also argued that the deal would help Israel, by preventing Iran from acquiring a nuclear weapon in the immediate future, and that as of July 2015, it would be damaging for the United States’s credibility in negotiations to abandon the rest of the P5+1 by rejecting the deal.\(^{17}\)

On the other side, opponents argued that the deal was not good enough. Opponents said that the deal failed to put in place tight enough restrictions on Iran’s nuclear development, especially as it pertained to uranium enrichment, and that the


\(^{17}\) Ibid 8-10.
limitations that did exist should have lasted more than fifteen years. Opponents disagreed with the assertion that Iran would be fundamentally different in fifteen years, pointing to Iranian rhetoric calling the United States the “Great Satan.” Opponents proposed that if the international community were to maintain economic pressure on Iran, then Iran would make greater concessions going forward, allowing the international community to reach a better deal. Opponents were concerned about Israel and regional security in the Middle East, arguing that this deal would provoke other Arab states to also try and get nuclear weapons and that sanctions relief would give Iran more money to finance aggression and terrorism in the region.  

While this study does not take a position as to the effectiveness of the JCPOA itself, it is important to understand the arguments on both sides to properly assess how media framing about certain dimensions of the deal might have activated different segments of the public.

1.4. Literature Review and the Basic Model for Framing Contests

This study focuses on putting public opinion data in conversation with media coverage and elite opinion using Robert Entman’s “cascading activation” model. This model is a conceptual framework for how various elite actors and the media interact with each other and the public. Entman developed the cascading activation model for public opinion formation in his analysis of the Bush administration’s efforts to drum up support for their responses to the September 11, 2001 attacks. This model provides a straightforward method of organizing the relationship between

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various actors that ultimately influence public opinion, and it allows for an organized consideration of more sophisticated factors, such as the stratification of power among different elites and the variety of strategies that might be chosen by different actors.

In considering the relative power and strategies of different actors throughout the model, Entman’s aim is to predict who will “win” over the public, in the case that there is disagreement between elites and the media. At the top of the model, Entman places the Administration, which includes the White House, State Department, and Department of Defense. In just the Administration, Entman places “Other Elites”, including members of Congress, experts at think tanks, and the possible influence of foreign leaders. All of these actors influence the next level of the cascading activation model: the media. In this way, the model allows the different elites to play out their disagreements in the media, but due to the executive branch’s substantial control over foreign policy, they are at the very top of the information flow.

The media includes print, online, and televised content. Through communications with news organizations and individual journalists, elites aim to influence that content. The way actors communicate with each other in Entman’s model is through frames. The definition of framing in varied in the literature, but can be aptly standardized as: “selecting and highlighting some facets of events or issues, and making connections among them so as to promote a particular interpretation, evaluation, and/or solution.”

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21 Ibid.
22 Ibid.
23 Ibid, 5.
characterized by an actor can change how audiences perceive and understand that issue.\textsuperscript{24} Specific methods of constructing frames include highlighting certain facets of an issue, or connecting ideas in a way that favors one side over another.

These frames are not only used at the upper levels of the cascading activation model – between the Administration, other elites, and media – but are themselves the intermediary between the media and the public. By deliberately choosing certain words and images, the media activates “knowledge networks”, or psychological associations between various words and a particular event.\textsuperscript{25}

Entman’s model is open to incorporating the views of foreign officials in the “other elites” category; however, Entman notes only that the effects of foreign officials on domestic public opinion are “possibly growing” and does not focus on them much as an existing relevant consideration.\textsuperscript{26} Hayes and Guardino argue for the importance of foreign officials in shaping United States public opinion under very specific circumstances, and in so doing they contribute to a robust understanding of the role of framing in the public’s understanding of foreign policy issues. Specifically, Hayes and Guardino argue that foreign officials can influence public opinion if those officials present a perspective that resonates with at least some segment of the American public’s values, and if their perspective is not sufficiently expressed by members of the domestic elite.\textsuperscript{27}


\textsuperscript{26} Ibid, 5.

\textsuperscript{27} Hayes and Guardino. \textit{Influence from Abroad: Foreign Voices, the Media, and U.S. Public Opinion}, 4.
Information flows down the aforementioned list, from the Administration, to other elites (including foreign officials), to the media, and to the public; repackaged into a new frame every step of the way. At the same time, information flows back up through the cascade, as framed representations of public opinion ultimately find their way back to leaders and other elites, informing their subsequent statements and actions. While the model is simple, it provides a coherent way of analyzing who wins in a “framing contest”, which describes a circumstance in which actors advance competing frames, and factors such as power and strategy determine who “wins” over the public.

Entman’s model is situated in a broader debate about whether the media serves as a hegemonic extension of the president’s views on foreign policy, an index or reflection of elite disagreement, or an independent actor that can influence the public through adding its own perspective on an issue. In the aftermath of the Cold War, it has become widely accepted that the media can and often does diverge from the president’s perspective regarding foreign policy issues, so the hegemonic view of the media is mostly outdated.\(^\text{28}\) In this study, the media will be considered primarily in its indexing role and in its capacity to construct its own frames.

To determine where the simplifications inherent in any frame originate, it is important to consider the complexity of the issue. The average American is much more likely to feel confident in his or her opinion about gun control or taxes than he or she is about a complex nuclear agreement. Therefore, most Americans must rely

on the media’s simplifications of a foreign policy issue to develop an opinion.\textsuperscript{29} Consistent with the indexing view of the media, it might be that politicians and other elites simplify the issue extensively into frames, which the media uses to inform their coverage. On the other hand, the media might take a more active role in framing, taking efforts to inform itself, understand what the JCPOA is, and then present arguments of politicians packaged in media frames that they have independently developed.

Earlier, the idea of the JCPOA’s unusual salience was highlighted. This particular element of the public response to the deal relates to the media through the theory of agenda-setting, which argues that there is a strong correlation between how much the media emphasizes certain issues and the importance that the public places on those issues.\textsuperscript{30} The purpose of this project is to evaluate elite efforts to sway the public against the deal via the media, but the presence of the deal as an item on the public agenda is also important. Therefore, an event’s salience, as measured through reported knowledge or “hearing about” an event, will be included when available in Chapter Two’s discussion of polling data over time.

1.5. The Cascading Activation Model Applied to the JCPOA

In the case of the JCPOA, the evidence reviewed suggests that the media largely, but not exclusively, served an indexing role. The media covered elite opinion about the issue, with a slight liberal bend on the mostly objective mainstream network.


news, and communicated the basic talking points of the deal to the general public. Since there was no framing war between the media and the elites, then, the application of the cascading activation model becomes in understanding how partisan debates play out in the media. What happens when the administration and other elites are advancing different frames? Are Americans persuaded by one side or the other, or does opinion solidify along polarized partisan lines?

There is evidence that both sides in the JCPOA were deliberately attempting to influence media coverage and, by extension, the public. Ex-Obama administration official Ben Rhodes, who worked on White House media relations in 2015, stated in an interview that the White House aimed to create an “echo chamber” to advocate for the Iran deal in the media by contacting friendly journalists and think tanks and suggesting how they go about covering the JCPOA. On the opposition side, two of the three events analyzed in this case – Netanyahu’s speech and the letter – appeared to be deliberately timed and executed to get people talking about the JCPOA, and they were successful in that endeavor. This sort of action is precisely what Entman’s model envisions.

In the case of the JCPOA, there are also sources of potential influence from foreign elites. Most notably, the first event analyzed is Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s speech in front of Congress in March 2015. Prime Minister Netanyahu was speaking at the invitation of Republicans in Congress, and he was voicing a perspective shared by many Americans who opposed the deal, so he was certainly not advancing a position absent from American discourse. The influence, or lack thereof, of his speech will either confirm or tend to work against Hayes and
Guardino’s theory that foreign elites only influence United States public opinion when the perspective of that elite is not shared by the public.

The administration and other elites, foreign and domestic, voiced their opinions about the JCPOA in interviews, press releases, speeches, and in sessions of Congress. The information provided by all of these officials ultimately influenced coverage, at the next level in the cascading activation model: the media. This study defines specific frames used by the media to explain the JCPOA. To assess public opinion, the study takes advantage of Entman’s idea of a knowledge network. For the JCPOA, a knowledge network might contain actors such as Presidents Rouhani and Obama, ideals such as diplomacy and peace, and an image of the destructive power of nuclear weapons. Highlighting any one of these images or ideas might provoke an audience to think about other elements of the knowledge network.

The idea of knowledge networks will be capitalized on in this project specifically in the discussion of heightened political polarization, which adds a dimension to foreign policy issues like the JCPOA. Ideological and party affiliation likely influences the schema, or method of interpreting frames via knowledge networks, that exist in individual minds. Put simply, a Republican will receive a news story about the JCPOA differently than a Democrat, and some of that difference can be attributed to a difference of association among actors, countries, images, and ideas. A Democrat might be more likely to associate the idea of diplomacy with the deal, whereas a Republican might be more likely to include war against a noncompliant Iran in his or her knowledge network.
Using Entman’s model to evaluate the communication strategies by the opposition to the deal is significant because, as Graham found in a review of five hundred public opinion surveys from 1938 to 1988, the sophistication in the delivery of a message by various competing political factions directly affects how much public opinion can influence and even constrain a president’s actions with regard to arms control. The administration was likely aware of the stakes in this case, especially given that the majority of Americans originally did not support the interim Joint Plan of Action. So, it was important that the Obama administration either consolidate support among Democrats or persuade sufficient moderates and Republicans to have enough support to move forward with the deal. On the other hand, the opposition could capitalize on a key opportunity to try and actually constrain the President’s ability to reach the deal.

In the end, the P5+1 and Iran reached the deal, despite a lack of bipartisan consensus, and despite successful framing and opinion activation by the opposition. The implications of this outcome are addressed in Chapter Four, as this case study is also an important example of when a President can use executive authority to get a deal through that is just popular enough to only create a backlash from half the population.

1.6 Methodology

This study analyzes public opinion polling data as the dependent variable, and media framing as the independent variable. In other words, the relationship between

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how the media talks about a given event and how the public perceives that event and related issues will be explored. This study does not conduct a data analysis to prove a causal relationship between the media framing and public response. Rather, by tracing media coverage and public opinion across the three events, a comparison demonstrates the strength of media framing in provoking public interest, and trends towards polarization suggest that the media’s communication of certain arguments did resonate with the public.

The three events, as outlined, are Netanyahu’s speech, the letter, and the INARA. Netanyahu gave his speech and the Republican senators published the letter in March 2015, and Congress passed the INARA in May 2015. The JCPOA itself was reached in July 2015. In Chapter Two, this study tracks public opinion polling data in 2015 by considering all available polling data about Iran on pollingreport.com from February 2015 through July 2015, and earlier, as necessary for context, and then isolating the most significant polls for analysis and discussion.

