

**Interpreting White House Public Opinion Mail and Polling:  
Vietnam Hawks and Lyndon Johnson**

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Public support is a key political resource a president needs, especially during times of international conflict. Since Franklin Roosevelt, presidents have sought to privately gauge the level of public support by institutionalizing a public opinion polling apparatus in the White House (Holli 2002; Jacobs 1992; Jacobs and Shapiro 1995). However, these data only provide one view of the public’s diverse opinions. Presidents may choose to supplement internal polling operations with additional measures of public support. Public opinion mail was an important measure of public opinion before polls were widely used in the White House (Geer 1996; Herbst 1993). Lee (2002) explores constituency mail to test theories regarding elite influence over public opinion, but scholars have not explored the public opinion apparatus in regards to the systematic collection of opinion mail sent to the White House and its value to presidential decision making. This article explores the mail summary apparatus of President Lyndon Johnson and takes the aggregate mail opinion summaries on the Vietnam War as a case study.

President Franklin Roosevelt was the first president to systematize the collection of the volume of letters sent to the White House and aggregate these letters into issue topics to determine salience and opinion direction (Levine and Levine 2002; Sussmann 1956). President Lyndon Johnson maintained an active and comprehensive White House mail opinion summary operation from the week after he was sworn in as president until the weeks before he retired. These weekly mail summaries show less support for the

Vietnam War policy in general than the results from the president's polls, but the opinion mail shows more support for the policy of military escalation the Vietnam conflict than present in the poll data. The mail registered opinion in terms of militarily escalation was more "hawkish" than the private opinion poll data collected and analyzed by Johnson Administration staffers, possibly providing covert evidence supporting the Administration's private assertion of a "silent center" of opinion favoring military escalation. Mail opinion gave the Johnson Administration an alternative explanation to public opinion polls and a way to justify their actions with public support as present in the White House mail.

### **Presidents, Public Opinion and Foreign Policy**

Previous conventional wisdom held that the public was unable to hold consistent or meaningful opinions about matters as complex and interconnected as foreign policy (Almond 1950; Lippmann 1922). The emergence of the "rational public" as a concept in mass public opinion research has shifted attention away from the public as poor decision makers or as inattentive to matters of foreign policy. Recent scholarship on the nature of public opinion has shown it to be stable and rational, and these authors claim it to be viable for basing policy decisions upon (Page and Shapiro 1992; Powlick 1995). The Vietnam War helped alter the thinking of scholars' opinions' of the role of public opinion in establishing or offering support for foreign policy (Holsti 1992). Revisionist scholars have taken the lead from V.O. Key (1963) and argue that public opinion serves as a "system of dikes" that constrain policy flow through the climate opinion. From these theories, several studies show public opinion to have an impact on foreign policy (Cohen 1973; Foyle 1999; Holsti 1992; Holsti 1996; Sobel 2001). In particular, public opinion is

shown to have grown in influence over elite opinion which reflects the breakdown in elite consensus during Vietnam (Powlick 1995).

Concerns over public support are generally important to presidents (Edwards 1983; Kernell 1986), and this need can be enhanced when the issue requires the commitment of military resources. Presidential dominance of foreign policy making allows him to shape and often manipulate public opinion since the president and his staff are able to utilize the State Department, Pentagon and White House resources to influence the media (Hallin 1986; Kellerman and Barilleaux 1991; Wildavsky 1966). As a result of this resource dynamic, the congruence between public opinion and presidential foreign policy has been shown to be higher than that of domestic policy (Monroe 1979; Monroe 1998; Page and Shapiro 1983). Although presidents are generally able to control opinion on foreign affairs, presidents still need to have favorable climate of opinion for their actions. The worsening “credibility gap” and decreasing domestic support for the war began to hurt Lyndon Johnson’s public stature and contributed to his retirement announcement in March of 1968 (Dallek 1998).

