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Polls Influenced Public Misperception of Saddam 9/11 Link

WASHINGTON, D.C.—Why were most Americans, following 9/11, convinced that Saddam Hussein was behind the terrorist attacks in the United States? Did their mistaken belief result from information from the Bush administration, or was something else at work? A new study to appear in the American Political Science Association (APSA) journal *PS: Political Science and Politics* finds that there was, indeed, “something else.”

The authors, Scott Althaus, professor of political science at the University of Illinois at Urbana Champaign and Devon Largio, a law student at Vanderbilt University, say that the high levels of “public misperception” about Saddam’s culpability are attributable to two things: the public’s predisposition to believing Saddam was the culprit, and the wording and format of polling questions—which “artificially inflated” the misperception that Saddam was behind 9/11.

The authors examined every publicly available survey question asking Americans whether Hussein might be responsible for the attacks, concluding that this “mistaken belief was already widespread among Americans long before President Bush began publicly linking Saddam Hussein with the war on terror.” They also found that the number of Americans blaming Saddam “has been dropping ever since the first days following 9/11.”

The authors show that the wording of opinion surveys exaggerated the extent of these misperceptions. The earliest surveys indicate that Americans spontaneously mentioned Osama bin Laden as the main person responsible for the attacks. Other questions asked only about Saddam, forcing “survey respondents to pick an option. In response to those questions, as many as eight in 10 Americans appeared willing to believe Saddam could have had a hand in the terror attacks.”

“It appears that rather than becoming duped, as the popular account has it, the American public has gradually grown more critical of the idea that Hussein had a hand in 9/11,” the researchers wrote. “Rather than showing a gullible public blindly accepting the rationales offered by an administration bent on war, our analysis reveals a self-correcting public that has grown ever more doubtful of Hussein’s culpability since the 9/11 attacks.”

“When Osama Became Saddam: Origins and Consequences of the Change in America’s Public Enemy #1” will appear in the October issue of *PS*.

For access to the full article visit www.apsanet.org/about/media/althaus.pdf

For access to APSA’s media web site visit www.politicalsciencenews.org.

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