To assess the independent variable of media framing in Chapter Three, this study evaluates nightly and morning news coverage on ABC and opinions pieces and editorials from the Washington Times and the New York Times in the week following each event. ABC News coverage was gathered from LexisNexis for the week after each event, while the newspaper coverage was gathered from each paper’s website for the same timeframe.

ABC News coverage is used to assess what the more objective news networks were saying, as this coverage would have significantly less bias than networks such as Fox News and MSNBC. As Hayes and Guardino point out, television news is “still
the primary source of political and public affairs content for the U.S. mass public”
going into the late 2000s.\textsuperscript{32} Though numbers have slipped somewhat throughout the
twenty-first century, the “Big Three” news networks – CBS, NBC, and ABC – still remain dominant. This study uses ABC specifically, rather than assessing CBS, NBC, and ABC, due to resource constraints. Further, ABC’s nightly news broadcast was the
top nightly news network for the relevant time period in 2015, drawing an average of
7.853 million total viewers per night.\textsuperscript{33}

This study uses the Washington Times and the New York Times to ascertain the arguments communicated to the public from the right and the left. The Washington Times tends to have a conservative bias, while the New York Times tends to have a liberal bias in their respective opinions and editorial pages. The public that is reading the Editorial and op-ed pages in these newspapers is likely more engaged in politics than the average person, and may even be looking to validate their own partisan beliefs, so the ABC News coverage remains the most important in determining what the “average” American would have been exposed to. At the same time, since Democrats and Republicans were so polarized on the Iran nuclear deal from the start, the arguments they might read in the paper to reinforce and strengthen those beliefs remain significant.

Finally, this study ties together the independent variable of media coverage and the dependent variable of public opinion in a qualitative analysis. Tracking the

\textsuperscript{32} Hayes and Guardino, \textit{Influence from Abroad: Foreign Voices, the Media, and U.S. Public Opinion}, 27.
story of the two variables across the three events essentially creates three “sub-case studies”, which, when compared, have important implications for the ways different attempts to lead public opinion play out. All in all, this method demonstrates the way that elite voices come through in media depictions of an event, and shows how polarization increases contemporaneously with the availability of that information. The evidence demonstrates a probable causal link, but this study does not overstate its findings by claiming a unique causal relationship.

1.7 Conclusion

Chapter Two provides both a brief history of the JCPOA and an analysis of polling data. Specifically, Chapter Two begins by providing historical context for the United States’s relationship with Iran leading up to the three key events. Next, the Chapter assesses each of the three key events by describing each one, explaining its significance, and outlining polling data from the time of each event. The events and data start to suggest two ongoing conflicts: a partisan one, between Democrats and Republicans, and an institutional one, between the legislative and the executive branches. This institutional conflict is related to the partisan conflict, as Congress was controlled by the Republicans and President Obama is a Democrat. However, the institutional conflict relates more to which body of government actually has the power to decide whether the United States should accept the deal, and therefore has more significant practical implications than the partisan conflict alone.

Chapter Three analyzes media framing. The media primarily framed the JCPOA as three conflicts: an institutional conflict between the legislative and executive branches, a partisan conflict between Democrats and Republicans, and a
political conflict between Obama and Netanyahu. The analysis underlying those frames relies on a qualitative assessment of the ABC News coverage, to understand how the event was framed without a politically motivated source, while the qualitative assessment of the opinions pieces and editorials offers a glimpse into what partisans were debating.

Chapters Two and Three both also include a brief review of polling data and news coverage around July 14, 2015, when the P5+1 and Iran officially agreed on the JCPOA. This information is included primarily to provide context and tell a complete story of the JCPOA, rather than to inform the analysis of the three events, specifically.

Chapter Four pulls together the elements of the cascading activation model discussed separately in Chapters Two and Three, explaining exactly how the model is a useful way of understanding the 2015 JCPOA, especially accounting for the diverging knowledge networks of Republicans and Democrats. Chapter Four also compares the three events to explain why they had varying levels of success in activating the public. Finally, Chapter Four addresses the implications of this study, especially with regards to President Trump’s decision to exit the JCPOA.
Chapter Two: Key Events and Polling Data

2.1. Introduction

Public opinion polling data, especially segmented along partisan lines, is the dependent variable in this study. This chapter summarizes the dependent variable and provides historical information about three key events in 2015. The polling data focuses on each of the three events, the deal itself, negotiations for the deal, and other questions related to Iran. A review of this evidence suggests a clearly definable divergence in the knowledge networks of Republicans and Democrats. Finally, this chapter discusses polling data from April to July 2015, to create a complete picture of public opinion up through the deal’s official formation on July 14, 2015.

The opposition’s first action in this study was to invite Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to speak in front of Congress on March 3, 2015. Of course, public opinion about Iran, Israel, nuclear weapons, military intervention, and a host of other related issues did not exist in a vacuum starting in March 2015. When both the administration and the opposition initiated attempts to shape the public’s view of the deal, they understood what they were “working with” in terms of existing public opinion. As the cascading activation model predicts, not only does information flow down to the public from elites through the media, but information about what the public believes also flows back up in the form of polling data. While polling data is a dependent variable, in that public opinion forms largely as a result of elite and media level framing, it is also important to consider as an input in elite and media level decisions about how to construct those frames. To that end, this chapter begins with a sketch of public opinion in the years leading up to 2015.
After the Iranian Revolution in 1979 instated a fundamentalist government with covert nuclear ambitions, public and elite opinion in the United States turned sharply against Iran.\textsuperscript{34,35} At times, the public even supported taking military action, should Iran continue their efforts to develop nuclear weapons. Twelve years before the JCPOA was reached, in April 2003, polling data revealed that the public was not especially polarized on the use of force to prevent a nuclear Iran – 52\% of Democrats were in favor of military action if Iran continued developing nuclear weapons and other weapons of mass destruction (WMDs), versus 59\% of Republicans.\textsuperscript{36}

For the most part, Americans were afraid of Iran because they suspected that Iran was developing WMDs and supporting terrorist groups. In June 2003, 84\% of Americans believed that Iran was at least somewhat likely to be developing WMDs, and 89\% believed it was at least somewhat likely Iran was providing assistance to terrorists.\textsuperscript{37} Furthermore, 72\% of Americans believed that Iran would be likely to attack Israel should they develop nuclear weapons.\textsuperscript{38} Throughout 2006, Americans consistently reported that they believed Iran was a medium or long-term threat to United States interests, and that the use of military force might be justified to prevent Iran from obtaining and using nuclear weapons.\textsuperscript{39}

However, the way a question is posed to an audience can significantly affect the way the public responds.\textsuperscript{40} Other polls asked whether America should go to war with Iran immediately, or take other specific military actions that imply commitments or casualties. Those specific actions was far less popular than support for hypothetical military action in the event that Iran did, someday, obtain a nuclear weapon, which suggests that Americans would not have been as supportive of an actual war as they might have expected to be.\textsuperscript{41, 42}

Although more than half of Americans tended to support military intervention in theory, the most popular responses in practice were economic or diplomatic.\textsuperscript{43} In the early 2000s, these manifested mostly as economic sanctions. In January 2006 and November 2007, upwards of 70\% of Americans supported international and U.S.-based economic sanctions against Iran.\textsuperscript{44, 45} The data also reveals an inclination towards multilateral efforts to contain Iran’s nuclear program. In February 2006, 78\% of Americans believed that the United Nations should take the lead in dealing with Iran’s nuclear program, compared to 17\% who said the United States should.\textsuperscript{46} The JCPOA was a multilateral effort based around diplomacy and the use of economic sanctions relief as a bargaining chip, fitting right in with what the administration likely believed the public would support.

\textsuperscript{43} CNN/USA Today/Gallup Poll, February 9-12, 2006. Retrieved from: pollingreport.com/iran.htm  
The Green Movement of 2009 shifted American public opinion even further against Iran. The Green Movement was a series of protests in Iran beginning in June 2009, prompted by a fraudulent presidential election. Just before the Green Movement began, in April 2009, 53% of Americans believed that the United States should establish a diplomatic relationship with Iran while Iran still had a nuclear program. In the fall of 2009, though, after the Green Movement started, 78% of Americans said they would approve of tougher international sanctions against Iran.

The Green Movement was also followed by a slight increase in the public’s willingness to use military action against Iran immediately, though the percent of the public in favor of that course of action never topped 20%. Further, the rates of desiring a diplomatic relationship with Iran declined from 61% at the beginning of Obama’s presidency to 55% in November of 2011. In September 2009, intelligence officials also discovered a covert uranium enrichment facility in Iran, which had been constructed under the nose of international inspectors, and a February 2010 IAEA report confirmed that Iran had the potential to develop a nuclear weapon. By 2012, the public was beginning to doubt the efficacy of sanctions. Throughout 2012 and 2013, the public tended towards increased support of doing whatever it took to prevent Iran from getting nuclear weapons, including military intervention.

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The first significant polling data about a nuclear deal with Iran came in the midst of this increased support for potential military action. In November 2013, 64% of Americans supported a hypothetical multilateral agreement that would lift some economic sanctions in exchange for restrictions on Iran’s nuclear program. In one poll, polarization was not nearly as intense as it would be in 2015, with 57% of Republicans and 72% of Democrats supporting the hypothetical deal.\(^{53}\) However, another poll conducted at the same time found only a 56% overall approval rating for an interim deal easing some economic sanctions in exchange for restrictions on the nuclear program, with a 66% approval rating from Democrats and only a 45% rate of approval from Republicans. The discrepancy between the two polls may be attributable to slight variations in the phrasings of the questions, as the latter went into more detail than the former about how the restrictions would stop short of ending Iran’s nuclear program. Just after these polls was conducted, on November 24, 2013, the P5+1 countries reached the Joint Plan of Action, the predecessor to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, which set out the terms of negotiating the comprehensive deal.

Negotiations continued throughout 2014, but they attracted little attention from pollsters until March 2015. What little data there is reveals that, going into the time period of this study, the public mostly did not believe that the negotiations would prevent Iran from getting a nuclear weapon.\(^{54}\) The opposition to the deal was


in an advantageous position from the start – regardless of whether the public supported the deal, they did not think it would work, if the goal of the deal was to actually stop Iran from building a nuclear weapon. Still, the opposition would have to contend with and even persuade members of the elite and public who believed that the JCPOA would be better than no deal. The remainder of this chapter analyzes the three main ways that the JCPOA’s opposition attempted to do just that.