### **Assessing Public Opinion in the Johnson White House**

President Johnson’s career-long interest in gauging and interpreting public opinion led him to create one of the most extensive internal apparatus for public opinion analysis to date. From his first campaign for elected office to his ascendancy to the presidency, public opinion was a key component in Johnson’s political resource reserve. Johnson insisted on weekly polls in his 1948 Senatorial campaign to tell him “exactly what issues ‘touched’ Texas voters” (Caro 1990). President Johnson continued to utilize public opinion while in the White House and greatly expanded the administration staff

and monetary resources dedicated use of polling (Altschuler 1990; Jacobs and Shapiro 1999). Johnson staffers Fred Panzer, Bill Moyers, Haynes Redmon and Tad Cantril (son of President Franklin Roosevelt's private pollster Hadley Cantril) were primarily in charge of the gathering and interpretation of polling results in the White House. Over the course of President Johnson's time in the White House, dozens of poll results were analyzed on topics ranging from the United States' Vietnam policy to urban unrest to Johnson's popularity.<sup>1</sup>

Lyndon Johnson's legislative career in the House and Senate taught him well that constituency opinion via the mail was important (Caro 1990). President Johnson was keenly aware of the role of public opinion in relation to the Vietnam conflict and he understood that favorable opinion could shift to unfavorable opinion overnight (Dallek 1998). Letters, telegrams and cards received a "surprising" amount of attention in the Oval Office during the period of Vietnam and "in a country of 200,000,000, one thousand adverse letters could turn heads in the White House, especially if those letters bore no evidence of being part of a mass campaign" (Small 1987, 192). President Johnson often asked for representative letters to demonstrate the public support for the policy in Vietnam which were to be distributed to reporters and media outlets (Small 1987).<sup>2</sup> The incoming mail was not a representative sample of the entire public, but the mail summaries were instructive for illustrating the views of those individuals who were

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<sup>1</sup> These data were collected at the Lyndon B. Johnson Presidential Archive in Austin, Texas. The White House Central Files, particularly PR 16, Public Relations, Public Opinion Polls Boxes 345-355, and the Confidential Files, PR 16, Public Relations, Public Opinion Polls Boxes 80-82, contain the majority of the polling memos interpreting advance Harris and Gallup results as well as private polls conducted on behalf of the White House by Harris and Oliver Quayle. Polling memos are also found, although with much less frequency and with some duplication, in the White House Aides' Files, particularly Moyers and Panzer.

<sup>2</sup> See also a memorandum from Mail Chief Paul Pople to the White House Staff on July 22, 1965 describing the use of the mail sent to the White House. White House Central Files, 5-1-1, Mail Summaries, Box 1, Pople to White House Staff, July 22, 1965.

knowledgeable about the conflict or who were considered elite activists (Lee 2002; Verba and Brody 1970). In the present case, the Johnson Administration may have wanted this alternative viewpoint.

President Johnson's apparatus for analyzing opinion mail sent to the White House began the week after President Kennedy was assassinated on December 6, 1963 and ends on December 3, 1968.<sup>3</sup> The reports were summarized weekly on the subject and disposition of the mail received by the White House Mail Room addressed to President Johnson. The memoranda appear to have been summarized by the White House Mail Chief; the memos were signed by Paul Poppo until June 9, 1967 and by Whitney Shoemaker from June 16, 1967 until October 3, 1968. The weekly memos are addressed "Memorandum for the President" but are circulated to key members of the President's staff, including, McGeorge Bundy (National Security Advisor), Horace Busby (Special Assistant), Douglas Cater (Special Assistant), Richard Goodwin (Special Assistant and chief speech writer), Bill Moyers (Press Secretary), Larry O'Brien (Congressional Liaison), Jack Valenti (Special Assistant), Marvin Watson (Special Assistant) and George Reedy (Special Assistant and Press Secretary).<sup>4</sup> Most subjects of the opinion mail were counted only for a few weeks, such as a response to a speech given by President Johnson, the status of Civil Rights legislation in 1964 and 1965, the creation of Medicare, the United States' intervention in the Dominican Republic and urban rioting.

