

Foreign Policy and the Electoral Connection\*

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## Foreign Policy and the Electoral Connection

*“War is much too serious a matter to be entrusted to the military”*

*--Georges Clemenceau*

*“[Clemenceau] once said that war is too important to be left to the generals. When he said that, 50 years ago, he may have been right...but now, war is too important to be left to the politicians. They have neither the time, the training, nor the inclination for strategic thought...And I can no longer, sit around and allow Communist subversion, Communist corruption, and Communist infiltration of our precious bodily fluids.”*

*--Col. Jack D. Ripper in Dr. Strangelove*

### Introduction

Threats to our precious bodily fluids notwithstanding, is war too serious a matter to be entrusted to the public? In this article we examine whether the public is capable of making sufficiently informed evaluations of international affairs, so that these views can lead to reasonable policy-based electoral choices and thus influence foreign policy. We approach this question by examining how individuals' foreign policy attitudes might translate into electoral choices. Following Aldrich, Borgida and Sullivan (1989) we suggest that three important conditions need to be met if public opinion regarding foreign policy is to influence electoral outcomes. First, the public must actually possess coherent beliefs or attitudes about foreign policy (called “availability” in the political psychology literature). Second, voters must be able to access these attitudes in the context of an election. And finally, the major party candidates must offer sufficiently distinct foreign policy alternatives so that voters who have accessed their available attitudes have a basis on which to make a choice.

In a review of more than fifty years of research, we find reason to believe that the public does have coherent foreign policy attitudes and is capable of addressing serious issues such as the tolerance of casualties in military operations. Moreover, we find that members of the public can and do use these attitudes to make voting choices when events and candidates make foreign policies salient to the public and when political parties provide them with distinctive platforms so that voters face “a choice and not an echo” on foreign policy.<sup>1</sup> Finally, we find evidence that this electoral connection leads policymakers to consider public opinion consequences as they shape their foreign policies. In sum, the public can influence foreign policy.

### The Structure of American Attitudes towards Foreign Policy

The first question, of course, is whether the American public has anything consistent and coherent enough to be called “attitudes” toward foreign policy. The early work on this issue was decidedly pessimistic. Following World War II, assessments of the public’s grasp of foreign affairs were decidedly unflattering. Experts like Gabriel Almond and Walter Lippmann viewed the public’s views on such matters to be capricious, unstructured and even dangerous.<sup>2</sup> Looking at Gallup’s biennial “most important problem” question, Almond noticed that the mass public named international issues only *after* wars or crises. Almond inferred that the US public was incapable of sustained attention to foreign policy priorities (Holsti 1996) and concluded that foreign

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<sup>1</sup> The quotation was a campaign theme of Sen. Barry Goldwater (R., AZ) in his 1964 presidential campaign.

<sup>2</sup> For a complete review of the Almond-Lippmann consensus and challenges to it, see Holsti 1992 and 1996. Note also that Lippmann’s pessimism about the public’s role in a democracy applied to domestic policies as well, and extended back at least to the 1920s (see Lippmann, 1922; 1925, the latter entitled The Phantom Public).

policy views were best analogized to “mood swings” which “lack intellectual structure and factual content” (1950: 53-54, 69). Even more dramatically, Lippmann saw the public as an irrational and dangerous force in foreign policy (Lippmann 1955: 16-27). “The unhappy truth,” he wrote, “is that the prevailing public opinion has been destructively wrong at critical junctures. [The people] have compelled governments . . .to be too late with too little, too long with too much, too pacifist in peace or bellicose in war . . .” (1955:20). To be sure, survey research (as Lippmann well knew) painted an unflattering portrait of the public on domestic matters as well, but the scholarly understanding of public opinion about foreign affairs was even less flattering.

Even as more data and more sophisticated tools of analysis became available, documenting a structure or interdependence of foreign policy attitudes remained elusive.<sup>3</sup> Attitudes toward specific foreign policies seemed not to be defined by traditional organizational principles like isolationism versus interventionism or liberal versus conservative. Campbell et al found that opinions about foreign policy were not associated with the standard liberal-conservative ideological dimension, saying these opinions “fail to correlate with placement on the social welfare dimension” or with partisanship (1960: 198). Converse highlighted the absence of ideological consistency in the views of the mass public in both the domestic and foreign policy spheres, as well as between the two. One would, he wrote, “come closer to reality by assuming no connection at all” (Converse 1964: 230). Converse and others also revealed the public’s ignorance of basic foreign policy facts (for example, see Erksine 1963). According to one survey, at the height of the Korean War, almost a quarter of the American public

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<sup>3</sup> Scholars “speak of an ‘attitude structure’ when two or more beliefs are functionally related” (Campbell et al 1960: 189).

answered “don’t know” to the question, “Do you happen to know if there is any Communist government in China right now?” (Patchen 1966: 257, as cited in Mueller 1973).<sup>4</sup>

The Vietnam experience proved to be a watershed both in the politics of American foreign policy and the study of public opinion and foreign policy. Sustained popular opposition to Vietnam began to contradict the image of the public as unpredictable and irrational (Holsti 1996). During those years scholars increasingly gained access to large public opinion datasets with precise questions about foreign policy issues. For example, a study by Verba et. al. (1967) marks an important, but subtle, shift away from the Almond-Lippman consensus. While agreeing that foreign policy views appeared to fluctuate, their findings challenged the Almond-Lippmann consensus, claiming public views “were not as bad as had been assumed; and that the phenomenon under study was not as simple as previous reports had suggested” (Verba et. al. 1967: 319). The authors documented both strong public support for negotiations with the Vietcong and strong opposition to a withdrawal of American troops, 88% and 81% respectively (330). Rather than see a public confused about what choices were available, they viewed the results as indicative of a moderate stance that neither capitulated to the enemy nor dragged out the conflict. Other Vietnam era studies increasingly supported this view of a moderate and logical public (Caspary 1970; Mueller 1973; Achen 1975).

