

## Public Opinion and U.S. Foreign Policy

### Source A

Stereotypes abound when it comes to how the world views the American people. Depending on who sketches the caricature, Americans are all jingoistic adventurers eager to assert power, or ethnocentric know-nothings with no capacity for subtle diplomacy, or cowardly isolationists who have lost the will to defend Western interests. In addition, there is the odd impression that the American public treats each foreign policy issue in an ad hoc manner, as if based solely on the information in the last newspaper or newscast.

Generalizations, of course, are often wrong -- markedly so in this case. American public opinion on foreign policy can be broken into several broad orientations, but it does not fit crude categories such as isolationist, militarist, or internationalist.

A series of underlying attitudes forms the basis from which most Americans interpret international news. These fundamental orientations toward world affairs have been remarkably consistent for the better part of this century. Seven major patterns can be supported by decades of opinion polling. ...

William C. Adams, "Opinion and Foreign Policy", *Foreign Service Journal*, No. 61 (May 1984).

### Source B

It has been frequently noted that the American public's attention to foreign affairs is sporadic. The foreign policy literature depicts a public highly attentive to crisis situations that involve military force, but paying little mind to noncrisis issues like foreign trade or foreign aid. Moreover, because the public is unusually dependent on elites and the mass media for the information and interpretations on which to base opinions, the influence process is often portrayed as running from the top down, from the government to the public. Presidents and their policy teams are not viewed as having carte blanche, but unless popular attention to an issue is high, national leaders are predicted to be only weakly constrained by public opinion in their foreign policy choices. The salience of foreign policy issues to the public is central to this picture: electorally accountable leaders will give closer consideration to the potential electoral impact of their decisions the more attentive the public is. What are the conditions under which the public is more or less attuned to foreign policy? ...

Our research shows that both the immediacy of the international challenge and the visibility of the White House decision process influence public attentiveness. Crises garner more attention, and the public's attentiveness builds steadily toward the resolution of the issue, in a pattern whose overall trajectory is consistent with a process of learning the facts and considering alternative policy arguments. These appear to be situations in which the public is primed for engagement, and in which presidents have the potential to help enlighten the public's conception of the national interest. The popular salience of noncrises is lower overall and more episodic, with the president's own action to resolve the issue generally the main stimulus to public attentiveness. In such situations, presidents are usually safe in predicting that their range of policy maneuver is wide, and that any but the most egregiously errant policy will make a sufficiently small impression on voters that it is not likely to figure as an issue in the next election. The relatively high degree of autonomy comports well with the view that elites know more and think more rationally than the public; these cases lie close to the normative ideal for an elite-centric theory of foreign policy making. But from a normative perspective that sees democracy as an on-going process of mutual consultation and learning between leaders and

the public, such cases offer presidents an opportunity for initiating useful democratic deliberation.

Thomas Knecht, and M. S. Weatherford, "Public Opinion and Foreign Policy: The Stages of Presidential Decision Making", *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 50, No. 3 (2006), pp. 705 and 719-20.

### Source C

Wars are momentous decisions for governments to make. The 2003 invasion of Iraq by the United States and its allies occurred amidst considerable domestic skepticism and opposition in these countries. The public rationale presented by the Bush administration for invading Iraq – that the government in Baghdad had (or was about to have) weapons of mass destruction and that it supported Al Qaeda's terrorist network – was based on dubious intelligence that has since been widely discredited.

With advances in public polling, we have gained substantial insight into people's reactions to their countries' involvement in foreign conflicts. There is a tendency for the public to increase its support of incumbent officials at the initial stage of a militarized dispute. This popular support, however, declines sharply if the conflict becomes protracted and when its financial and human costs begin to mount. The so-called "rally around the flag" syndrome, responsible for the dramatic increase in a chief executive's popularity in the immediate aftermath of a foreign crisis, has been documented in a considerable number of instances. For example, Harry Truman's approval rating went from 37% to 46% when the United States joined the Korean War, Dwight Eisenhower's popularity rose from 48% to 58% when he introduced troops to Lebanon, and John Kennedy's support level increased from 61% to 74% at the time of the Cuban Missile Crisis. There is also ample evidence that shows the erosion of this support over time as a conflict drags on without a resolution. The decline of a U.S. president's popularity during the Vietnam War, the Iranian hostage episode and, most recently, the campaign against Iraqi insurgents demonstrate this tendency. ...