2.2. Netanyahu’s Speech

On March 3, 2015, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu delivered a speech to a joint session of Congress. Netanyahu began his address with the quote from the introduction of Chapter One, thanking Democrats and Republicans for their “common support for Israel, year after year, decade after decade.” Netanyahu was responding to the highly partisan controversy the scheduling of his speech had provoked. On January 21, 2015, just after President Obama’s State of the Union Address, House Speaker John Boehner invited Netanyahu to speak in front of Congress. Boehner said that Republicans were not going “to stand idly by and do nothing while [President Obama] cuts a bad deal with Iran” and told reporters that he did not speak with Obama before inviting Netanyahu to speak.55

The substance of Netanyahu’s speech focuses on two specific criticisms of the likely nuclear deal. First, he argued that the deal would guarantee Iran a short breakout time, or the time it would take to actually develop a nuclear weapon, by not requiring the demolition of nuclear facilities. Netanyahu asserted that inspections

would be ineffective in preventing the development of a weapon, should Iran decide that it wishes to violate the deal and pursue the bomb. Netanyahu’s second argument is that the ten-year expiration date of the deal guarantees that Iran’s nuclear program would be free to develop without restriction ten years down the line. He argued that Iran presents a significant safety risk to Israel and the international community more broadly, referring to Iran’s sponsorship of terrorism and disparaging statements from Iranian leadership about both the United States and Israel.

More significant, perhaps, than the content of the speech itself is the historic statement that it made. Normally, the President invites others heads of state to visit, so the White House said that this invitation from the Speaker of the House was a “breach of typical diplomatic protocol.” Some also saw the invitation as a deliberate effort to derail negotiations. The Republican leadership in Congress invited a foreign leader to speak about the ongoing negotiations between the United States, the rest of the P5+1, and Iran, despite the fact that this foreign leader was not a party to those negotiations. In this way, Republican congressional opposition made their first interjection in the executive branch’s negotiations, setting off an executive versus legislative conflict over the JCPOA that would continue throughout 2015.

Polling data from February of 2015 revealed that 63% of Americans thought that congressional leaders did the wrong thing when they invited Netanyahu to address Congress without notifying President Obama beforehand, compared to 33% who thought they had done the right thing. A slight Republican majority supported

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56 Nakumara, Sullivan, and Fahrenthold, “Republicans Invite Netanyahu to address Congress as part of spurning of Obama.”
the invitation, at 52%, while only 14% of Democrats believed that the invitation was the right thing to do.\textsuperscript{58} Although the existence of a partisan divide is consistent with what we might expect for such a polarized issue, especially since this move was largely lead by Republican leadership, it is significant that such a small majority of Republicans supported the move. The fact that Republicans only had lukewarm support for the invitation tends to suggest that violating any norm is unpopular, even if the public supports the elites’ broader motives in violating that norm.

Public opinion about Netanyahu and Israel are significant elements of the public’s knowledge networks, and serve as a key point of disagreement for Republicans and Democrats. 38% of Americans had a favorable impression of Netanyahu as of February 2015, compared to 27% with an unfavorable impression and a high percentage, 35%, of the public that had never heard of him. Republicans were far more likely than Democrats to have heard of Netanyahu and perceive him favorably, at a 58% favorability rate and only a 25% rate of not knowing who he is. On the other side of the aisle, only 28% had a favorable impression, 35% had an unfavorable impression, and 37% had not heard of him.\textsuperscript{59}

In 2015, Americans across the board wanted the United States to be supportive of Israel, but the question of how supportive created partisan tension. In February 2015, 55% of Democrats thought the United States was “about right” in their support of Israel, while 54% Republicans thought the U.S. was not supportive.

\textsuperscript{58} CNN/ORC Poll, February 12-15, 2015.
\textsuperscript{59} “More View Netanyahu Favorably Than Unfavorably; Many Unaware of Israeli Leader: Little Change in Views of Level of U.S. Support for Israel,” \textit{Pew Research Center}, February 27, 2015.
enough. 26% of Democrats thought the United States was too supportive of Israel, compared to only 7% of Republicans.60

The significance of Netanyahu’s speech in public opinion formation largely depends upon whether Hayes’s assertion is true, that foreign leaders’ voices only matter in cases where there is no domestic voice arguing the same position. Of course, there was a strong movement against the deal within the United States, so Netanyahu was not bringing in a new perspective. However, it was American congressmen who gave Netanyahu a platform, in a setting that would have been associated with the United States in any American’s knowledge network; he spoke in front of Congress. Netanyahu’s speech, then, differs from a general situation wherein a foreign leader voices an opinion and that leader’s opinion is covered by American journalists.

The speech served a few purposes. The Republican elite and Prime Minister Netanyahu probably both hoped to persuade members of the public to oppose the deal, as demonstrated by Netanyahu’s bipartisan language and appeals to Israel’s national security. As the data suggests, supporting Israel’s safety and right to exist were a relatively uncontroversial issues in 2015, and therefore might have been key rallying points for a potential bipartisan opposition to the deal. By bringing Netanyahu to speak through an unconventional invitation, however, Republicans risked offending Democrats, which is exactly what the polling data and elite reactions suggest happened. The controversy certainly would have crippled the speech’s ability

60 “More View Netanyahu Favorably Than Unfavorably; Many Unaware of Israeli Leader: Little Change in Views of Level of U.S. Support for Israel,” Pew Research Center, February 27, 2015.
to persuade Democrats, but it may have allowed Republicans to further activate their own base, by showing that they were willing to do whatever it took to stop the deal.

Since the letter discussed in Chapter 2.3, below, was released just six days after Netanyahu’s speech, that section discusses polling data about negotiations and the deal in general, taking both the letter and Netanyahu’s speech into account. Chapter 3.2 focuses on the efficacy of Netanyahu’s speech specifically in attracting media attention, and assesses how the media framed the speech.

2.3. The Letter

Less than a week after Netanyahu spoke in front of Congress at the Republican leadership’s invitation, forty-seven Republican senators released an open letter to the Islamic Republic of Iran. On March 9, 2015, The New York Times published that letter, which was approximately one page of single-spaced text followed by three pages of signatures. The senators began the letter by stating their intention to inform the leaders of Iran about the American constitutional system, explaining first that Congress must ratify an international agreement, whether it is a treaty or a congressional-executive agreement. The senators then wrote that, should Congress fail to ratify the deal, it would be merely an executive agreement, which need not be followed by President Obama’s successor. As the senators put it, “the next president could revoke such an executive agreement with the stroke of a pen and future Congresses could modify the terms of the agreement at any time.”

This letter was extremely controversial. Some, mostly on the right, argued that

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the letter was simply an explanation of constitutional law, adding more transparency
to the process. However, many found the letter to be an offensive breach of
international norms of negotiations. Just as the Obama administration and many other
Democrats disapproved of Netanyahu’s speech, the same actors saw the letter as an
unprecedented effort by Congress to undermine the administration’s goal of reaching
a deal by directly interfering.

These different elite-level reactions falling along party lines were echoed by
the public, as captured by polling data from March 2015. A poll conducted shortly
after the letter’s publication, from March 13-15, 2015, asked respondents whether the
letter “went too far” or was an appropriate response to the way negotiations were
going. The pollsters also asked what the public believed the letter might actually
change about the negotiations, if anything.

On both these questions, there was a statistically significant difference
between the responses of Democrats and Republicans. Republicans were far more
likely to support the legitimacy of the letter as a political tactic: 52% of Republicans
believed the letter was an appropriate response to negotiations, while 67% of
Democrats thought the letter went too far.\textsuperscript{63} There is certainly a partisan divide, but
just as in the case of Netanyahu’s speech, the difference suggests that Republicans
were less strongly in favor of the letter than Democrats were opposed to it. This
presents implications about the popularity, or lack thereof, of breaking a norm in
international negotiations, even among compatriots of the party that broke the norm.
Only 24% of Republicans thought the letter would hurt U.S. efforts at diplomacy with

\textsuperscript{63} CNN/ORC Poll, March 13-15, 2015. Retrieved at:
http://i2.cdn.turner.com/cnn/2015/images/03/16/iran.poll.pdf
Iran, compared with the plurality of Democrats (44%). Most Republicans thought the letter would have no effect on negotiations (50%).

The opposition’s most likely goals by publishing this letter were to set the agenda and influence the negotiations themselves. Specifically, one point of the letter was to push negotiations with Iran to the top of the agenda, and in so doing show the public that the opposition to the deal was vocal and willing to take drastic measures to stop a deal. Only 3% of respondents reported that they hadn’t heard of the letter, indicating that the letter’s publication was likely an effective agenda-setting method, and suggesting a significant magnitude of impact of media framing on public opinion. Additionally, the description of the letter as an “open letter to the Islamic Republic of Iran” indicates a desire to directly interfere with the negotiations, asking that Iran’s leadership take any deal made without congressional approval with a grain of salt. The most likely explanation for the letter, then, is that the Republicans aimed to influence the actual formation of the deal and rally their base against the deal by highlighting its importance.

In March 2015, there was some bipartisan common ground regarding negotiations for the JCPOA. Although the deal would wind up being wildly unpopular among Republicans when it was signed in July 2015, in March 65% of Republicans still supported negotiations with Iran. As the issue became more partisan and as negotiations went on, approaching a concrete deal with definable pros and cons, public support for the negotiations slipped somewhat. Overall, in March 2015

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65 Ibid.
68% of Americans supported direct negotiations to try and prevent Iran from developing nuclear weapons, down from 76% in CNN’s September 2013 poll with the same question and 78% from CNN’s October 2009 poll with the same question. A Pew poll from the end of March 2015 was consistent with the CNN poll, finding that from 2009 to 2015 approval of negotiations declined from 63% to 49% while disapproval increased from 28% to 40%. Still, a deal itself remained somewhat popular, as 59% of the public supported a hypothetical agreement lifting sanctions in exchange for making it harder for Iran to develop a nuclear weapon. Along party lines, 68% of Democrats supported this hypothetical deal, compared to 47% of Republicans. However, only 25% of Republicans supported this hypothetical deal strongly, compared to 41% of Democrats. 43% of Republicans strongly opposed the deal, compared to 22% of Democrats.

The letter itself, like the manner in which Netanyahu was invited to speak to Congress, highlights the ongoing conflict between legislative and executive authority when it came to the JCPOA. Specifically, the letter focuses on the weaknesses of a deal reached without congressional approval. Public opinion about whether Congress or Obama should have “final authority” over a nuclear agreement fell on partisan lines. 82% of Republicans believed that Congress should have the final say, compared to 42% of Democrats. According to Pew, this is consistent with broader trends, as members of the president’s party tend to favor him having more control over foreign

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68 Ibid.
policy decisions, while members of the opposing party prefer that Congress have the final say.  

The letter was published at a point when support for negotiations was slipping, and public opinion was strengthening along party lines. The public was extremely aware of the letter, suggesting a strong role for media framing in shaping public opinion and in activating knowledge networks that differed between Republicans and Democrats. Clearly, the story was becoming one of Congress versus the President, and Democrats versus Republicans.