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<sup>4</sup> Only 37 percent of respondents to a poll conducted during the Berlin airlift knew that Berlin was surrounded by East Germany, during the Cold War only 42 percent of Americans knew the US was part of NATO, and one could go on. Similarly, of course, respondents have trouble answering domestic and other political questions correctly. For instance, in the ANES 1978 survey, 37 percent of respondents in districts with an incumbent-challenger contest for the U.S. House failed to recognize the name of the challenger, even when presented with it (Mann and Wolfinger, 1980, p. 623).

The intellectual shift away from the Almond-Lippman consensus by Verba et. al. was made possible by using a new survey question format. Drawing heavily from the Downsian proximity model and related spatial models, scholars asked respondents to place themselves on a seven point scale. In addition, respondents were asked to place competing candidates or parties on the same seven point scale. As a result, scholars had access to data measuring distance from individuals to candidates *and* measures of distance from one candidate to another. Moreover, this data was directly linked to a causal explanation of vote choice. While poor factual recall may be alarming (though we discuss below reasons that may mitigate cause for alarm), the presence or absence of some fact in memory does not by itself change a voter's choice. Greater or lesser distance to a candidate does. After using two such scales for the 1968 American National Election Survey (ANES), scholars moved to regular and sustained use of the new 7-point issue scale format beginning in 1970. Intellectual developments (spatial theories of voting) led to new technology of survey design, which in turn caused new intellectual advances (evidence of a "rational" public in matters of foreign affairs).

Even with the new evidence, substantive inferences of a "logical" public were still indirect. Page and Shapiro were among the first to present direct empirical evidence of the public's capabilities (Page & Shapiro 1982; Shapiro & Page 1988; Page & Shapiro 1992). Using a data set of over 6,000 questions compiled from five respected polling organizations, their 1988 study identified 425 foreign policy questions asked at least twice in the period from 1935-1982. They could then use such repeated questions to examine stability or change in public opinion, its antecedent causes, and subsequent consequences. The data revealed that responses to over half (51%) of the questions

remained constant throughout the period.<sup>5</sup> An additional 22% of policy questions fluctuated by less than 10%.<sup>6</sup> Page and Shapiro thus claimed that when opinion shifts did occur, the change was precipitated by changes in the international environment (1988, 1992). Additional studies showed the public reacting rationally to issues of arms control (Russett 1990), Central America, the Arab-Israeli conflict, and terrorism (Hinckley 1990; Sobel 1992), and military intervention (Jentleson 1992; Jentleson & Britton 1998; Chanley 1999). The overall trend pointed toward a public offering reasonable responses to international events (Nincic 1992a).<sup>7</sup> More importantly, Page and Shapiro found that changes in public opinion in response to international events regularly *preceded* eventual changes in public policy. Not only do Page and Shapiro offer compelling direct evidence, but the evidence of rational response to international events subtly undermines one of the founding pillars of the Almond-Lippman consensus—Almond’s analysis of the Gallup most important problem question following major international events.

Stability only hints that “true” attitudes may be available to voters, and cannot by itself demonstrate that individual foreign policy attitudes are structured in a coherent enough manner to make them the basis of vote choice. A number of studies found evidence of an isolationist-interventionist dimension in which only a small minority of the public opposed international engagement entirely with the rest divided according to advocacy of militant versus cooperative internationalism (Modigliani 1972; Holsti 1979;

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<sup>5</sup> Consistency defined as opinion variation of 6% or less (p. 216).

<sup>6</sup> Statistic comes from Shapiro and Page’s assertion that of the 49% of questions that displayed fluctuating opinion, 44% of changes were opinion shifts of less than 10% (p. 217).

<sup>7</sup> In the literature bridging foreign policy and public opinion, “reasonableness” has become the default definition of “rationality” in the colloquial sense, not to be confused with “rationality” as used in rational choice theory (see Nincic 1992a).

Mandelbaum & Schnieder 1979; Wittkopf 1981; Wittkopf & Maggiotto 1983; Mayer 1992).

Hurwitz and Peffley, in accordance with the path breaking work on “core values” by Feldman and Zaller (1992), argued that ethnocentrism and the morality of warfare were the core values that shaped how people viewed certain approaches to foreign affairs, which in turn determined the level of support or opposition to specific foreign policy actions (Hurwitz & Peffley 1987a; Peffley & Hurwitz 1992). A related strand of research indicated that personality characteristics, such as aggression or accommodation, contributed to preference formation on a variety of international security and trade policies (Herrmann, Tetlock, & Visser 1999; Herrmann, Tetlock, & Diascro 2001). Advances in the understanding of foreign policy beliefs held by the public moved in tandem with what Paul Sniderman referred to as the “new look” in public opinion research (1993), revealing the impact of advances in social and cognitive psychology.

The evolving complexity of scholars’ understanding of the structure of American foreign policy opinions is evident when tracing scholars’ understanding of the American public’s willingness to tolerate the deaths of U.S. soldiers in combat. Combat casualties are important because the willingness to pay the costs of war is one of the central mechanisms by which public opinion might affect foreign policy choices. Soldiers dying in combat is obviously something that the public would like to avoid, yet such deaths are inevitable when using military force to achieve foreign policy goals. The tension of making this uncomfortable and emotional tradeoff makes casualty tolerance a difficult but important area for measuring and understanding the structure and complexity of opinions.

In a pioneering analysis, Jeffrey Milstein found that public support dropped as the U.S. military commitment in Vietnam increased and as casualties increased, whereas public support climbed when the burden was shifted to the shoulders of the Vietnamese themselves (Milstein & Mitchell 1968; Milstein 1969; Milstein 1973; Milstein 1974). John Mueller built on this work with a landmark study of public opinion in the Korean and Vietnam Wars (Mueller 1971; Mueller 1973). Mueller found that support for both wars dropped in proportion to the log of casualties (1973: 62). Mueller later reinforced this “inexorable decline” view with his analysis of public opinion during the first Iraq war, which emphasized that the euphoria over the quick victory obscured the precarious nature of the public’s support (Mueller 1994).<sup>8</sup> Other research also showed that there was a direct link between mounting casualties, anti-war protests and then subsequent changes in U.S. governmental policy. This stream of research established the presence of fairly stable and coherent public attitudes toward paying the human costs of war, but it also suggested a mechanistic public response to casualties; public support for war declines consistently and inexorably with casualties regardless of the context in which those casualties occurred.