Our discussion of the influence of British and American public opinion on the Iraq war underscores an observation made by V. O. Key (1961) some time ago. In his view, the political salience and relevance of public opinion depends ultimately on the incumbent politicians' concern for the voters being mobilized by the opposition. That is, the incumbent politicians' perception is critical. Are they concerned about the potential for their opponents to exploit public opinion? Absent this potential, they have less incentive to adjust their unpopular policies. To the extent that the main opposition party in the United States and the United Kingdom fails to offer a clear and sharp alternative policy, the government has less to be worried about being challenged in the election. Citizens unhappy with the incumbent's Iraqi policy face a quandary because a vote for an antiwar third party is "wasted." The nature of the electoral system therefore induces voters not to support their top preference but to cast their ballot in the hope of defeating the candidate or party that is most objectionable to them.

Steve Chan and William Safran, "Public Opinion as a Constraint against War: Democracies' Responses to Operation Iraqi Freedom", *Foreign Policy Analysis* Vol. 2, No. 2 (April 2006), pp. 137-38 and 154.

### Source D

In recent years, a charitable view of the mass public has emerged in the public opinion and foreign policy literature. Increasingly, scholars have attributed "rationality" to public opinion concerning war. Many political scientists and policymakers argue that unmediated events—the

successes and failures on the battlefield—determine whether the mass public will support military excursions. The public supports war, the story goes, if the benefits of action outweigh the costs of conflict and should therefore have a place at the policymaking table.

In this paper, I argue that military events may shape public opinion, but not in the straightforward manner posited by most scholars of public opinion and war ... I demonstrate that patterns of conflict among partisan political actors shape mass opinion on war. It is not the direct influence of wartime events on individual citizens' decisions that determines public opinion, as "event response" theories of war support claim. Instead, consistent with the "elite cue" theory I advance in this paper, the nature of conflict among political elites concerning the salience and meaning of those events determines if the public will rally to war. To a significant degree citizens determine their positions on war by listening to trusted sources—those politicians who share their political predispositions.

I present evidence from World War II and the Second Iraq war, two cases that span 65 years of American history, to come to this common conclusion. In both wars, I find that significant segments of the mass public possessed little knowledge of the most basic facts of these conflicts. Thus, there is little evidence that citizens had the information needed to make cost/benefit calculations when deciding whether to support or oppose military action. Instead, I find that patterns of elite conflict shaped opinions both throughout the six years of World War II and during the Iraq conflict. When elites come to a common interpretation of a political reality, the public gives them great latitude to wage war. But when prominent political actors take divergent stands on the wisdom of intervention, the public divides as well. Furthermore, even in cases—such as the Iraq war—where prominent political actors on one side of the partisan divide stay silent, the presence of a prominent partisan cue giver can lead to divergence in opinion. In sum, while members of the mass public are not lemmings – they have agency to determine their own opinion and may even, in the aggregate, reasonably react to changing events—in the realm of war, any apparent rationality arises largely through the process of elite cue taking, not through a reasoned cost/benefit analysis. The mass public is rational only to the extent that prominent political actors provide a rational lead.

Adam J. Berinsky, "Assuming the Costs of War: Events, Elites, and American Public Support for Military Conflict", *The Journal of Politics*, Vol. 69, No. 4 (November 2007), pp. 975-76.

### Source E

Scholars have long analyzed the influence of combat casualties on public support for war. However, the mechanisms through which casualties—particularly local casualties—affect wartime opinion formation have received much less attention. We employ a novel survey experiment to test three mechanisms that might explain previously observed cleavages in war support between residents of high- and low-casualty communities. We find that subjects who read a news story concerning a casualty from their home state were significantly more likely to oppose the war in Afghanistan than were subjects who read an identically worded news story in which the fallen soldier was not identified as being from the respondent's home state. Moreover, this difference emerged regardless of whether the story followed the coverage patterns and emphasis typical of national or local media reporting. We conclude that the local connections triggered by learning of a home-state casualty, not the emotionally charged nature of local media reporting, is most responsible for generating opinion cleavages observed in previous research

Douglas L. Kriner and Francis X. Shen, "How Citizens Respond to Combat Casualties: The Differential Impact of Local Casualties on Support for the War in Afghanistan", *Public Opinion Quarterly*, Vol. 76, No. 4 (Winter 2012), p.761.