2.4. The Iran Nuclear Agreement Review Act: May 14, 2015

On May 7, 2015, the Senate passed a long-planned and discussed law allowing them to have somewhat of a say in a nuclear deal with Iran, the Iran Nuclear Agreement Review Act. On May 14, 2015, it passed the House and President Obama signed it into law. The most important feature of the INARA is the creation of a sixty-day review period. Following the formation of a deal, Congress would have sixty days to attempt to issue a resolution of approval or disapproval of the deal. During that review period, the President would be prohibited from waiving statutory sanctions. If Congress reached a resolution of approval or no resolution, the President would be free to waive sanctions. If Congress successfully issued a resolution of disapproval, though, Congress would delay the President’s ability to waive sanctions and would continue implementing statutory sanctions.  

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70 Iran Nuclear Agreement Review Act of 2015
The INARA also set the parameters of communication between the President and the Congress. It directed the White House to give Congress the deal within five days of reaching it, verify that the deal did what it is was supposed to do and did not jeopardize national security, and prepare a report assessing the IAEA and United States’s ability to verify compliance on Iran’s end. It also required the President to send information about any Iranian breaches of the deal to Congress within ten days of receiving information about a breach, and to determine and communicate to Congress within thirty days of the breach whether it constitutes a “material breach” or a “compliance incident.”

This law addressed a key constitutional dispute that had been ongoing throughout negotiations for the JCPOA. Specifically, it asserts the President’s right to reach this deal but Congress’s right to review it, because Congress was the one who instated the sanctions. The law is clear that it does not intend to modify the President’s right to negotiate, enter into, or implement executive agreements, and that certain sanctions will remain in place regardless of whether a deal is approved by Congress. Specifically, sanctions put in place to punish Iran for their support of terrorism and human rights abuses, and those barring the sale of ballistic missiles to Iran, shall remain in place no matter what. The law finally asserts that any agreement cannot compromise the United States’s commitment to Israel’s security and support for Israel’s right to exist, and that any agreement shall not be seen as the United States deciding not to address issues of Americans held in captivity in Iran and human rights abuses by Iran against its people.

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71 Iran Nuclear Agreement Review Act of 2015
72 Iran Nuclear Agreement Review Act of 2015
There is not significant polling data about the INARA. The INARA was different from the letter and Netanyahu’s speech, first because it was created through an indisputably legitimate and traditional channel. The Act was also not the “victory” for the opposition that they had expected. Republicans and others who opposed the negotiations with Iran proposed amendments to the INARA that were never included in the law, and most of the partisan controversy within Congress surrounded those amendments, not the law itself. These amendments included a requirement for Iran to recognize Israel or to release Americans held overseas in Iran in exchange for any deal. The underlying bill itself wound up being fairly uncontroversial on partisan lines, as both parties widely supported it and it was passed in the Senate by a 98-1 vote. Only Tom Cotton, the main author of the letter and one of the sponsors of several of the controversial amendments to the Act, voted against its passage. The bill was then passed by the House by a 400-25 vote, despite, again, some conservatives arguing that the bill was not strong enough. Although this law was set up to be yet another partisan conflict, it wound up passing quietly and not prompting polling data at all.

2.5. Opinion in April through July 2015

Since the Iran Nuclear Agreement Review Act did not prove as controversial as one might expect, assessing opinion at this time required a slightly different approach than the one used in evaluating Netanyahu’s speech and the letter. Additionally, this study would not be complete without an understanding of where

public opinion landed once the parties reached the deal in July 2015. Most data from April through July 2015 is concentrated around the two versions of the deal reached in 2015: the first, an interim framework deal reached on April 2, and the second, the exhaustive JCPOA reached on July 14.

The framework deal laid out the broad strokes of the July agreement. April polling reveals that 46% of Americans approved of the interim deal, while 37% disapproved and 18% had no opinion. Public opinion about the deal fell along partisan lines, more sharply than the hypothetical deals of the months before, with 72% of Democrats supporting April’s framework deal versus only 20% of Republicans. The same poll found that 72% of the public believed that Congress should have a role in deciding whether the United States would support an agreement, up from 62% in a March 2015 poll. Only 19% of the public said Congress should have no role. Going into the passage of the Iran Nuclear Agreement Review Act, then, it was clear that the majority of the public would be on Congress’s side to the extent that they should have some sort of say in the deal.

At the elite level, President Obama said in April that congressional action was unnecessary, and only risked undermining the negotiations. Despite Obama’s position, 58% of Democrats supported Congress having a say in the deal, compared to 91% of Republicans. The March 2015 Pew poll cited in Chapter 2.3 found substantially lower numbers, especially on the Democrat side, but that poll asked if

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77 Ibid.
Congress should have the final say. It appears that members of both parties agreed Congress should be involved in the deal’s implementation, but disagreed about who should make the final call.

One April poll summarized the deal as lifting sanctions that have damaged Iran’s economy in exchange for extensive inspections of any Iranian nuclear activity. 49% of the public was optimistic that that deal would make the world safer by making it less likely that Iran would develop a nuclear weapon, and 43% were pessimistic regarding that prospect. Additionally, 61% of Americans supported hypothetically taking military action against Iran, should they violate an agreement, showing that support for hypothetical military action against Iran remained strong.

Just before the deal was reached, polling indicated that 74% of Americans had heard at least a little about the negotiations with Iran. The public remained split about 50/50 on whether the negotiations were a good idea. 55% of Americans had no trust at all in Iran to abide by the terms of the agreement. 35% had a little trust in Iran, and just 5% trusted Iran a lot. Additionally, 64% of Americans thought negotiations would fail to lead to an agreement that prevented Iran from developing nuclear weapons. Even on the eve of the deal’s announcements, most of the public thought that it would not work in one specific way: it would not stop Iran from ultimately getting nuclear weapons.

A poll from just a week after the deal was reached reveals the continued relevance of the INARA. Respondents were asked whether Congress should approve

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80 Monmouth University Poll, July 9-12, 2015, Retrieved from: pollingreport.com/iran.htm
or reject the deal. 44% said approve, 52% said reject, and numbers remained polarized. 61% of Democrats supported approval, which was about two times the rate of Republican approval, while 36% of Democrats supported rejection, compared with 66% of Republicans. Ultimately, the INARA was the most formal and legitimate element of an opposition strategy which tried to take advantage of the Republican majority in Congress to create and win a partisan conflict.

2.6. Conclusion

Following the opposition’s efforts, the P5+1 and Iran reached the JCPOA, and Republicans in Congress were unable to gather enough support to reach a resolution of disapproval. Congress never formally approved of the deal, either. Just after the JCPOA was reached, approval ratings were low. Among people who had heard of the deal, just 38% of the public approved of it, and 48% disapproved. Republicans familiar with the agreement disapproved, and only 14% of Republicans approved, while 59% of Democrats approved, and 25% disapproved. President Trump would ultimately make good on the Republicans’ warning in the March 2015 letter, withdrawing the United States from the JCPOA on May 8, 2018.

This outcome highlights the importance of assessing the institutional and partisan conflicts of 2015, when the Obama administration struggled to reach a deal that a good portion of the population was never going to support. The data also presents implications for the role of public opinion in foreign policy decisions. As a second-term president, Obama was not constrained from reaching the deal, despite its

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83 Ibid.
general lack of popularity, and despite its popularity being largely limited to Democrats. During President Trump’s first term, he was able to withdraw from the deal, likely in an attempt to please the members of his own party who had been opposed to it from the start.

Based on these outcomes, a couple of generalizations can be made. First, polarization was present from the beginning and only tended to increase over time. Second, Americans in general were very likely to have heard about negotiations and the deal, especially following the two non-traditional moves by the Republicans (the letter and Netanyahu’s speech). Because Americans were engaged with the issue, the media likely had a role in informing public opinion. As the increasing polarization suggests, analyzing news sources from the right and left might reveal the arguments underlying solidifying partisan attitudes.

Although the first observation, that polarization increased over time, is important, a more interesting element of this story is how that polarization increased. In November 2013 polling, between 45% and 57% of Republicans were in favor of a hypothetical nuclear deal. As mentioned, in July of 2015, when confronted with the real JCPOA, only 14% of Republicans approved – a 31% to 43% decrease. However, in December of 2013, just 14% of Republicans supported the interim November 2013 Joint Plan of Action with Iran, the same percentage that would ultimately be supportive of the JCPOA. 84 Going into the JCPOA negotiations, then, Republicans were not happy with the interim deal, but they were more open to some better nuclear deal. While the approval ratings for the Joint Plan of Action and JCPOA remained

constant among Republicans, the disapproval ratings increased from 59% for the
November 2013 Joint Plan of Action to 75% for the July 2015 JCPOA. In these ways,
polarization on the Republican side increased over time.

Democrats, on the other hand, remained in favor of the deal. They were less in
favor of the JCPOA than they were of the hypothetical agreement, but more in favor
of the JCPOA than they were of the Joint Plan of Action. Just 50% of Democrats
supported the Joint Plan of Action in December 2013. Between 66% and 72% of
Democrats supported that hypothetical agreement in November 2013, compared with
59% who supported the actual JCPOA. Part of that decrease for both Republicans and
Democrats can be attributed to the phrasing of the question. A hypothetical agreement
will likely be more popular than a tangible one, which has clear drawbacks.
Additionally, approval ratings for the JCPOA among Democrats increased 9% over
their approval for the Joint Plan of Action. The administration’s own framing efforts
very well might have also activated their base, though that activation was not
sufficient to convince more than half of the general public to support the deal. In that
way, this study’s analysis of the behavior of the opposition captures the more
impactful part of the JCPOA framing effort.

Going into Chapter Three’s media analysis, a stylized version of the
knowledge networks for a Republican and Democratic public is helpful to organize an
analysis of how the media might have gone about influencing the public. Through this
chapter’s polling data, elements of the Republican and Democrat knowledge
networks about the JCPOA negotiations and deal are summarized on page forty-five.

85 “Limited Support for Iran Nuclear Agreement.” Pew Research Center, Pew Research Center. 9
December 2013.
Note that these knowledge networks rely largely on polling data from March through July 2015, so they reflect only what the public likely believed contemporaneously with the news coverage. The knowledge networks operate as Entman argues, as the mechanism through which news coverage influences the public, but in this case, they can also be interpreted as a representation of the information that the elites would have been aware of as they were responding to and discussing current events, since they are based on polling data that would have been communicated to the elites.