Following the collapse of the Cold War, scholars began to reevaluate the willingness of the American public to tolerate casualties in war. Much like the scholarship of the Vietnam era, these works do not suggest that the public casualty tolerance might vary across different kinds of military conflicts. They do, however, suggest that public tolerance for casualties may vary over time. In particular, many

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<sup>8</sup> Scott Gartner and Gary Segura revised this argument somewhat, noting that support for the Korean and Vietnam wars declined with logged casualties during periods when the casualty rate was low, but in periods of high casualty rates, then public support drops with marginal casualties, not logged cumulative casualties (Gartner and Segura, 1998).

observers began to posit a secular decline in public tolerance for casualties due to long term trends in American society. Edward Luttwak, for example, argues that the public is more casualty sensitive now than in the time of the World Wars because of the lower birth rate (Luttwak 1995, 1996). Charles Moskos, on the other hand, argues that the public is more casualty sensitive now because they see that children of the elite are not at risk in most military missions (Moskos 1995). Still further, Harvey Sapolsky and Jeremy Shapiro argue that casualty phobia has driven changes in technology which has, in turn, reinforced casualty phobia by fostering unrealistic expectations of what human toll is unavoidable in war (Sapolsky and Shapiro, 1996). And of course, numerous commentators have argued that the advent of near-real-time television coverage of military operations has heightened public casualty sensitivity by giving the deaths a vividness and immediacy that makes them more shocking (Stech 1994; Neuman 1996; Livingston 1997).

The most recent research in this area, however, has indicated a more nuanced structure where the public's response to operations that suffer U.S. military casualties is not an automatic, but rather depends on context. While casualties are always a cost that the public would prefer to avoid, the elasticity of public support in the face of casualties varies in systematic ways. Put another way, this research tried to identify the conditions under which casualties would cause public support for a given mission to decline more rapidly or more slowly. There is by now a wide scholarly consensus that multiple factors may be at work at the same time (Larson 2000; Klarevas 2002). What distinguishes different authors in this debate, however, is the pride of place they give to certain factors.

Bruce Jentleson, for example, argued that the “pretty prudent” public bases its casualty tolerance on “the principal policy objective (PPO)” envisioned by the military operation (Jentleson 1992; Jentleson & Britton 1998). Eric Larson, on the other hand, argued that public casualty tolerance follows domestic elite casualty tolerance (Larson 1996; Larson 2000). That is, he contended that when domestic elites line up in a consensus behind the mission, public support will be robust even in the face of mounting costs, but when domestic elites are divided then even small numbers of casualties will be highly corrosive of public support. In contrast, Steven Kull and colleagues argued that public support for a military mission will be more robust if the public sees that *other* countries also support the mission (Kull 1997; Kull & Destler 1999; Kull & Ramsey 2000; Kull 2002). Thus while Larson emphasized domestic elite cues as critical, Kull emphasized the international elite cues of public opinion. Finally, Peter Feaver and Christopher Gelpi identify expectations of success as the crucial factor in explaining the public’s tolerance of casualties (Feaver and Gelpi 2004, Gelpi, Feaver and Reifler, 2005/2006).<sup>9</sup> While the debate over the determinants of public tolerance for casualties has not yet reached a “consensus view” there is agreement that the American public has sophisticated and nuanced views about the difficult and emotionally charged issue of American soldiers dying in battle.

As economic policy is increasingly becoming an important part of foreign policy, a nascent and growing body of research suggests that the public has coherent attitudes here as well. This work is primarily derived from foundational work in economics on the consequences of trade. A number of scholars have investigated whether economic

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<sup>9</sup> Richard Eichenberg reaches a similar conclusion in an analysis of aggregate public support for US military operations (Eichenberg 2005).

models of the consequences of trade such as the Ricardo-Viner (RV) model or the Heckscher-Olin (HO) models of trade can be used to predict public preferences for trade liberalization or trade protection. A number of scholars used these models to predict political coalitions that will support liberalizing trade (Rogowski 1989; Frieden 1991; Hiscox 2002). Until recently, however, surprisingly few studies actually linked these models directly to voter preferences, and even fewer studies examined the preferences of American voters. In an influential study of American public opinion regarding trade and globalization, however, Scheve and Slaughter (2001a, 2001b) found that American public preferences for trade liberalization closely matched the predictions of the Heckscher-Olin model. The H-O model divides workers into two essential factors of production: skilled and unskilled labor. The model expects that liberalizing trade will increase the welfare of workers in the abundant sector of the economy at the expense of those in the scarce sector. In the United States - as in other developed economies - skilled labor is the abundant factor of production. Thus according to the H-O model skilled American workers should support trade liberalization while unskilled workers will be opposed. Scheve and Slaughter find strong support for this proposition and also find support for a causal linkage between the material consequences of trade and individual attitudes toward trade liberalization. Specifically, they find that workers blame the increase in globalization for slow real-wage growth among unskilled American workers.

More recent studies have expanded and built upon this central result, but Scheve and Slaughter's (2001a, 2001b) general conclusions appear to have been robust.<sup>10</sup> For example, Baker (2005) finds that respondents form their preferences regarding trade

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<sup>10</sup> O'Rourke and Sinott (2001), Beaulieu (2002) and Mayda and Rodrik (2005) report similar results with cross-national data that includes the United States.

based not solely on the consequences for them as workers, but also on the consequences they face as consumers. Thus in a skill abundant country like the United States, Baker finds that those who consume exportable goods relatively heavily are more protectionist than those who tend to consume imports. In some circumstances consumption consequences of trade run contrary to the labor market consequences, but through an analysis of individual level data Baker is able to distinguish between these influences and demonstrate that both effects exist and they are robust across a number of nations - including the United States. Consistent with the findings on American public opinion regarding casualties in war, this line of research suggests that American voters have well-formed attitudes about international trade and they ground these attitudes "prudently" in terms of the material consequences of trade for themselves and their families.