## Source F

Without in any way suggesting that traditional security concerns have vanished with the end of the Cold War and the disintegration of the Soviet Union, it seems increasingly likely that the top echelons of the U.S. foreign policy agenda during the post-Cold War era will also encompass some issues on which it is difficult to make a compelling case for excluding the public and its representatives from involvement in the policy process. This agenda will probably include but not be limited to a number of issues on which the public is likely to have strong views and on which the thesis that the “president knows best” may appear less compelling than, for example, during World War II or the Cold War. The long-term impact of the terrorist attacks on New York and Washington is not wholly clear. The war on terrorists could create an extended crisis atmosphere reminiscent of the coldest days of the Cold War, with enhanced power for the executive branch and a concomitant constriction of the role of the public and those representing it. Alternatively, although the war on terrorists is unlikely to result in a clearly defined victory in the near future, if ever, efforts to subordinate permanently all other issues to that undertaking may fail. Among the issues on which the case for executive dominance over other domestic political actors is not likely to be wholly compelling are trade, immigration, the environment, and intra-state conflicts abroad that may touch on the interests of various groups of hyphenated Americans.

Ole Holsti, *Public Opinion and American Foreign Policy* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, rev. ed. 2009), pp. 292-93.

## Source G

The 2012 Chicago Council Survey shows that Americans are recalibrating their views on international engagement and searching for more effective and less costly ways to project positive U.S. influence abroad. The public ultimately has not viewed the Iraq and Afghanistan wars as successful, seeing neither security benefits nor an increase in democracy in the greater Middle East as a result of U.S. efforts. Now, with a strong sense that the wars have overstretched our military and strained our economic resources, they prefer to avoid the use of military force if at all possible.

Over the past two years, the preference for selective engagement that was first revealed in the 2010 Chicago Council Survey has consolidated. Americans are now less likely to support the use of force in many circumstances and are more likely to endorse spending cutbacks, including on defense. As always, if force is necessary, there is a preference for multilateral rather than unilateral approaches.

Millennials (those aged eighteen to twenty-nine) are at the front edge of these evolving American attitudes toward certain key aspects of foreign policy, perhaps foreshadowing trends that will continue into the future. They are much less alarmed about major threats facing the country, particularly international terrorism, Islamic fundamentalism, and the development of China as a world power. They are also less supportive of an activist approach to foreign affairs than older Americans.

Independents, often distinct in their opinions from both Democrats and Republicans, may also be a force for change. Over time they have become less inclined to support an active U.S. role in world affairs at a steeper rate than partisans, and they are less likely to consider strong U.S. leadership in world affairs desirable.

Despite military and economic struggles over the past ten years, Americans still consider the United States as the greatest and most influential country in the world. But they are seeking a lower profile. They clearly reject the role of the U.S. as a hegemon and want to take a more

cooperative stance, even if this means the United States might have to go along with a policy that is not its first choice. ...

While media attention has focused on growing political polarization in American society, this appears to be exaggerated. Contrary to conventional wisdom, the foreign policy opinions of Americans in “red” and “blue” districts are remarkably similar. Moreover, Chicago Council Survey trends reveal that Republicans and Democrats rarely disagree on key foreign policy issues, though they differ in emphasis. Their sharpest differences are on immigration issues and Middle East policy.

Dina Smeltz et al, *Foreign Policy in the New Millennium: Results of the 2012 Chicago Council Survey of American Public Opinion and U.S. Foreign Policy* (Chicago Council on Global Affairs, 2012), pp. 3-4.

### **Essay Question**

Using these sources and your own knowledge evaluate the extent to which public opinion influences American foreign policy.