These knowledge networks are, of course, oversimplifications, as a real knowledge network is unique to every individual. They are also based on a very limited amount of data, so they reflect only a small percentage of what the average Democrat or Republican would believe. Essentially, these knowledge networks are constructed for the limited purpose of evaluating the way that framing efforts for the three events in this study may have influenced members of each party.
Republican Knowledge Network

- Negotiations: generally supportive
- Military strength is better than diplomacy to ensure peace.\(^86\)
- Institutional conflict: Congress should have the final say
- Israel: positive perception of Netanyahu, should help Israel more
- Iran: no confidence that they will comply\(^87\)
- International monitoring: no confidence that they would catch Iran cheating\(^88\)

Democrat Knowledge Network

- Negotiations: supportive
- Diplomacy is the best way to ensure peace.\(^89\)
- Institutional conflict: President should have the final say, but Congress should have some say
- Israel: negative or no perception of Netanyahu, help Israel enough or should help a little less
- Iran: at least somewhat confidence that Iran will comply\(^90\)
- International Inspections: at least somewhat confident that they would catch Iran cheating.\(^91\)

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\(^87\) Ibid.
\(^88\) Ibid.
\(^89\) Ibid.
\(^90\) Ibid.
\(^91\) Ibid.
Chapter Three: Media Coverage

3.1 Introduction

When the media served a role in these three cases, it was mostly an indexing one. Coverage directly quoted administration officials and other elites and summarized both sides of the debate over the JCPOA negotiations. This chapter demonstrates the media’s role in each case through an analysis of nightly and morning news coverage on ABC and editorials and opinions pieces from the New York Times and the Washington Times. By analyzing ABC news coverage, this study ascertains how big of an issue each of the three events was, and assesses how elites did or did not go about attempting to activate public opinion. In this sense, this chapter measures the independent variable, analyzing how and why the polling data discussed in Chapter Two might have turned out the way it did. Opinions pieces and editorials include the arguments partisans were using about each event, which provide further clarity to the way the media and elites were able to activate a polarized public.

Following Chapter Two, this chapter is organized by the three events: Netanyahu’s Speech, the Letter, and the Iran Nuclear Agreement Review Act. Each event received qualitatively different coverage, coverage which is compared in the conclusion to this chapter. Following the analysis of the three events, Section 3.5 includes a brief assessment of the coverage that the JCPOA received when it was announced in July 2015. Coverage of the JCPOA’s announcement provides a complete picture and a metric by which to compare the amount of coverage that each of the three events received, since the deal itself was certainly more significant historically than the events leading up to it.
3.2 Netanyahu’s Speech

The media framed Netanyahu’s speech primarily as a conflict between the Obama administration and Netanyahu, rather than a conflict between Republicans and Democrats. The speech also had less agenda-setting power than the letter, discussed below, which is consistent with Hayes’s assertion that foreign leaders have limited influence in domestic opinion about United States foreign policy. Specifically, ABC News only covered the speech on March 3, 2015, the day it occurred. From March 4-9, 2015, the speech did not receive any coverage on ABC News, and then after the letter was released on March 9, the speech was only occasionally mentioned in coverage as context for the letter, showing that the speech only had medium-term influence, and mostly only insofar as the speech related to the domestic actors involved – the Republicans who invited Netanyahu, who also released that letter.

In the March 3, 2015, ABC World News Tonight Coverage, the media used a conflict frame right off the bat. They introduced Netanyahu as a “world leader who came to the United States today and spoke before Congress, taking on President Obama’s foreign policy.”92 ABC quoted Obama first, saying that he didn’t watch the speech and that Netanyahu’s speech offered “nothing new.”93 Next, they moved to the coverage of the speech itself, calling it a “dramatic denunciation of the Obama administration’s negotiations with Iran.”94 ABC quoted Netanyahu saying: “it doesn’t block Iran’s path to the bomb, it paves Iran’s path to the bomb.”95 Obama’s response

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93 Ibid.
94 Ibid.
95 Ibid.
was to ask Netanyahu what his alternative plan would be, asserting that the plan
Netanyahu promotes is “no deal” which would cause Iran to “immediately begin once
again pursuing its nuclear program.” The media used Obama’s framed
characterization of the opposition’s point of view, that their position is no deal at all,
implicitly arguing that this deal is better than nothing.

So far, coverage of the speech itself in the mainstream media has operated in a
traditional indexing manner. ABC’s nightly news covered both Obama and
Netanyahu’s positions through quoting their public statements, including Netanyahu’s
statements during his speech before Congress. Coverage then shifted to the
“upwards” direction of the cascading activation model – the media covered public
reactions, but not from the domestic public. The media focused instead on the
reactions in Israel and Iran.

The coverage framed Israel’s reactions in the context of electoral politics,
pointing out that Netanyahu’s appearance in the United States may have been
motivated by his domestic electoral concerns. ABC News called the upcoming Israeli
election a “close fight”, and said that Netanyahu’s speech in front of Congress helped
his electoral odds in two ways: first, it prompted praise from Israeli commentators,
and second, the image alone of the Prime Minister speaking in front of the American
Congress resonated with Israeli voters.96 In the knowledge network of an Israeli voter,
that image was likely associated with maintaining a strong relationship with the
United States, and it likely prompted patriotic feelings, as Netanyahu “stuck up” for
Israel. In this way, Netanyahu’s own political concerns intersected with the concerns

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96 David Muir, “Tough Talk; Netanyahu Warns Congress of Nuclear Iran,” ABC News, World News
of the Republicans in Congress who invited him to speak, and the Israeli public’s knowledge networks are put at the center of the story.

In Iran, the interviews and quotes from the public focus on the effects of the sanctions regime and its implications for the negotiations. ABC’s reporter spoke with Iranians, most of whom supported some sort of agreement with the United States because of how bad the sanctions had been for Iran’s economy.97 Covering the effects of the sanctions on the Iranian people is an interesting choice by the media, in that it advances two narratives, depending on the viewer’s partisan beliefs. To more liberal viewers, this story presents a human rights concern, and advances the argument that we ought to make a deal so that Iranian citizens are not suffering as a result of their leaders’ choices. To more conservative viewers, the fact that the Iranian people want negotiations could be a sign that Americans should not want them. More importantly, to a conservative viewer, this reaction from the Iranian people might be evidence of the continued need for an aggressive sanctions regime, to put pressure on Iran to reach a better deal with the United States.

Netanyahu’s speech did not receive any other coverage after it occurred on ABC News. Further highlighting its limited efficacy as an agenda-setting method is the lack of nightly news coverage on ABC, CBS, or NBC in January, when the Republicans invited Netanyahu to speak in the first place. The only story that ran in the week following the invitation about that invitation was a very brief announcement

on CBS. The potential for ABC, and, to some extent, CBS and NBC to employ the partisan or institutional conflict frame was not capitalized on fully in the case of Netanyahu’s speech.

The New York Times ran an editorial about the speech the following Sunday, on March 7, 2015. The headline read: “Sabotaging a Deal with Iran” and embraced the partisan conflict frame. The New York Times specifically identified the situation with Republican Senator Mitch McConnell, saying that he was “apparently hoping to capitalize on the fiery denunciation of Iran by the Israeli Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, in a speech to Congress” by pressing for a vote on a bill that was an early formulation of the Iran Nuclear Agreement Review Act. According to the editorial, McConnell eventually backed down after some of the bill’s supporters argued to delay the vote until negotiators agreed on the framework deal for the JCPOA, which was scheduled to occur at the end of March and wound up actually happening on April 2, 2015.

In this way, the media identifies the Iran Nuclear Agreement Review Act, which would later be passed by a nearly unanimous vote, with the Republican opposition. The editorial also takes the opportunity to frame the JCPOA as effective, saying that the deal-in-progress “is intended to offer Iran relief from crippling economic sanctions in return for tough restraints on its nuclear program for at least a

98 Norah O’Donnell and Margaret Brennan, “Well, a fight over how to stop Iran’s nuclear program is heating up just as President Obama asked Congress to hold their fire and threatened to veto any new sanctions bill,” CBS News, CBS This Morning, January 22, 2015.
100 Ibid.
101 Ibid.
decade.” The editorial avoids quoting Netanyahu and lending credence to any of his arguments, and instead presents the “tough restraints” and ten-year time frame as positive attributes of the deal.

The New York Times editorial also employs the institutional conflict frame in its discussion of the developing Iran Nuclear Agreement Review Act, citing the administration as arguing that the law would be unnecessary, since the deal would not be a treaty but rather a political commitment which Obama could enter into regardless of congressional approval. Meanwhile, the editorial points out that Congress has the power to prevent the administration from permanently waiving certain statutory sanctions. The editorial concludes with a quote that aptly summarizes the pro-JCPOA response to the opposition moves discussed in this study: “Congress needs to think hard about the best way to support a verifiable nuclear deal and not play political games that could leave America isolated, the sanctions regime in tatters and Iran’s nuclear program unshackled.” In other words, this deal is far better than no deal.

The Washington Times ran an editorial with the headline “Netanyahu lays out deadly challenge of Iran” on March 3, 2015, the day Netanyahu spoke. Rather than presenting the speech in the context of the opposition’s broader goal of passing a deal review act, this editorial focuses specifically on lauding Netanyahu’s speech. Much of the editorial simply summarizes Netanyahu’s arguments and presents Congress’s

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103 Ibid.
104 Ibid.
105 Ibid.
response as positive – saying that the speech was well-attended by “cheering” and “applauding” members of Congress, minus, of course, “50 or so pouting Democrats.”\textsuperscript{107} Additionally, the editorial frames Obama as the villain from the very beginning, saying that Netanyahu’s argument that “no deal is better than a bad deal turns Mr. Obama’s defense of his weak and feckless negotiations with Iran neatly on its head.”\textsuperscript{108} The Washington Times article also includes a comment on their perception of American public opinion, claiming that Netanyahu’s points are what “most Americans” believe is true.\textsuperscript{109}

Both newspapers followed elite cues in presenting a position in favor of or against the deal. The New York Times follows President Obama in summarizing the purpose of the deal and touting the ten-year limitation on nuclear development as a positive, while the Washington Times follows domestic Republican voices and Netanyahu’s arguments in its position that no deal is better than a bad deal. However, the New York Times goes a bit beyond this indexing role, connecting the dots between the administration’s position on Netanyahu’s speech and the administration’s positions on the developing Iran Nuclear Agreement Review Act. The most immediately significant observation is that coverage differed between the more opinionated pieces and the more objective nightly news sphere, in that the nightly news coverage was less comprehensive. This tends to suggest that some Americans could have “escaped” hearing about the details of the speech, but that those who cared enough to read the editorial pages certainly would have been informed about it.

\textsuperscript{108} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{109} Ibid.
3.3 The Letter

The media’s role in covering the letter was largely an indexing role, describing Democratic, Republican, and foreign opinion about the letter rather than contributing a unique perspective. In the seven days following the letter’s publication, the letter received coverage on ABC World News Tonight on two occasions: March 9, 2015 and briefly on March 12, 2015. However, on March 10, 2015, the letter received substantial coverage on Good Morning America. On March 9 and 10, the letter was the leading story, and ABC payed substantial attention to indexing the conflict regarding the letter by quoting elites and highlighting the partisan nature of the deal, as well as the conflict it provoked between the legislative and executive branches. While the letter was not a story every single night that week, the impact it had reveals a moderate success in terms of setting the agenda and focusing the public debate in the more objective, nightly news sphere.