At the same time, however, some studies have also demonstrated that public attitudes toward trade can be unstable. Hiscox (2004), for example, finds that American public support for trade liberalization depends significantly on the consequences of trade that are accentuated to the respondents. Specifically, he shows that the expressed level of support for trade liberalization can vary by as much as 19 percentage points depending upon whether the question emphasizes the positive or negative consequences of trade. Not all voters are equally at the mercy of elite discourse and framing, however. Hiscox finds that the effect of framing is more than twice as large for respondents who have never attended college as it is for those who spent at least some time in college. Hiscox contends that his findings contradict previous research indicating stable and coherent preferences about trade as predicted by H-O trade model.

The truth, however, might lie somewhere in between. While Hiscox finds that education and self-reported level of training have no impact on protectionist sentiment when respondents are only presented with positive arguments about trade, his results also indicate that the gap between skilled and unskilled respondents is significant when they are provided negative arguments about trade, both positive and negative arguments about trade, and when they are provided no arguments about trade. In each of these circumstances the impact of skill level is substantively at least as large as the impact of the changes in question wording. Thus respondents seem to express attitudes consistent with their material interests under a variety of circumstances. Aldrich, et al. (1999) obtained findings similar to Hiscox's, arguing that the influence of the H-O trade model's variables was significant but relatively modest. They also argued that the effects interacted with political variables, especially party identification. These patterns of responses can be altered, however, by the information provided to them. This more complex pattern of results leads us to our next concern: elite discourse and the shaping of public opinion.

### The Accessibility of Foreign Policy Attitudes

Following our simple causal chain, if members of the American public actually do have attitudes about foreign policy, are they able to access those attitudes so as to be able to express them in a politically relevant way? Here the evidence is less clear, but a growing body of research suggests that foreign policy views can be accessible to voters. The important caveat is that control over this accessibility may depend significantly on the behavior of policy making elites, the news media, and other opinion leaders.

Perhaps the central work on attitude accessibility and public opinion is Zaller's (1992) Receive-Accept-Sample (RAS) model of public opinion formation. Zaller posited that survey answers are a "top-of-the-head" response to the questions presented to the respondents. These answers reflected a person's beliefs (not unlike the "core values" of Feldman & Zaller, 1992; Hurwitz & Peffley, 1987; Peffley and Hurwitz, 1992), but they also reflect the considerations that happen to be salient to the respondent at the moment the question is posed. Responses to any one question may not reflect the full complexity of an underlying attitude. As a result, *survey responses* may be unstable as different bundles of considerations are at the top of the head—even if the underlying *attitudes* are perfectly stable. Framing, priming, and the like can all have a significant effect on any single response to a survey question.

Zaller's RAS model is heavily indebted to social psychology and its large body of findings of humans as "cognitive misers." In this view, the motivation of people is to "satisfice" (Simon 1957) or make good enough decisions or judgments with minimal cognitive effort. Instead of devoting the mental resources necessary to reach the "best" decisions about foreign policy, people use schemas, scripts, heuristics, or other types of cognitive shortcuts to make good decisions without knowing all the specifics. Taking cues from partisanship, the news media or elite discourse have all been suggested as labor saving devices for cognitive miser (Rahn 1993; Krosnick & Kinder 1990, Iyengar & Kinder 1987; Zaller 1992). Popkin (1991) argued that using heuristics is an eminently "reasonable" way to make voting decisions. One implication is that voters who chose the right heuristic(s) can, on average, make decisions similar to what they would have made

if fully informed without expending the resources to become fully informed (Lupia & McCubbins, 1998; Lau & Redlawsk, 1997).

The effort required to monitor and express one's views prevents voters from expressing all aspects of their (reasonably nuanced) attitudes at once. Instead, they are more likely to focus on the dimensions of opinion made salient to them. Of course, important questions like "what sources inform the public of international happenings and events?" immediately spring to mind. Two influential answers are the politicians and the news media.

Existing research suggests that the mass media can have both salutary and deleterious effects on the accessibility of attitudes when making judgments about foreign policy. On the one hand, the prevalence and pervasiveness of the news media can help bring the public into contact with foreign policy issues of which they would otherwise be unaware. A number of scholars have held that the advent of the 24-hour news cycle and the proliferation of news media have given the public a more intense and vivid connection to foreign policy events – especially foreign military conflicts (Stech 1994; Neuman 1996; Livingston 1997). Moreover, media coverage gives even respondents who are disinterested some exposure to international issues (Baum 2002), and the diversity of media sources allows for a variety of perspectives to be voiced.

At the same time, while the open and competitive American media environment allows for a tremendous breadth of public expression, it also allows voters to select news media that reinforce their views and avoid streams of information that might create dissonance. Studies of media consumptions during the Iraq war, for example, indicate

that respondents may select news media outlets that support their own views of the conflict. (Kull 2002).

Additionally, TV media has sharply reduced in-depth analysis of foreign policy reporting even as technology allows the media to produce more immediate surge coverage in crises. For instance, American news sources eschew reports of the day-to-day hardships in poverty-stricken countries in favor of near-live video coverage of tsunamis and explosions. This phenomenon may distort the way Americans conceptualize and prioritize foreign policy.

The other major source of information on which the public can draw when accessing attitudes about foreign policy is the rhetoric of the President and his administration. As numerous scholars have attested, the president has dramatic powers of agenda-setting in both the domestic and foreign policy spheres (Baumgartner and Jones 1993; Bond & Fleisher 1990; Kingdon 1995). This information is, of course, even more subject to problems of framing and selective use of information and strategic manipulation than the information from the mass media (Fritz, Keefer and Nyhan 2004). Samuel Kernell, for example, argues that American presidents can and do use public rhetoric to generate support for their domestic and foreign policies (Kernell 1986).

Recent studies also confirm that presidents are strategic in their decisions “go public” over foreign policy issues (Baum 2004).