The issue which was tracked with most frequency and for the longest period was the opinion mail concerning the "US Stand in Vietnam." These summaries begin the

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<sup>3</sup> A complete collection of the weekly White House mail summaries are located in the Johnson Archive in the White House Central Files, 5-1-1, Mail Summaries, December 1963-January 1965 (Boxes 8 and 9) and January 1965-December 1968 (Boxes 1-5).

week of August 6, 1964 and end on October 6, 1968.<sup>5</sup> Of interest to this article is the distribution of opinion on the specifics of the United States' policy in Vietnam, in particular the proportion of the mail opinion which favored greater action towards peace or escalation. Mail that registered an opinion on the Vietnam War were also tallied in the category of "Vietnam, Escalation."<sup>6</sup> These summary memoranda begin on July 29, 1966 and end on October 3, 1968. One of the primary sources of bias in the Johnson Administration mail summaries is the presence of letters, telegrams and cards from foreign countries, form letters or mass petitions. The mail summary memoranda include an asterisk next to the count of mail on a particular issue and reference the number of "non-letters" included in the weekly count. These data have been subtracted from the present analysis with the assumption that the Johnson Administration was only concerned with those opinions which were not mass produced or international in origin (see Small 1987).<sup>7</sup>

### **"Hawkish" Mail**

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<sup>4</sup> See the April 2, 1965 summary for a full list of the individuals to whom the mail summary memos were circulated.

<sup>5</sup> Although the data are mostly comprehensive by date, there is a large gap from August 27, 1964 to February 11, 1965. Archivists at the Johnson Archive attribute these gaps to the relatively recent exploration of these papers and the disorganization of the dates.

<sup>6</sup> No memorandum found at the Johnson Archive indicates the decision criteria for discerning what counted as a "pro" or "con" opinion on either the general Vietnam policy or the specific policy of escalation or peace efforts. However, a memo from Califano to the President (White House Central File, 5-1, Box 9) on February 24, 1966 explains that the mail was sorted by policy type and those letters most favorable were sent to the press office. This memo also argues for more concrete and usable categories, including a breakdown of the general Vietnam mail by policy favorably. These categories begin in July of 1966.

