

Regional

Young voter participation depends on issues

Although the recent wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have had many consequences in terms of human lives, economic costs, and political disruptions, sometimes we tend to forget that these kinds of engagements also have consequences in terms of American politics.

Recently two faculty members of the department of political science at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville researched how those wars impacted the electoral process. They are Laurie Rice and Kenneth Moffett and I talked to both of them to find out more about the result of their investigations.

Although it is clear that major conflicts such as Pearl Harbor, the Vietnam War, or 9/11 had great political impacts on American politics, less is known about how this country's more recent foreign war engagements have impacted the political scene. One issue they studied had to do with the behavior of new voters.

"I can see protracted wars having an effect definitely in terms of voting patterns and in terms of engagement patterns more broadly that extend beyond them," said Moffett. "That said, as far as the act of voting itself, there are lots of other things that necessarily play into that."

His response begs the question of whether there are differences between protracted wars like the ones in Iraq and Vietnam versus a specific event like 9/11 or Pearl Harbor in terms of the effect it may have on the American electorate.

"Specific events like 9/11 or Pearl Harbor often result in a lot of patriotism in a short amount of time, and they result in things like people approving more of the president, people having a better feeling about the government," said Rice. Yet, she added that such events do not have much of an effect on people's opinions about who should be elected and it doesn't necessarily translate into larger numbers of people going to the polls.

"A protracted war, especially as people begin to disapprove of the war, can begin to mobilize the sorts of opposition that leads more and more people to vote,"



Dr. Rice, Dr. Moffett, and Dr. Romero during the Segue interview.

Rice added.

In their study, Rice and Moffett pointed to an important distinction between Vietnam and the Iraq and Afghanistan wars: the absence of a draft. Rice said that this was something they were really interested in looking at.

"Certainly you can see how if there

is a draft and people have no choice on whether or not they are going to go fight in a war, that would more easily mobilize opposition," she said. "It wasn't clear when we first started out whether the Iraq War would lead more young adults to participate because they have a situation in which they are choosing whether

to enlist or not.

"When we compared two protracted wars, like the war in Vietnam and the war in Iraq, we also saw a major difference in the way people reacted to them. During the Vietnam War era we saw a lot of activism against the war, but for the Iraq War the public reacted in a different way." For

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Moffett, the time between the start of the war and the national elections was a crucial element.

"I think because you didn't have nearly the protracted nature, by the time you got to the 2004 elections you had about a year and a half between when the Iraq War started in March 2003 and the election in November 2004," said Moffett. "By 2008 the public opinion was solidified in terms of getting American troops out of Iraq."

For their article, Rice and Moffett conducted surveys in order to obtain the necessary data. Rice said that they used two data sources. "One was a survey that we designed in 2008 and it was a survey of students here at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville. We also looked at a study that is done periodically called the American National Elections Study that is a nationwide study," she said.

Moffett added that they took both approaches because some would argue that if you just looked at students at a single institution at a single point in time, that such a group wouldn't represent the broader array of either college students or younger people.

Now that their work has been published, both Rice and Moffett expressed what they hope readers will take from it.

"I think one thing would be that there are issues that can bring more young adults into the electoral process," said Rice. "That it is not always just a matter of young adults not participating. That some issues bring them to the polls and bring them to other forms of participation in greater numbers. And also we shouldn't expect them to participate in the same ways that generations before them did."

Aldemaro Romero Jr. is the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville. His show, "Segue," can be heard every Sunday morning at 9 a.m. on WSIE, 88.7 FM. He can be reached at College_Arts_Sciences@siue.edu.