In sum, the public seems to receive ample opportunity to access their attitudes regarding foreign policy, but the cues that they receive from both the media and politicians are likely to be strategically shaped by decisions at both the mass and elite levels. The public has attitudes about foreign policy, but those attitudes are complex

determining which aspects of those attitudes will get expressed is neither straightforward nor automatic. Elites would appear to retain some leeway in shaping the expression of public opinion.

## Foreign Policy Attitudes and Electoral Choice

Scholars have long known that retrospective and prospective economic evaluations affected presidential approval and vote choice (Kinder & Kiewiet 1979; Fiorina 1981; MacKuen, Erikson, & Stimson 1992). Fiorina (1981) devoted considerable attention to retrospective evaluations of the president on matters of war and peace, finding them strongly related to the vote. Economics and foreign policy assessments share characteristics that make them especially appropriate for retrospective evaluations: important and easily judged outcomes, complex and difficult to judge policy means toward those outcomes, and great uncertainty to the voter (and expert alike) as to how the policy means connect to the outcomes.

Beginning in the late 1980s, scholars started to devote more attention to retrospective judgments of foreign policy. In their public opinion survey, Hurwitz and Peffley found retrospective judgments of foreign policy to be statistically significant predictors of President Reagan's approval ratings (1987b). Similarly, Clyde Wilcox and Dee Allsop designed their study to compare directly the impact of foreign policy and economic issues on presidential approval. Based on survey data at six distinct points in President Reagan's tenure, they concluded that foreign policy attitudes were only slightly less relevant predictors of presidential approval, though the strength of international issues relative to economic concerns varied with salience (1991). Nickelsburg and

Norpoth tracked quarterly presidential approval from 1976 to 1996 and pronounced that “to maintain public support the chief executive must be ‘commander-in-chief’ and ‘chief economist’ in equal measure” (2000: 313). Indeed, in most of their cases, foreign policy even matched the overall approval ratings more closely than economic ratings (2000).

In addition, focused, individual-level panel survey data began to refine scholarly assertions about public opinion at the aggregate level. Peffley, Langley, and Goidel (1995), for instance, examined the impact of dramatic use of force on individual appraisals of the president. Polling respondents before and after the U.S. bombing of Libya in 1986, they showed that post-bombing “improvements in presidential popularity are directly tied to citizens’ evaluations of the initiative,” and not solely the result of positive press coverage or elite consensus. By contrast, Krosnik and Kinder (1990), examined the affects of scandals on individual evaluations of the president and found that media priming had a strong effect.

All of these studies, except for the original work by Fiorina, focused largely on Presidential approval and not vote choice per se. The evidence on whether and how the public makes the leap from opinions to actual vote choices is much more mixed. One important difficulty is the low level of information that most voters possess. Fortunately, as we saw above, a growing literature has pointed to a variety of cognitive processing factors that enable people to react rationally to changes in foreign policy outcomes and also allow them to vote “correctly” with low levels of information (Popkin 1991; Lau & Redlawsk 1997).

The earliest assessments found foreign affairs to have a limited relationship to voting. These studies highlighted the impact of short-term crises on particular elections,

but shied away from citing foreign policy as a regular factor in voting (Miller & Stokes 1963; Stokes 1966; Kernell 1978; Abramson, Aldrich & Rohde 1982). Donald Stokes, for instance, investigated six domains of influence on voting and found foreign policy to be important only in 1952 and 1964, though even then popular references to international issues occurred with only a fourth of the frequency of domestic happenings (Stokes 1966). Likewise, Hess and Nelson found that foreign policy impacted electoral behavior only in 1952, 1972, and 1980 (Hess & Nelson 1985).

The key to understanding this gap between public attitudes and electoral behavior lay in the positions taken by the major parties and especially their presidential nominees on foreign policy issues during elections. The 1940s through the 1960s were the era of the “bipartisan consensus” in American foreign policy. There were, of course, substantial disagreements over foreign policy during this period. However, leaders of both parties, especially at the presidential level, consistently agreed on the importance of leadership of the first world and on the necessity of pursuing a policy of containment of the second world. There were, of course, debates over how to implement America’s containment policy against the Soviet Union (Gaddis 1982). For instance, Kennedy and Nixon debated who would more strongly back Taiwan in the event of the PRC’s invasion of Quemoy or Matsu. Similarly, Johnson criticized Goldwater for his alleged willingness to use nuclear weapons in Vietnam, thus “debating” which strategy was the better way to win the war, rather than debating whether to fight the war or not. Given the level of general agreement between candidates, voters were not able to use their most important heuristic, party identification, to choose between the two party’s presidential candidates in election after election.

The Vietnam War, however, created a partisan cleavage on attitudes toward American foreign policy. Between 1948 and 1972 voters rarely had an opportunity to use their foreign policy views to distinguish between presidential candidates. In 1968, for example, the public could choose between Nixon's vague but firm "I have a plan to end the War" stance and Humphrey's pledge to continue Johnson's policies. By 1969, however, Vietnam had become "Nixon's war," and the Democratic Party broke the bipartisan consensus. McGovern's campaign promise to bring American troops home in six months not only marked the formal party opposition to the Vietnam War but also marked the rise of perceptions in the public that the Democratic Party favored negotiations with the USSR instead of continued containment. Beginning in that year, the public perceived the Democratic Party as favoring peace and as "soft" on defense and Communism. The net result was a distinct and long-term advantage for the Republican Party on foreign policy concerns, as revealed through ANES responses on the open-ended "likes/dislikes" questions about the two parties and their presidential candidates (see Wattenberg, 1996). Since this shift in the Democratic Party's foreign policy stance in 1972, voters have had the opportunity to distinguish between candidates on the basis of their foreign policy views, should they choose to do so.