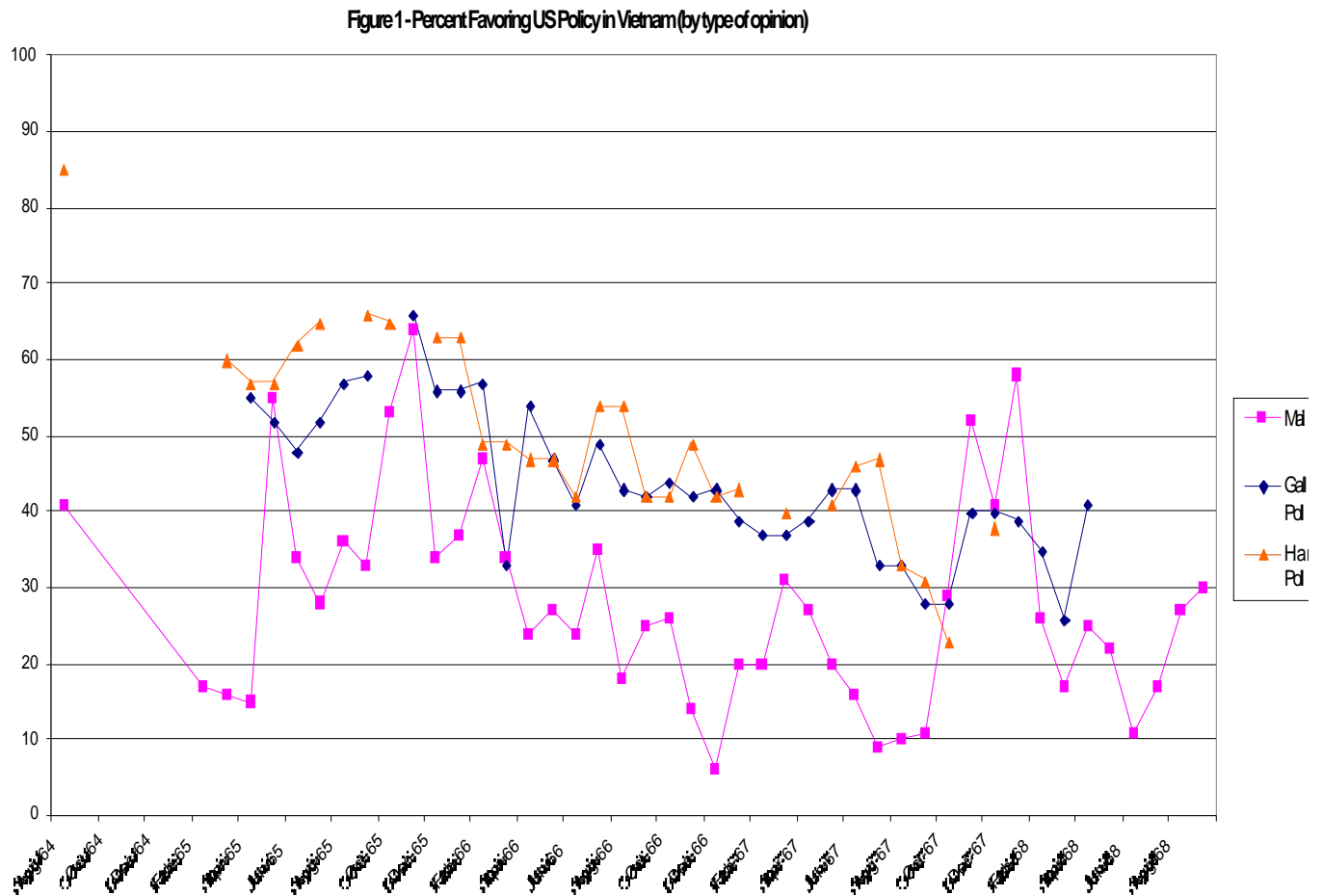
<sup>7</sup> On several occasions, the Mail Chief included comments which referred to the volume of mail from abroad or from form letters. In each instance, a short analysis was given which excluded this type of mail and offered an assessment of the opinion on the policy excluding the mail. See for instance the October 22, 1965 and the November 5, 1965 mail summary memoranda.

Figure 1 charts the two types of opinion which the Johnson Administration systematically tracked with regularity: mail summaries and public opinion polls.<sup>8</sup> The percentage of opinion mail sent to the White House tended to be less favorable towards the Johnson Vietnam policy than did the public opinion polls. The exception here is the brief period of time from November of 1967 to April of 1968 where opinion mail registered more favorable opinions than the polled opinion. The public is likely rallying around President Johnson who during this time covertly organizes the Committee for Peace with Freedom in Vietnam (with the intention to mobilize the “silent center” of opinion) and the Tet Offensive which produces clear but brief support for the war effort. The Gallup and Harris polls which were tracked by staff members in the Administration were generally consistent with each other reflecting the representativeness of a national sample and question wording. The opinion mail tended to be less stable and consistent than the polling results. The instability of opinion mail was likely due to a lack of a consistent arrangement when letters were sent, and unlike polled opinion, the mail was sent by individuals only when event prompted them to write rather than the monthly polling operations administered their questions (see Lee 2002). The two opinion types begin to converge in late 1967 possibly as a result of the growing consensus among elites and media sources that the war was not winnable.

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<sup>8</sup> The poll data in Figure 1 was taken from a polling memo sent to Fred Panzer by B. Marvel on September 14, 1967 (Aides’ Files (Panzer), Box 180, “Marvel to Panzer” September 14, 1967). Additional monthly Gallup and Harris data were filled in (from a Lexis-Nexis search of the Roper Center Archive) where the memo excluded data.