The dominant frames in the nightly news coverage analyzed was that this issue was both a legislative versus executive and a Republican versus Democrat conflict. The first sentence of coverage on March 9, 2015 indexed the elite conflict, as David Muir said: “outrage over what some are calling an extreme measure by members of Congress. Others are saying the letter was necessary.” This story focused specifically on the conflict between the White House and Congress, as White

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113 Muir, “Letter to Iran; Does Senate Undermine Negotiations?”
House Correspondent Jonathan Karl described the White House as “furious”, saying that a top official called the letter “reckless.”

To support the partisan conflict frame, ABC News quoted Republican senator Tom Cotton, the primary author of the letter, and Vice President Joe Biden, who fervently opposed the letter. Cotton’s quotes focus on the argument that the only purpose of the letter was to inform Iran of the precarious nature of a deal reached without Congress’s approval, while Biden’s quotes are harsher, calling the letter “dangerous” and saying that it is beneath the dignity of Congress to try and undermine a President’s foreign policy. Framing this letter as a conflict between both Democrats and Republicans and the White House and Congress would have implications for the general question of whether the legislative or the executive branch should have the final say on any deal.

The nightly news framed the letter as unprecedented and potentially dangerous to the negotiations, using the institutional conflict frame to highlight the real question of where executive authority stops and legislative authority begins. On March 9, 2015, David Muir said the letter violated “a long-standing rule of diplomacy that it is the president who negotiates with foreign leaders.” Cotton, on March 10, 2015, was quoted saying “it’s the job of the President to negotiate, but it’s the job of Congress to approve.”

On March 10, 2015, ABC White House Correspondent Jonathan Karl pointed out the potential consequence of this legislative versus

\[\text{\textsuperscript{114}}\text{David Muir, “Letter to Iran; Does Senate Undermine Negotiations?” ABC News, World News Tonight with David Muir, March 9, 2015.}\\ \text{\textsuperscript{115}}\text{Ibid.}\\ \text{\textsuperscript{116}}\text{Ibid.}\\ \text{\textsuperscript{117}}\text{George Stephanopoulos, Robin Roberts, and Jonathan Karl, “Fight Over Iran Nuclear Deal; White House Fires Back at Republicans,” ABC News, Good Morning America, March 10, 2015.}\]
executive conflict, saying “you can believe that the White House will point the finger right at Congress for undermining these talks if they do go down.” In this way, through the conflict frame, the media highlighted the question of what the effects of this letter would be on negotiations, and, implicitly, what Republicans were hoping to accomplish by sending the letter. The deal was reached about on schedule, so it is unlikely that the letter actually had a long-term impact of slowing negotiations down substantially.

Another interesting element of the news coverage is its emphasis on what Iranian leaders had to say about the letter. This emphasis in the news may not have influenced American public opinion substantially, but it tends to cut against the idea that the American media will only treat foreign voices as important if the position that that voice advances is missing from domestic discourse. As Jonathan Karl put it on March 10, 2015: “The Iranians, it seems, look at this Republican letter basically the same way as the President does.” Sources quoted include the Iranian foreign minister’s tweets and, on March 12, 2015, a quote from Ayatollah Khamenei himself, calling the behavior by the forty-seven senators a sign of “the collapse of the political ethics in Washington.” The graphic displayed for the Khamenei quote was: “Anti-U.S. Rant.”

Moving to opinion pieces in print media, the polarization frame is especially apparent. In a New York Times editorial published on March 11, 2015, the headline

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119 Ibid.
121 Ibid.
reads: “Republican Idiocy on Iran.” The language throughout the editorial is scathing, calling the letter “dangerous”, “irresponsible”, and “divorced from constitutional principles, tradition, and the security interest of the American people.”122 The editorial departs somewhat from a clean Republican versus Democrat frame by pointing out that the letter angered “even some conservatives.”123 In pursuit of the argument that the letter was a potentially dangerous effort to undercut Obama’s foreign policy, one that might inadvertently damage the United States’s credibility as a global power in other arrangements, the editorial tends to move away from a clean conflict frame and instead emphasizes the unprecedented nature of this sort of letter.

The editorial indexes opinion from the left using two often-quoted sources in the ABC News coverage: President Obama and Vice President Biden. One specific Obama quote was widely used across news sources. He said: “It’s somewhat ironic to see some members of Congress wanting to make common cause with the hard-liners in Iran. It’s an unusual coalition.”124 The editorial draws a link between certain Iranian elites and American Republicans, taking advantage of the public’s distrust of Iranian hardliners and arguing that the Republicans’ behavior demonstrates a desire to prevent diplomacy from succeeding. The article quotes the Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif calling the letter “propaganda”, covering the Iranian response without necessarily indexing their opinion as part of a frame.125

The editorial also links the letter to the two other key events in this study. It places the letter in its context following Netanyahu’s speech, calling it the “latest

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123 Ibid.
124 Ibid.
125 Ibid.
shot” to “blow up negotiations,” and it predicts that legislation like the Iran Nuclear Agreement Review Act will be the next attempt to, again, “blow up negotiations.”\textsuperscript{126} Just as in the case of Netanyahu’s speech, the New York Times editorial coverage is linking different strategic moves by the opposition together, rather than simply covering the partisan tensions on each specific issue.

On the other side of the aisle, the Washington Times editorial board published a piece on March 15, 2015 responding to the argument that the letter constitutes treason, an issue which never appeared in the ABC nightly news and was likely confined to more partisan coverage.\textsuperscript{127} Compared to the New York Times editorial, the Washington Times tends to highlight the partisan frame even more, identifying Republicans as generally supporting the letter and Democrats as generally against it. The article’s primary focus is in assessing another instance in which Nancy Pelosi allegedly became similarly involved in foreign policy, and pointing out that Democrats did not react the same way to the member of their own party. In this way, the editorial is entirely focused on the partisan conflict, and does not emphasize the merits of the debate on either side specific to the JCPOA.\textsuperscript{128}

The Washington Times also published an opinions piece by Armstrong Williams on March 16, 2015, which deals more directly with the opposition’s criticisms of the JCPOA.\textsuperscript{129} Williams summarizes the problems with the nuclear deal by referencing Netanyahu’s speech, demonstrating the speech’s continued influence

\footnotesize{\begin{itemize}
\item Ibid.
\end{itemize}}
on the sorts of people that write conservative op-eds. Williams identifies the letter with Cotton and forty-six other Republicans, and addresses the issue of treason again, but rather than bringing in the Pelosi example, Williams engages directly with the question of legislative versus executive authority, stating that the congressmen have official U.S. authority as federal officers to write this letter. Williams writes:

“While the letter was certainly a bold idea, the purpose of its content may be misrepresented or misperceived… It appears that, because of media reports and the White House’s reaction, the conversation has shifted from foreign policy to a political fight between a sitting Democratic president and Republican congressmen.”¹³⁰

Williams’s point tends to suggest that the letter, if intended to persuade the public, may have backfired because Democrats and the mainstream media were so successful in framing the letter as a partisan issue. If the letter is so partisan, it has a limited capacity persuade. Williams also covers elite opinion from Iran citing Foreign Minister Zarif calling the letter a “propaganda ploy”, just as the New York Times did.¹³¹ Williams’s article ends: “If our own legislative and executive branches are not talented at striking solid deals between each other, do not expect a promising negotiation to arise after talks with a foreign adversary.”¹³²

3.4 The Iran Nuclear Agreement Review Act

The Iran Nuclear Agreement Review Act received no coverage on ABC News from May 7, 2015, when the Senate passed it, through May 14, 2015, or from May 14, 2015, when the House passed it, through May 21, 2015. Expanding the search to

¹³¹ Ibid.
¹³² Ibid.
CBS and NBC reveals that of the three main news networks, only CBS covered the Act’s passage at all and only at a surface level on May 7, 2015. In light of the lack of public opinion data in Chapter Two, this finding is not surprising. However, it is surprising that a law long anticipated by both parties, one against which the New York Times editorial board issued a preemptory argument back in March 2015, one about which President Obama made statements, became a non-issue when it passed. In this case, the media was largely cut out of the cascading activation model, and so the INARA must have become a non-issue because of actions and decisions by elites or the public, or both. The lack of media coverage implies that the traditional cascading activation model simply does not apply. It is not the case that the media covered the INARA as a fair compromise because elites said it was, and that as a result of this balanced coverage, the people changed their minds. It is also not the case that the media covered the public opinion, which was generally in favor of Congress having some sort of say in the deal, thus informing the elites of what the people wanted them to do. There is simply a lack of evidence for any media coverage at all. In fact, the only significant coverage that exists is in more niche news networks that focus on congressional politics, such as Politico and Congressional Quarterly.

3.5. Coverage of the JCPOA: July 14, 2015

A discussion of news coverage would not be complete without some discussion of July 14, 2015, when the P5+1 and Iran reached the JCPOA, just as this study assessed opinion polling data through July to provide a more complete picture.

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133 Alison Harmelin and Charlie D’Agata, “In Britain, voters are headed to the polls this morning to elect a new prime minister. Conservative leader David Cameron is fighting to keep his job,” CBS News, CBS Morning News, May 7, 2015.
First, ABC News covered the JCPOA much more frequently in the week after its publication than it did the other three events, which cuts in favor of Entman’s idea that the Administration is at the top of the cascading activation model. The Administration reaching this deal had substantially more influence on media coverage than the opposition trying to throw wrenches in the negotiations.

On July 14, 2015, ABC News covered the JCPOA both on Good Morning America and on World News Tonight. Both reports called the deal historic, and emphasized that the deal was President Obama’s political goal, calling it a “victory” for him and referring to it as his “top diplomatic priority.”134 On Good Morning America, coverage indexed Obama and Netanyahu’s opinions, quoting Obama describing the deal as blocking Iran’s pathway to a nuclear weapon for at least ten years. Netanyahu is referred to only as Israeli’s leader, and he called the deal a “historic mistake” and claimed that the United States’s “far-reaching concessions” would allow Iran fund more terror in the region.135 In this way, the early coverage indexes a conflict between the United States and their ally, Israel, but not a conflict within the United States, either on institutional or party lines.

Good Morning America and World News Tonight both covered the celebratory reaction from the Iranian public, explaining that the sanctions were crippling and the civilians specifically had “suffered under those sanctions.”136 ABC

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135 Ibid.
quotes the Iranian Foreign Minister calling the deal a “win-win” for Iran.\textsuperscript{137} The coverage frames the deal as positive for Iran right off the bat, and, though the coverage does explain the deal will block nuclear weapon development for at least ten years, there is no similar celebratory response from the American public. The coverage frames the deal as at least even, and perhaps somewhat in Iran’s favor, but certainly not as a clear cut win for the United States. The coverage emphasizes that the deal represents progress for the United States’s diplomatic relationship with Iran, using the 1979 hostage crisis as a point of reference to show just how far the two countries have come.\textsuperscript{138}

Although the morning coverage focused on the Obama—Israel conflict frame, the coverage later that night emphasized the question of congressional approval. Graphics displayed during that night’s coverage on World News Tonight included: “Anger and Outrage”, “Backlash on Capitol Hill”, and “Will Congress Pass Iran Deal?”\textsuperscript{139} This contrasts sharply with the coverage of celebrations in the streets in Iran, and relates directly to the power that the Iran Nuclear Agreement Review Act officially put in Congress’s hands – the power to issue a resolution of disapproval. The story frames Tom Cotton, the same senator who drafted the letter and voted against INARA for not being sufficiently harsh, as the leader of the Republican opposition for the deal. Cotton called the deal a “bad, terrible, tragic mistake” and said that it “may be the worst diplomatic agreement in the history of the United


\textsuperscript{138} Ibid.