This shift in partisan stances was nicely illustrated by public perceptions of the positions of the presidential candidates on the Vietnam War 7-point issue scale in the 1968 and 1972 ANES. Page and Brody examined whether citizens' views on Vietnam affected their vote choice in 1968 but found that the range of public perceptions was so diffuse for each candidate and similar for the two candidates that people had little grounds on which to contrast the candidates (1972). Further, they concluded that there

appeared to be considerable “projection,” that is, the attribution of their own position to a candidate already favored for other reasons (and perhaps contrasting of the position of a disliked candidate). In 1972, by contrast, the public’s perceptions of the positions of Nixon and McGovern were far more precise and distinct, with large majorities both perceiving a difference between the two candidates’ positions and believing McGovern was the more dovish candidate (see, for example, Aldrich & McKelvey, 1977). Aldrich (1977) found that the Vietnam War issue strongly influenced the vote in that election, with an effect that clearly exceeded that of any other issue.

In 1989, Aldrich, Bordiga, and Sullivan set forth the three criteria for measuring foreign policy’s influence over electoral outcomes on which we have focused here. Public attitudes towards foreign policy had to be available for the citizen in the first place, they needed to have accessed them for use in the second place, and the parties and candidates had to fail to converge to the same options, presenting them with different policy choices. Using ANES data from 1980 and 1984 and their own national survey (conducted by Gallup) from 1984 they showed that large majorities of the public could accurately characterize their own and the candidates’ foreign policy positions, that foreign and defense issues were consistently identified among “the most important problems facing the nation,” and that the survey respondents “perceived greater differences between the candidates on foreign and defense issues than on domestic issues” (1989: 132). Not surprisingly, they found strong evidence that foreign policy views affected vote choice as much or more than domestic issues.

Recent work has questioned whether Aldrich et al’s research can generalize beyond the foreign policy issues identified in the study (Soviet Union, defense spending,

and nuclear weapons) and the bipolar era that ended with the collapse of the Soviet Union. Anand and Krosnick (2003) charged that the earlier research relied on NES questions that had been selected specifically because of their salience at the time of the elections. Employing a new questionnaire which included a wider array of international topics, Anand and Krosnick tested whether the 2000 presidential candidates took distinct issue positions and whether members of each issue's "attentive public" voted accordingly. They found that "Americans' attitudes toward foreign policy goals seem to have affected their evaluations of candidates" quite predictably (36). In stark contrast to previous work, Anand and Krosnick found only modest evidence of a humanitarian-militarism structure and no support for any other underlying organizational principles.

A study of the impact of the second Gulf War on the outcome of the 2004 Presidential election by Gelpi, Reifler and Feaver (2005) found strong evidence linking voter's attitudes about whether President Bush "did the right thing" by attacking Iraq to voters' choices in November 2004. These findings are consistent with much of the literature on retrospective voting, but more importantly for our purposes here, the results of this study nicely illustrated the contingent mechanisms that link voter foreign policy opinions to electoral outcomes. First, Gelpi, Feaver and Reifler (2005/2006) demonstrated that the American public had coherent and well-organized attitudes about the war in Iraq. Then, the authors demonstrated that the war and its coverage by the media during the 2004 campaign made foreign policy a salient issue, and thus making it accessible to voters, and they show that about one-third of the voters stated that foreign policy issues were the most important factor in determining their vote choice. For this segment of the public, Gelpi Reifler and Feaver (2005) found that attitudes toward the

Iraq war had a substantial impact on vote choice – more substantial than their attitudes regarding which candidate would be more effective in handling the economy or social issues. For those who were more focused on economic or social issues, however, judgments the Iraq war had little impact on vote choice.

Other studies of the November 2004 election also suggest that the Iraq war had a substantial impact. Campbell (2004), for example, argues that Bush's margin of victory was smaller than one would predict based on economic variables. He attributes the gap to Iraq and notes that respondents who believed that the Iraq was not going well voted heavily for Kerry. Wleizen and Erikson (2005), on the other hand, conclude – based on their aggregate predictive model - that the Iraq War did not substantially hurt the President's electoral performance. Karol and Miguel (2005) appear to square this circle with their careful analyses of county level data on casualties from the Iraq War and aggregate voting returns. They find that casualties had a significant negative aggregate impact on votes for Bush outside the South, but in the South they found that casualties had no effect at all. Given the very solid support that the President enjoyed across the South regarding the war in Iraq, this pattern seems consistent with the individual level findings about attitudes toward the war and votes for Bush.<sup>11</sup> Thus the impact of foreign policy on electoral outcomes once again appears to be both potentially substantial and highly contingent.

## Public Opinion and the Making of American Foreign Policy

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<sup>11</sup> There have been relatively few studies of the impact of casualties on U.S. elections during wartime, but the available evidence from previous cases seems consistent with this result. See, for example, Carson, Jenkins, Rhode and Souva (2001) on the impact of casualties on Congressional elections during the Civil War. This result is also consistent with Gartner and Segura's (1998) study of the impact of local casualties on support for military operations during the Vietnam War.

Thus far we have demonstrated that the American public has coherent foreign policy attitudes and that it can – under some circumstances – translate those attitudes into choices at the ballot box. One question concerning foreign policy and public opinion remains to be addressed: how do elected policymakers respond to public opinion once they are in office? Do they ignore the public entirely as Almond and Lippmann supposed? Or, alternatively, do they appear to be constrained by public opinion because of their mutually-reinforcing desires to retain office and maintain the popularity necessary to govern effectively?

Consistent with the Almond-Lippmann consensus, realist scholars maintained that national interest would be best served if foreign policy-makers ignored public opinion (Morgenthau 1985). Arguments to exclude the public stemmed from the need to maintain an administration's ability to act with secrecy, speed, and flexibility (Holsti 1996). These goals were considered especially important in the Cold War world of treaty negotiations and the nuclear balance of terror. The public, it was thought, could not be trusted to be calculating enough in tough situations or forgiving enough in cooperative situations (Lippmann 1955). Accordingly, during most of the Cold War period, policymakers wanted to be perceived as independent thinkers who incorporated public views minimally or not at all. In one famous example, a researcher asked a State Department official about the impact of public opinion on the agency's decisions and received the memorable reply, "to Hell with public opinion . . . We should lead not follow" (Cohen 1972: 62). This view was consistent with what little empirical evidence could be mustered. For example, Miller and Stokes' famous study of representation (1963) found direct or indirect influence of constituency opinion on congressional voting

on social welfare and civil rights issues, but virtually no influence at all on their foreign involvement scale.