By 1967, President Johnson and his advisors were increasingly concerned with walking the fine line between fighting a limited war in Vietnam and maintaining critical public support at home (Herring 1994). Neither the “hawks” nor the “doves” would be satisfied with the Johnson Administration’s efforts in Vietnam. By early 1967, the public, the media, key members of Congress (including Congressman Tip O’Neill) and President Johnson’s advisors (including Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara) began to turn against the war effort (Hallin 1986; Lurch and Sperlich 1979). Public opinion polls began to show a decline in both President Johnson’s approval ratings and in the public’s confidence in the Administration’s handling of the war (Dallek 1998; Page and

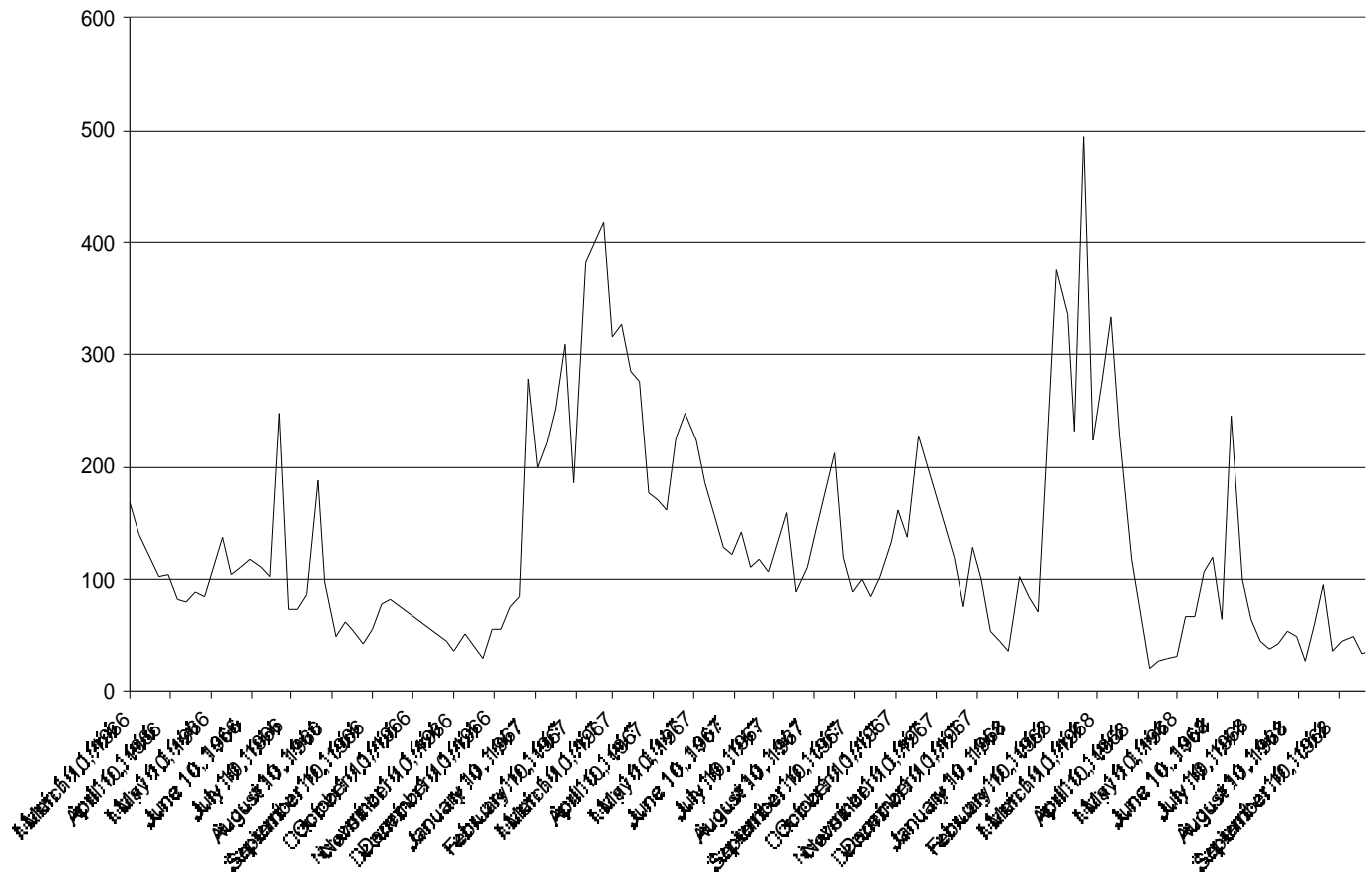
Shapiro 1992). The mail opinion summaries show similar trend in declining support for the war in general but register more support for increased military escalation.