States… because it’s putting an outlaw terrorist-sponsoring regime on the path to a nuclear weapon.”

Congress, at that point, had sixty days to vote on the deal, and ABC’s coverage emphasized that President Obama vowed to veto any resolution of disapproval from Congress. To override that veto, then, Democrats would have to vote against the deal, which ABC News’s coverage called unlikely. However, they noted that there was “a lot of Democratic concern” about the agreement when it was reached.\(^\text{141}\) The primary frame, then, is institutional conflict, Congress versus Obama, with a secondary frame of Republican versus Democrat conflict, secondary because some Democrats were concerned about the deal. All in all, ABC covered the as historic and probably effective, but not as a clear victory for the United States by any means, and the conflict frames identified throughout this study persisted. Ultimately, Republicans in Congress would fail to gather up enough votes to override the President Obama’s promised veto of a resolution of disapproval, and the JCPOA would be implemented as planned until Trump withdrew in May 2018.

3.6. Conclusion

Overall, the coverage of Netanyahu’s speech and the letter have a lot more in common than the coverage or of the INARA. This is not surprising, as the events also diverge in certain characteristics. Specifically, the INARA is a law passed through a legitimate and traditional route, while the letter and Netanyahu’s speech were more controversial in their inception. Chapter Four assesses how we can understand public


\(^{141}\) Ibid.
and elite opinion about the INARA in the absence of the media piece of the cascading activation model, keeping in mind the lessons about polarization learned from both of the other two events.

Overall, the nightly news coverage was fairly balanced, but tended to lean slightly left, especially when it came to emphasizing the unprecedented nature of the letter and Netanyahu’s speech. The opinions coverage was passionate on both side, and tended to engage with each other, providing a clear snapshot of the sorts of arguments that the Republican and Democrat publics were considering as they developed their opinions on the issue.

Three frames stand out in assessing the nightly news and opinion-based coverage. The first is the institutional conflict frame. Much of the conflict over negotiations was framed as a battle between Congress and the White House, calling into question constitutional issues and activating knowledge networks based on a sense of who has the right to do what. The second, and perhaps more significant, frame was the partisan conflict frame. This frame simply summarized each dispute as a Republican versus Democrat conflict, and would have tended to activate knowledge networks based on one’s allegiance. The final frame is the Obama—Netanyahu conflict frame. Some coverage emphasized that President Obama and Prime Minister Netanyahu disagreed sharply about the deal, thereby framing the deal as a conflict with one of the United States’s close allies, Israel.
Chapter Four: Conclusion

4.1. Introduction

The beginning of this study posed several questions. Why did the JCPOA capture public attention in the way that it did? How did the public become so polarized around this issue, specifically? And why did each of the three events affect the public in different ways?

Coverage about the JCPOA from July 2015 helps provide an answer to the first question. As shown in Chapter Three, the JCPOA was historic, and it was framed as such by the media. It represented a major pivot in the United States’s relationship with Iran, a departure from the relationship that once lead Iran to hold fifty-five Americans hostage at the United States Embassy. Ultimately, though, the historical significance of a foreign policy decision alone is not necessarily enough to interest the public. The deal was important, and American elites made sure people knew it was important. President Obama made forming a nuclear deal with Iran a major priority of his presidency. The opposition decided to pushed the deal to the top of the public agenda by controversially inviting Netanyahu to speak and writing the open letter to Iran. The elites feuded, and the public got interested.

This chapter addresses the question of polarization and compares the three key events by applying the cascading activation model to each event. Section 4.2 walks through quotes from the administration and other elites, how those statements were covered, what other frames were implemented by the media (if any), and how the Republican and Democrat publics might have perceived that coverage based on their knowledge networks. Finally, section 4.2 includes a review of public opinion polling
data. Using knowledge networks, this study shows exactly how Entman’s model can account for the high levels of polarization in American society to better explain public opinion outcomes. Section 4.2 pays special attention to explaining why the INARA was different from the other two events; why it did not fit the same activation model.

Section 4.3 then outlines the implications of this study. President Obama reached the JCPOA despite successful public opinion activation by the opposition. The JCPOA was ultimately abandoned by President Trump, just as the forty-seven Republican senators warned in their letter; in part, perhaps, a consequence of the administration’s failure to persuade the public.

4.2. The Cascading Activation Model and the Three Events

4.2.1. Netanyahu’s Speech

The elite-level feud about Netanyahu’s speech was a conflict between Congress and the President, between Democrats and Republicans, and between President Obama and Prime Minister Netanyahu. From the top of the cascading activation model, ABC News received information about the elites’ perspectives in those aforementioned conflict frames, and decided to focus primarily on communicating the Obama versus Netanyahu conflict frame to the public.

The media also went a bit beyond this traditional indexing role, as ABC discussed public responses to the speech in Israel and Iran. By highlighting Netanyahu’s electoral concerns in Israel, ABC is advancing a frame that, to those suspicious of Netanyahu, might make him seem disingenuous in his speech to Congress. The frame suggests that Netanyahu gave the speech, at least in part, to help
his own electoral odds. The final frame ABC constructed emphasizes the devastating
effects of the sanctions regime on the Iranian people.

The editorials were certainly more argumentative, in that the Washington
Times lauded Netanyahu’s speech and disparaged the deal while the New York Times
lauded the deal, but they mostly did not move beyond indexing the contents of the
speech and other elites’ reactions to it within that biased context. The New York
Times, however, connected the dots between Obama’s disapproval of Netanyahu’s
speech and his disapproval of the developing Iran Nuclear Agreement Review Act. In
this way, the media re-introduced the institutional conflict frame.

Based on the constructed Republican and Democratic knowledge networks,
each group would receive ABC’s coverage quite differently. Democrats tended to
either have a negative perception of Netanyahu or to not know who he is, so they
would, of course, support the American president, a member of their own party, in a
dispute with Netanyahu. They would also be more receptive to the idea that
Netanyahu’s speech was really just an electoral ploy for himself. Democrats were
also more likely to think comparatively favorably about Iran, to the extent that they
thought Iran was at least a little likely to comply with the deal. Democrats would
therefore be more likely than Republicans to be swayed by concerns for the economic
security of the Iranian people.

Republicans tended to have a positive perception of Netanyahu and thought
that the United States did not help Israel enough. They also had a negative perception
of Obama, so the conflict frame would have successfully activated the Republican
public, but more in favor of the Israeli Prime Minister. Republicans would also likely
have seen the Iranian people’s plight as evidence that sanctions were working, not that they should be stopped, and that the sanctions pressure should continue until Iran agreed to a better deal.

The institutional conflict frame, too, would have resonated with members of the public in both parties, just in opposite ways. Polling data from the same month that the New York Times article was published reveals that Republicans felt strongly that Congress should have the final say in the deal, and Democrats felt strongly that the President should.

This logic suggests that Republicans would have been activated to be more against the deal, and Democrats would have been activated to be in favor of it. The data shows that a slight Republican majority did support inviting Netanyahu to speak, at 52%, while only 14% of Democrats thought it was the right thing to do. This, combined with the previous discussion about each party’s knowledge network regarding Netanyahu and Israel, sets up the polarized public to receive this speech in two very different ways.

At that point, 65% of Republicans still supported negotiations with Iran, suggesting that Netanyahu’s speech did not go so far as to activate Republicans against continued negotiations. Furthermore, 47% of Republicans supported a hypothetical deal lifting economic sanctions in exchange for Iran restricting its nuclear weapons, compared to a 14% approval rating of the actual Joint Plan of Action. By the time the actual JCPOA was passed, Republicans would wind up supporting the JCPOA at that original 14% approval rating. These findings demonstrate that Republicans were open to some deal, just not what they perceived as
a bad deal. This is consistent with the thesis of Netanyahu’s speech and other elite rhetoric from Republican opposition. The most significant findings to suggest that the Republican public was activated ultimately against the actual JCPOA, then, are that they tended to approve of Netanyahu’s speech (though by a small margin) and that they ultimately did not support a deal whose characteristics actually fit the one Netanyahu described.

4.2.2. The Letter

Elite conflict over the letter was directly related to both the institutional conflict between Congress and the White House and the political conflict between Republicans and Democrats. The media took these frames from the elites, and indexed them almost exactly, using the same conflict frame to communicate about the letter to the public, signaling to Democrats and Republicans alike whose side they should be on. The coverage of the letter was far more passionate than that of Netanyahu’s speech, because the elites got more passionate. White House officials called the letter “reckless”; Joe Biden said that the letter was beneath the dignity of Congress.

The framing was very successful on the left, in that they were able to present this action by the Republicans as unprecedented and put Republican elites in the position of defending their actions from the start. On the Republican side, elite language as reported by the media was a lot more constrained, talking about the divisions of powers constitutionally, and saying they were just trying to explain the constitutional system to the Iranians. Even though the Republicans provoked this situation by releasing the letter, the way the story was covered implies that they were
put on the defensive after the left’s sharp rebuke.

The domestic elite language that the media picked up on focused almost exclusively on the institutional legitimacy of the letter. The media also offered frames of their own, predicting what would happen to the talks because of the letter, and saying that the White House would blame Congress if the letter served to undermine negotiations in any way. The media framed Republicans as obstructionists for doing something that might work against negotiations, which would have activated Democrats who wanted those negotiations to go well. In theory, this frame also may have activated Republicans against their own party, since most Republicans were still supportive of negotiations. However, public opinion polling shows that the plurality of Democrats thought the letter would hurt the negotiations, compared to a minority – less than a quarter – of Republicans, providing evidence that the media framing successfully activated Democrats but not Republicans.

In terms of foreign elites, ABC News quoted the Iranian Foreign Minister and Ayatollah Khamenei referring to the letter as a sign of the “collapse of the political ethics in Washington” in what the media called an “Anti-U.S. Rant.” In this way, the media is actually identifying the letter as an American action, rather than an action by a rogue faction of Republicans. The rant is called “Anti-U.S.”, not “Anti-Republican” or “Anti-Letter.” This approach adds to the frame that this letter hurt negotiations, by showing that Iran’s officials made anti-American statements because of the letter.