As the understanding of public attitudes toward foreign policy began to evolve, however, a number of scholars began to take more seriously the notion that public opinion could (and perhaps should) constrain American foreign policy at least modestly. This idea was first proposed by V.O. Key (1961). Key hypothesized that the public acted as a “system of dikes,” channeling the flow of policy (1961). James Rosenau analogized this mechanism of control to a “slumbering giant” (1961). Leaders formulated foreign policy as they wished as long as the public lay dormant, but incurred political costs if policies provoked the “giant” by veering outside the boundaries set by public opinion. Gathering polls from the pre-WWII era through the end of the Cold War, Bruce Russett applied this theory to arms control and showed public opinion indeed kept U.S. policy in balance (1990). The public supported hawkish policies when leaders came too close to perceived appeasement and dovish policies when U.S. initiatives seemed too aggressive. Similarly, Richard Sobel found that public opinion also constrained intervention policy, at times setting the duration or timing of American involvement in conflicts (Sobel 2001). Nincic (1988) found evidence for the “politics of opposites” more generally, observing the public to support conservative policies during liberal presidential administrations and vice versa. Later work qualified this broad assertion by looking at public influence on individual presidents. In comparing the styles of presidents from Truman through Clinton, Doug Foyle found that a president’s beliefs about the desirability of public approval and necessity of public support to legitimize policy greatly affected the ability of the public to influence presidential foreign policy (1999).

Of course, the entire literature on casualty aversion emerged from the perception that the American public could alter U.S. foreign policy enough to cause the president to withdraw from a military conflict or to avoid involvement in the first place. As we noted above, ever since John Mueller's (1973) seminal work policymakers have been reluctant to send American troops in to risky military situations. Policymakers of all political persuasions have responded by not sending troops into risky situations (i.e. Rwanda or Sudan) or by withdrawing troops from conflict situations in the aftermath of attacks on American soldiers. For example, President Reagan removed American troops from Lebanon after 241 Marines were killed by a terrorist bomb and President Clinton ceased American peacekeeping activities in Somalia after American soldiers were publicly defiled in the streets by Somali warlords.

America's experience in Lebanon and Somalia clearly illustrate how the elite perception of public opinion can have a profound impact on foreign policy. The widespread assumption of public casualty aversion that flowed from these experiences also shaped American foreign policy in Rwanda, Bosnia, and Kosovo. But the policy impact of the myth of public casualty phobia also illustrates the difficult and problematic link between public opinion and elite behavior. The central lesson that American elites drew from the experiences of Lebanon and Somalia was that the public would not tolerate even a very small number of casualties (Feaver and Gelpi 2004). Yet, James Burk (1999) investigated the peacekeeping situations in Lebanon and Somalia and found that public support for the missions did not automatically plummet in the wake of casualties. Instead, the public support had begun to wane when the missions switched from humanitarian

Kristin Thompson 10/29/05 6:54 PM

**Comment:** Jason and Peter both expressed concern that this paragraph was redundant considering the section on casualties above. However, it didn't seem redundant to me when read with the next paragraph.

Arts & Sciences Comp..., 11/4/05 3:15 PM

**Comment:** I agree with Kristin – but I made a few wording changes to reduce redundancy and acknowledge our earlier discussion. - Chris

orientations to intervention orientations. The problem was exacerbated not by American casualties, but by growing divisions between elite partisans in the United States.

How could American policymakers be so wrong about public opinion at a time when political polling had become ubiquitous? Part of the problem relates to the endogenous relationship between elite discourse and public opinion that we noted previously. That is, the public depended on the elite to give cues about when to support military missions (Larson 1996), while the elites were looking to their perceptions of public opinion to shape policy decisions. Another source of confusion stemmed from elite policymakers' sources of information. According to Kull and Destler (1999), many members of Congress reported that they strongly distrusted polls and relied instead on vocal constituent groups and the media for sources of public opinion. Administration officials reported that they relied on Congress for the public view because that branch of government was closer to the people (Kull & Destler 1999). Thus, in many situations neither branch of government reported speaking directly with American citizens or paying much attention to their views as reported by public opinion polls. This problem had two severe consequences. First, the policymakers drastically underestimated the public's ability to understand situations sensibly. Second, they responded to erroneous perceptions of public views on issues ranging from foreign aid and defense spending to the United Nations, multilateralism, and humanitarian intervention.

Nonetheless, the casualty aversion literature does suggest an important link between elite *perceptions* of public opinion and American foreign policy behavior. This link is further substantiated by studies of American diplomatic history. Timothy

McKeown, for example, finds that perceptions of public opinion shaped the Kennedy Administration's behavior during the Cuban Missile Crisis (McKeown 2000).

Political campaigns may also underscore the importance of elite perceptions of public opinion. Certainly during campaigns candidates will be closely attentive to polls and we would expect them to be eager to take positions that maximize public approval. Even so, Douglas Foyle (2005) suggests that elections inform presidential calculations in some circumstances more than others. Specifically, he posits that incumbents carefully consider the electoral ramifications of their foreign policy decisions in "defensive" contexts, defined as a tight reelection race or a race in which the incumbent candidate is favored to win. In these circumstances, emerging foreign policy crises have the potential to upset the status quo environment; therefore the incumbents calculate foreign policy actions to avoid being perceived as "weak" and to defuse crises and reduce electoral scrutiny as quickly as possible.<sup>12</sup>

Thus the literature on American foreign policy substantiates the influence of public opinion on foreign policy, albeit an inconsistent influence. Looking more broadly across the international relations field, a number of theories purporting to explain the democratic peace also suggest a link between public opinion and foreign policy. In particular, the so-called "structural" theories of the democratic peace often contend that democratic states will be less likely to initiate military force because of the public's aversion to paying the costs of war (Doyle, 1986; Maoz and Russett, 1992). Other variants of this argument suggest that the public's desire to maintain economic growth leads democratic leaders to avoid military conflicts that will disrupt commerce (Domke,

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<sup>12</sup> Foyle notes, however, that the definition of "strong" action depends more on how actions will be perceived by the public than on particular behaviors.