Figure 2 tracks the total White House mail coded “pro escalation” from March of 1966 to October of 1968. Two interesting trends stand out. First, the total mail count in favor of escalation policies increased rather dramatically beginning in early 1967. Two events in early 1967 may have lead to this increase. On January 5<sup>th</sup>, the State Department announces 5,008 Americans killed and 30,093 wounded in Vietnam in 1966. Revelation of these figures may have prompted the public to become more aggressive in their opinions regarding a rapid escalation and quick victory. On January 8<sup>th</sup>, American Marines launch their largest offensive to date under “Operation Cedar Falls” against twenty five enemy positions in north Vietnam (Addington 2000). A small increase in the percentage of the mail-writing public favoring the US policy is also registered here (see Figure 3).

Second, the “hawkish” mail spikes three times in early 1968 as a result of a “rally around the flag” phenomenon after the Vietnamese Tet Offensive. The Tet Offensive, which occurs at the end of January and demonstrates to the American public that the war is not being won, drives a large increase in the volume of letters which support greater military escalation. This news may have appeased Johnson and his advisors given the private beliefs that significant numbers of the public were in favor of escalation if properly motivated. By May of 1968, the volume of mail favorable to escalation had dropped off possibly as a result of Johnson’s March 1968 decision to end the bombing in Vietnam and the emergence of the facts in the My Lai Massacre. Another brief spike in

early July of 1968 possibly as a result of the reduction in bombing during the peace negotiation process.