The editorial and opinion pieces relied more heavily on the polarization frame than on the institutional conflict frame that the ABC News coverage primarily used, but the more opinionated coverage is similar to ABC News in its reliance on
emotional language, drawing often from the responses within the Administration. Coverage frequently included one particular Obama quote, in which he accused Republicans of aligning themselves with Iranian hardliners. This accusation is based on the idea that the letter was intended to derail negotiations, which Iranian hardliners would have also liked. This is another example of the Democrats’ harsh response to the letter, placing the Republicans on the defensive and potentially activating the Democratic base against the Republicans and in favor of the developing deal.

At this point, it is worth considering what the Republicans really accomplished by releasing this letter. Their justification that the letter was simply an explanation of constitutional law contrasts with the fiery language from the Democrats, accusing them of undermining the President of the United States. This rhetoric, especially since it was communicated verbatim to the American people, could only serve to further polarize the public around the negotiations and the deal that would eventually come out of them. Some Republicans, such as Armstrong Williams, whose opinions article is in Chapter Three, did not want the letter to become polarizing. Williams blamed the White House and media for shifting public focus away from the actual merits of the letter, including the constitutional and procedural dispute between Congress and the White House, and instead towards a political fight.

The polarization may have resulted from the letter’s nature as a bold move, and it may have been a consequence of the Democrats’ harsh rebuke. In either case, the primary effect of the letter was likely to polarize. 67% of Democrats thought that
the letter went too far, compared to only 32% of Republicans. 52% of Republicans thought the letter was an appropriate response to the way negotiations were going, compared to just 23% of Democrats. ¹⁴²

The letter specifically asserted that Congress had power to make the deal impermanent, and at the same time, the public polarized around the issue of whether the President or Congress should have the final say in any agreement. 82% of Republicans thought Republicans should have the final say, and only 42% of Democrats thought the same. In this way, the letter also correlated with polarization around the key issue that it addressed.

The same caveat applies as in 4.2.1 regarding approval ratings for a deal, since the letter was released just six days after Netanyahu’s speech. Republicans still remained more supportive of a hypothetical deal than they were of the Joint Plan of Action in November 2013. They were also more supportive of a hypothetical deal in March 2015 than they would be of the actual JCPOA in July 2015. Just as in the case of Netanyahu’s speech, this data only serves to show that Republicans were not extremely opposed to any deal; only to the deal that was reached in July. The strongest evidence that the elite and media level framing activated the Republican based in the case of the letter comes from polarized opinion about the letter itself, as well as about whether Congress or the President should have the final say in the deal.

4.2.3. The Iran Nuclear Agreement Review Act

In Chapter Three included several March 2015 articles in sections 3.2 and 3.3 which also mentioned the Iran Nuclear Agreement Review Act, as it was developing

in Congress. Those articles framed the INARA as a partisan conflict on the horizon. Journalists quoted Obama saying that the INARA was unnecessary because, as president, he was not barred from entering executive agreements with other countries. They presented the INARA as the opposition’s next logical step, after having Netanyahu come speak and releasing the letter. All of the partisan conflict over the letter and Netanyahu was supposed to be leading up to the INARA – but it didn’t. The INARA passed the Senate with only one dissenting vote. The Act was not covered by ABC News or in opinions or editorial pieces from either of the written news sources evaluated in this study after it passed in May 2015. Nobody took polls to gauge the public’s response to the Act. The main news coverage available about the INARA was from news networks that focus specifically on congressional politics, which have limited reach with the general public.

So, what happened? Why was the Iran Nuclear Agreement Review Act different? Why wasn’t it the climax that it was supposed to be? An analysis of the news coverage of the INARA, as well as the content of the Act itself and subsequent events in 2015, provide a few potential answers to the question of why the elites and media chose not to activate the public by framing the INARA as another partisan and institutional conflict.

First, Politico coverage reveals that the opponents of the JCPOA were largely defeated in advancing the amendments that they wanted on the bill. The INARA was not the success that Republicans hoped it would be because debate over the bill was dominated by Republican in-fighting over which amendments to include. While

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the underlying bill, allowing Congress a say in the deal, was supported by both parties, the Republican proposed amendments were highly controversial. They included cracking down on Iranian ballistic missile development and requiring that Congress actively affirm any nuclear deal for it to go through, rather than just giving Congress the ability to issue a resolution of disapproval.\textsuperscript{144} Essentially, because the Republicans did not successfully get any of the controversial elements of the bill through, and because the basic bill had bipartisan support, there was no significant conflict to cover. One of the reasons that the Republicans may have capitulated on the amendments is because they were concerned about not only finishing the Iran bill, but also “finaliz[ing] a budget, work[ing] on new trade deals and extend[ing] expiring PATRIOT Act provisions, all by the end of May.”\textsuperscript{145}

After passing the INARA, Congress was faced with a daunting task: gather up enough support to override President Obama’s promised veto of their resolution of disapproval. Another potential reason why the Democrats supported the INARA might have been that they knew the Republicans did not have the votes to override a presidential veto of a resolution of disapproval. However, the ultimate Senate vote to pass the resolution of disapproval in the Senate was fifty-eight to forty-two, just two votes short of the two-thirds majority that was necessary to override a presidential veto.\textsuperscript{146} Republicans actually came quite close to blocking the deal in Congress after the INARA was passed. So, it is unlikely that Democrats passed the INARA because

\textsuperscript{144} Burgess Everett, “McConnell holds out hope for improbable deal on Iran amendments,” \textit{Politico}, May 4, 2015.
\textsuperscript{145} Ibid.
they thought they would be certainly able to beat Republicans on the resolution of disapproval.

A final explanation for Congress’s decision to pass the INARA with bipartisan support lies in the upward direction of the cascading activation model. The public was, overall, supportive of Congress having some say in the matter, though Democrats did not want Congress to have the final say. The INARA does not quite give Congress the final say, since they do not have to pass a resolution of approval for the deal to go through. Members of Congress who supported the deal probably recognized that their constituents wanted them to have a say in the matter, believed that they could gather enough support to stop a resolution of disapproval, and decided to vote in favor of the INARA for those reasons. Furthermore, both sides of the aisle were concerned with Iran’s credibility, or whether or not Iran would actually abide by the deal. Democrats in Congress probably wanted to have a say if the deal that was reached turned out to be as bad as Republicans feared. The JCPOA did receive relatively low approval ratings, though, of course, Democrats tended to be far more supportive of it than Republicans were.

The downwards direction of the cascading activation model does not apply to the INARA, since there was little information communicated downwards from the elites to the public via the media. However, the upwards direction of the model is significant in offering a reasonable explanation for why the Democrats in Congress decided to vote for the INARA in the first place, since they may have been responding to framed public opinion flowing up from the public itself.
4.2.4. Comparison

The JCPOA is a case of public opinion activation from elites through the media, but the most important part of this case is the necessity of dividing the public along party lines to fully understand how that activation worked. This argument plays out in two of the three examples described above in a very similar way. Netanyahu’s speech and the letter did not turn the Republicans against negotiations or any deal at all, but they did activate them to be suspicious of whether that deal would be good enough by advancing specific arguments that resonated with Republicans.

In the case of Netanyahu’s speech, the Republican public tended to approve of him speaking, and his assessments of the flaws of the likely deal wound up being the same flaws that detractors focused on in their opposition to the JCPOA in July.147 There is some limited evidence, then, that the words of a foreign leader had influence in public argumentation and opinion within the United States. However, Netanyahu was invited to speak at the United States Congress by American congressmen, lending an “American”-ness to his speech that is not usually present when analyzing the impact of foreign officials’ statements on American public opinion. Additionally, Netanyahu’s speech did not have as much salience as measured by the volume of media coverage as the letter directly from the forty-seven Republican senators did, showing that the voices of American elites tend to influence coverage and the public more than those of foreign elites. In the case of the letter, the public polarized around the questions of whether the letter was appropriate and whether they agreed with the contents of the letter – specifically, whether Congress should have the final say in a

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nuclear deal with Iran.

Although the public was polarized about Congress having the final say, most Americans believed that Congress should be somewhat involved in the process. The third case, the Iran Nuclear Agreement Review Act, did not follow the same pattern on the first two, because elites on both sides decided not to activate the public by having a partisan conflict and thereby informing intense media coverage. Republicans and Democrats in Congress formed a bipartisan coalition to pass the bill, and, though Obama originally spoke out against a bill like the INARA, he declined to veto it once he recognized that Congress had sufficient votes to override his veto. The INARA was a small piece of bipartisan work in a situation that was fraught with partisan conflict and polarization, likely because it did represent a true compromise, in that Republicans did not get as much power as they wanted to defeat a deal, and Democrats retained congressional authority to approve or reject a deal if they agreed with Republicans that the deal was fundamentally flawed.

In these ways, the three cases differ, but shed light on the way that elites can polarize the public or can fail to do so using specific actions, some legitimate and some questionable, to draw media attention. Further studies could be conducted on other elements of the JCPOA negotiations and even its implementation to demonstrate how these trends did or did not continue as the public remained polarized around the deal. This study provides a snapshot of just a few ways that the cascading activation model can be used, with a polarization-driven twist, to understand public opinion about foreign policy.
4.3. Implications

On July 14, 2015, the P5+1 and Iran announced that they had reached the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action. Coverage of the deal emphasized that its success was driven by elites. As ABC News reporter Terry Moran put it:

“What really drove this deal was national interest as defined by the leader. President Obama was looking for a diplomatic solution to the Iranian nuclear problem, and the Iranian leaders wanted to get out from under those crippling economic sanctions. That was what made this deal happen.”

Despite the efforts of Republican and foreign opposition, President Obama’s leadership got the deal through. The JCPOA only had a 38% approval rate in July 2015, with 59% of Democrats approving.

One important implication of these findings is that President Obama was not constrained by these low approval ratings, or the fact that much of the approval came from one party.

However, less than three years later, on May 8, 2018, President Trump withdrew the United States from the deal. The data demonstrates that, as with many foreign policy issues, between 2015 and 2018 the American public lost interest in the JCPOA. When asked if the United States should withdraw from the deal in 2018, 57% of Americans said they did not know enough about the deal to say one way or the other. However, there is a significant partisan divide in this survey. 64% of Democrats did not know enough to say whether the United States should leave the deal, and only 26% thought the United States should remain. Meanwhile, 48% of Republicans did not know enough to say, but 39% thought the United States should

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leave the deal. The JCPOA had more long-term salience for Republicans than it did for Democrats, suggesting a potential long term consequence of the 2015 public opinion activation.

Trump’s decision places a new significance on the letter and the INARA. First, a future president withdrawing from the deal is precisely what the forty-seven Republican senators described in their March 2015 letter. Second, President Trump’s ability to leave the deal was a direct consequence of Congress’s failure to pass a resolution of approval under the Iran Nuclear Agreement Review Act, since, as the letter explained, the next president could only withdraw from an executive agreement if it had been reached without congressional approval. The political decisions by the Republicans in 2015 failed to prevent the JCPOA from going through, but in the long run, they played out in such a way that the United States withdrew from what was arguably President Obama’s biggest foreign policy accomplishment.

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