1988; Papayoanou, 1996; Gelpi and Grieco, 2006). The central mechanism of public casualty aversion and its influence on democratic foreign policies also underpin game theoretic models that seek to explain why democracies do not fight one another while still being willing to use force against non-democracies (Bueno de Mesquita and Lalman, 1992; Fearon 1994). Consistent with the more recent literature on casualty aversion, scholars have also developed models of the democratic peace based on the assumption that democratic publics will punish their leaders for defeat in war rather than for casualties per se (Bueno de Mesquita, Morrow, Siverson, and Smith, 1999). All of these arguments contend that the public acts as a constraint on elites who would otherwise be more willing to use force.

Diversionsary war theory, on the other hand, asserts that public opinion may encourage leaders to use military force.<sup>13</sup> Drawing on literatures in sociology on group identification and the dynamics of group conflict (Cosser 1956), diversionsary war theory contends that the use of military force will cause the public to "rally 'round the flag" in support of their leader during a crisis (Russett 1990). Thus leaders who are concerned about their domestic standing may use force to divert attention from domestic problems and focus attention on patriotic symbols. Some scholars have suggested that this dynamic should apply primarily to democratic leaders because of their dependence on public support for maintaining office and because of their inability to use more direct methods of dampening domestic dissent (Richards et.al., 1993; Downs and Roche 1995; Gelpi, 1997). Consistent with this expectation, a number of studies of American foreign policy indicate that presidents have been more likely to use military force when their

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<sup>13</sup> Diversionsary war theory is also sometimes referred as a "Wag the Dog" argument - after the popular film - or as a "scapegoating" argument.

approval ratings have been in decline (Ostrom & Job 1986; James & Oneal, 1991; Fordham 1998). Other studies have indicated - contrary to the diversionary logic - that U.S. presidents have been more likely to use military force when economic conditions have been favorable (Lian & Oneal 1993; Meernick & Waterman, 1996). On the question of how public opinion influences American foreign policy, however, even these critical studies find that declining public approval has increased the probability that American presidents will use military force (Meernick, 2000).

How, then, are we to reconcile the mounting evidence that public opinion both may constrain American presidents from using military force and may provoke them to do so? Bueno de Mesquita et. al. (1999) bring these two disparate patterns together into an elegant model of democracy and foreign policy. As noted above, the central claim of their model is that fear of removal from office will constrain democratic leaders only to use force when the prospects for a quick and easy success are high. Interestingly, however, their model also indicates that this logic of constraint only holds when the leader's probability of retaining office is above some minimum threshold. Once the likelihood of retaining office drops below that level, their model shows that democratic leaders have an incentive to engage in risky policies that "gamble for resurrection." One such gamble that democratic leaders could make would be to initiate a military conflict.

In contrast to the extensive attention given the link between public opinion and the use of military force, relatively little has been done in the study of the influence on public opinion on the setting of trade or other such foreign economic policies. One exception is Aldrich, Kramer, and Merolla (2004) in which they show a direct influence

of public opinion on voting by U.S. Senators on NAFTA and GATT treaties. Needless to say, considerably more work is necessary in this area.

## Conclusion

Can public opinion about foreign policy influence American elections?

Following Aldrich, Borgida and Sullivan (1989) we identified three necessary conditions for public opinion about foreign policy to influence electoral outcomes. First, the public must have coherent attitudes about foreign policy. Second, the public must be able to access these attitudes when considering their vote choice. And third, the political parties must uphold distinct foreign policy platforms so that voters can use their attitudes to distinguish between candidates. Our review of the literature on public opinion, foreign policy, and elections suggests that these three criteria have often – though not always – been met since the collapse of the bipartisan foreign policy consensus during the Vietnam war. Voters appear to have held reasonable and coherent attitudes about America's foreign military and economic policies throughout this period, but their ability to express those attitudes in terms of electoral choice has depended on attitude accessibility and party platforms – both of which are strongly influenced by elite strategic behavior.

Has the public been able to influence American foreign policy behavior? The potential impact of foreign policy views on electoral outcomes is the critical mechanism linking public attitudes to elite behavior. Thus there is some reason for optimism regarding the efficacy of public opinion. In practice, the record has been mixed, and the translation from public attitudes to elite policy is not always simple or direct. American military interventions have often been guided, for example, by the elite perception that

the public would not tolerate casualties in such operations. Policymakers appear, however, to have been misguided on this point. Nonetheless, a mounting body of evidence suggests that the foreign policies of American presidents – and democratic leaders more generally – have been influenced by their understanding of the public’s foreign policy views.

While much progress has been made in understanding the link between the American public and U.S. foreign policy, at least two important questions remain to be address. First, while the available evidence suggests that public opinion influences foreign policy, we know much less about precisely when and how this influence is exerted. Scholars need to investigate and understand the point(s) at which public opinion enters the policymaking process (Powlik & Katz 1998). To what extent, for instance, do policymakers shape their policies in anticipation of public opinion as opposed to altering their policies in reaction to it? How much does the public alter foreign policy indirectly through its electoral choices as opposed to directly through constraining elected officials? How does the extent of public influence vary across differing issues? Is public opinion equally likely to influence trade policy and military intervention?

Second, while we understand that foreign policy behavior involves a complex interaction between public attitudes and elite behavior that is directed both at domestic constituents and international audiences (Putnam 1988), we need to know more about the fundamental structure of this relationship. Future research should place greater emphasis on teasing out the various causal influences in the complex endogenous relationship among public opinion, elite discourse, and elite beliefs about public opinion, and foreign

policy behavior. Disentangling this complex web may be one of the most important next  
steps in the study of public opinion and its impact on American foreign policy.

Kristin Thompson 10/29/05 6:54 PM  
**Comment:** Do we want to incorporate Peter's suggestion that the interaction between FP, PO, and the media is the next great challenge to the field?

Arts & Sciences Comp..., 11/4/05 3:27 PM  
**Comment:** I added one more sentence, but I thought the last paragraph kind of made that point already.  
Chris

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