Figure 2 - Total Pro Escalation Mail

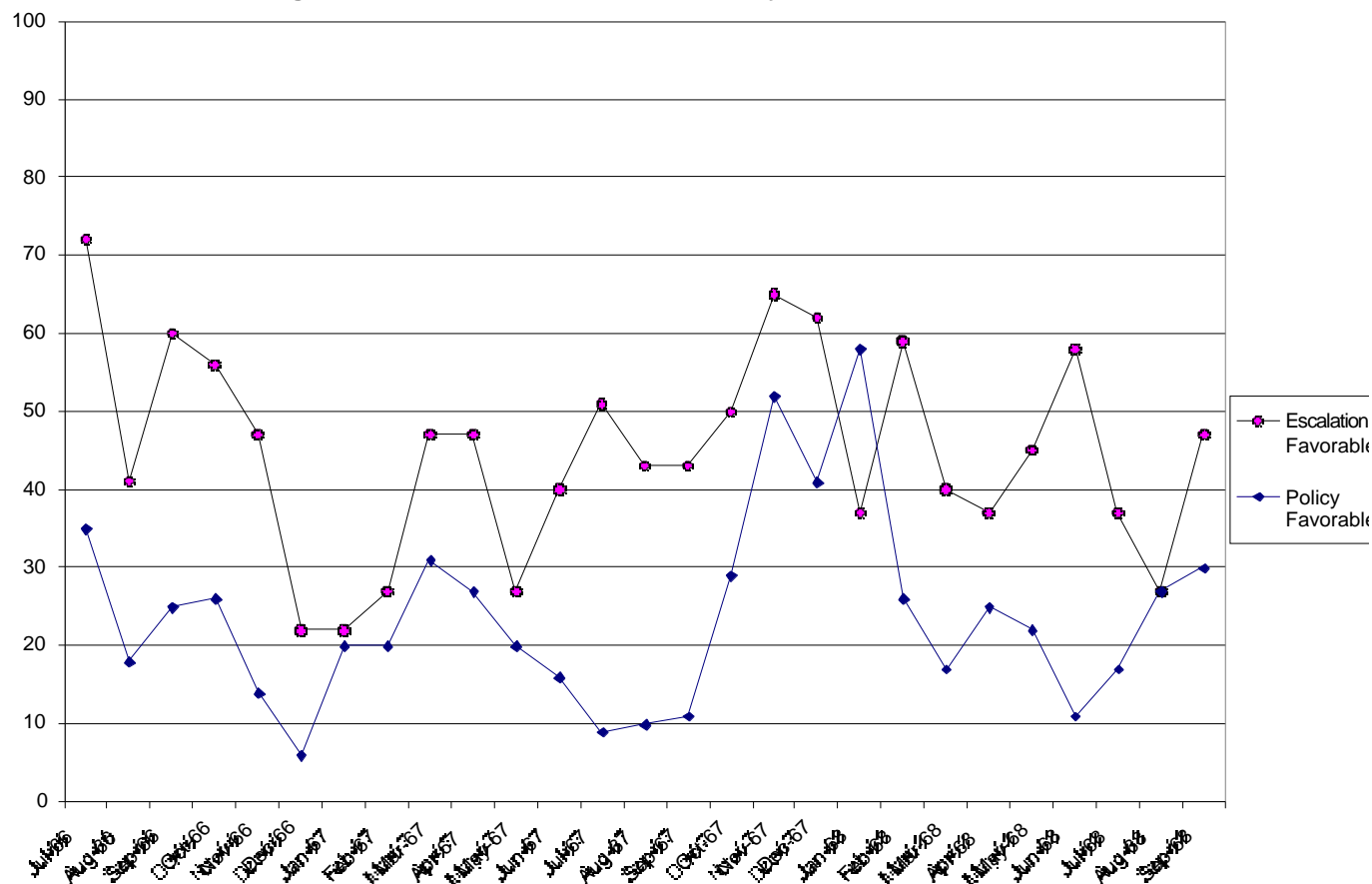


Conventional wisdom holds that the opinion mail sent to the White House on the Vietnam War was “hawkish” in nature; this is not universally the case. Figure 3 reports a calculated percentage of the favorable opinion mail out of the total mail counted in the Vietnam issue category as well as the percentage of the mail which indicated a favorable opinion towards military escalation in Vietnam (a category which begins in June of 1966). The opinion favorable to the policy did not typically exceed 30% except during

the period from October 1967 to April of 1968. The percent of the opinion mail favoring military escalation tended to fluctuate from 40% to 60% with lows of 20% in early 1967. From the first calculation of pro escalation mail in June of 1966 until the end of the data, several dates register a majority opinion in favor of escalation of the war. The mail was most consistently “hawkish” from July 1966 to December 1966 and from October 1967 to February 1968.

Leading up to the latter period, the public grew more “hawkish” from May 1967 to October 1967 but grew less favorable towards the general policy of the war. The public can be classified as “hawkish” here in that they desired a departure from the “dovish” peace negotiation strategy pursued prior to that time. In August of 1967, United States bombers were allowed for the first time to strike at targets in the center of Hanoi and Haiphong, a change from the previous policy of avoiding heavily populated areas. In September of 1967, President Johnson delivered a speech in San Antonio which indicated that the bombing of North Vietnam would continue until negotiation terms were met. The Administration pursues these strategies to address the gap between the current Vietnam policy and the trend of public opinion. The President’s Vietnam policies in these months appeased the “mail hawks” and offered the Administration an optimistic sentiment about their ability to mobilize the public. Mail opinion is useful to the Administration here as an alternative explanation to the public opinion polls.

Figure 3 - Percent Mail Favorable Towards US Policy and Escalation



Although the percent of the mail opinion favoring escalation was not consistently high, the percentage of the mail opinion favoring escalation was greater than the poll opinion percentage favoring escalation at every point. Table 1 reports poll data possessed by Johnson staffers during various dates in 1966 and 1967.<sup>9</sup> In some cases, the disparity between the mail opinion and the polling opinion was quite large. For instance, in November of 1966, 47% of the mail registered opinion favored escalation while only 11% of the poll registered opinion did. President Johnson's private argument about a "silent center" of favorable escalation opinion towards the war may have some basis in

<sup>9</sup> These poll data were taken from confidential memos to and from Johnson staff members. These polls are the only polls found directly addressing the subject of the percent of the public favoring escalation of the war. Only those polls which repeated the question "favor escalating the war" were used.

fact as the private mail data presented here show greater support for war escalation than the public opinion polls were reporting. By mid-1967 the gap between the two opinion types begins to narrow. This may reflect the growing desire among activists and the mass public to escalate heavily and produce a quick victory to end the United States' role in the war.

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**Table 1 – Percent Favoring Escalation of War: Mail versus Polls**

<b>Date</b>	<b>Poll Percent<sup>†</sup></b>	<b>Mail Percent</b>	<b>Difference</b>
July 1966	60	72	12
September 1966	51	60	9
October 1966	44	56	12
November 1966	11	47	36
February 1967	18	27	9
July 1967	21	51	30
August 1967	24	43	19
October 1967	42	50	8

<sup>†</sup> Poll data was taken from multiple polling memos in the LBJ Archives. The following is a complete list: Aides Files (Panzer), Box 217, Misc. Polls T-V, "Redmon to Moyers," September 13, 1966; White House Central File (WHCF), Box 81, PR 16 Public Opinion Polls (1966, 2 of 5), "Redmon to Moyers," September 10, 1966; Confidential File (CF), Box 347, PR 16 10/13/67-12/13/66, American Opinion Summary, Department of State, October 27, 1966; CF, Box 348, PR 16 4/21/67-5/20/67, "Panzer to President," May 12, 1967; CF, Box 349, PR 16 8/1/67-9/1/67, "Panzer to President," August 25, 1967.

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## **Conclusion**

The design of the President's public opinion apparatus is to provide the administration with a comprehensive view of the public's preferences. Assessing and analyzing the public opinion polling data possessed by the administration is an important dynamic because of the growing importance of public opinion polling in politics and governing. This article expands this focus to explore the public opinion as gleaned by the mail received by the White House with specific reference to the US policy in Vietnam.

As a voracious consumer of public opinion, President Johnson sought public opinion from a variety of sources. Each type of opinion provided a different story as to the direction of public sentiment. As a result, public support could be concocted to justify most any course of policy action (see Altschuler 1990 on the use of polls). The difference in opinion between the public opinion polls and the mail opinion summaries may have given the Johnson Administration good reason to think that they were effective in persuading the “silent center” of Vietnam opinion which they believed was more “hawkish” than the opinion registered by the opinion polls or the mass rallying war protesters.

It would have been difficult for the Johnson Administration to construct a viable policy course in Vietnam by only using the opinion mail as a measure of popular support. The mail opinion data are too variable and sporadic to enact a consistent policy. However, the opinion mail could provide evidence to demonstrate elite support of Johnson’s policies which were based on the opinion of the top military advisors. Opinion polls can tell the president what the mass public thinks, but if the president is more interested in a particular segment of the public, the incoming White House mail may provide an answer. In the present case, the opinion registered by polling and the opinion registered by the mail were often quite different. Different types of public opinion, for instance active opinion or mass opinion, may be useful to presidents at certain times (Entman and Herbst 2001; Key 1963). In this case, the White House public opinion apparatus was used to provide President Johnson with additional supporting evidence to convince the media and the mass public that his policies had support at key times. The

mail could therefore be used to offer President Johnson an interpretation of public opinion which reflected a more potentially positive environment than actually existed.



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