To what extent is foreign policy making affected by public opinion in a liberal democracy?

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The issue of public opinion and its influence in foreign policy making has been a matter of dispute between different schools of thought both during and since the Cold War. On the one hand realists find public opinion volatile, emotional, lacking coherence and structure, and with little if any influence on foreign affairs. On the other, liberalists suggest that public opinion on international affairs is stable, sensibly structured, consistent, and influences foreign policy making in a ‘reciprocal relationship’. Hence, some leaders take into account the public opinion when making important decisions others ignore it.

The paper investigates the impact of public opinion on foreign policy making in a liberal democracy both theoretically and empirically. The debate between realists and liberalists is explored with particular emphasis on the influence of public opinion on foreign policy making in the United States. The paper then examines empirical evidence in the US and the European Union.

Before proceeding further, it is important to define concisely the concepts of liberal democracy, foreign policy, and public opinion. What is democracy? James Wilson of Pennsylvania stated in 1787 that,

In our governments, the supreme absolute, and uncontrollable power remains in the people. As our constitutions are superior to our legislatures, so the people are superior to our constitutions … In giving a definition of what I meant by a democracy … I termed it, that government in which the people retain the supreme power.

For Abraham Lincoln (the sixteenth U.S. president), democracy is a government ‘of the people, by the people, and for the people’. The term liberal democracy mainly describes Western political systems such as the United States, the EU and other Western countries. It is a ‘modern form’ of democracy, which particularly tends to emphasise the protection

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of individual rights rather than collective rights. Foreign policy for Joseph Frankel, ‘… consists of decisions and actions which involve to some appreciable extent relations between one state and others’. Foreign policy (simply put) ‘covers the actions of a state taken beyond its borders to pursue its goals’. The free online dictionary defines public opinion as ‘a belief or sentiment shared by most people; the voice of the people’.

However, the concept of public opinion is very controversial. V. O. Key wrote that ‘to speak with precision of public opinion is a task not unlike coming to grips with the Holy Ghost’. Nevertheless, he defined public opinion as ‘those opinions held by private persons which governments find it prudent to heed’.

How do leaders in liberal democracies make foreign policy decisions? In Britain for instance, there is minimal conclusive foreign policy formally scrutinised by the House of Commons. Instead this is done through intra-party discussions and Select Committees with little manoeuvre for parliamentarian input. The ability to give voice over sensitive issues of national debate for instance in the human rights field and ethical public interests are more positively asserted through Commons debate and Question Time. These channels do allow foreign policy delivery to be practised with visible effect.

In a democratic state foreign policy, decisions are expected to be made by the people and for the people. Immanuel Kant in Perpetual Peace (1795) argued that governments are responsible to the people and the public would not go to war, since it is

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5 The political system in liberal democracies is defined by ‘(a) more than one party; (b) free and open regular elections; (c) free press and freedom of speech; (d) freedom of assembly, ability to demonstrate in public; (e) freedom of association, ability to form pressure and interest groups; (f) civil society: non intervention of the state into pressure groups; (g) competition between different political groups; (h) tolerant of opposition: opposition is upheld by within political institutions’. Heather Deegan, ‘State, Society and Foreign Policy in Liberal Democratic States,’ Lecture delivered at Middlesex University, Enfield, 18 October 2007; U.S. Department of State, ‘Democracy Glossary’, http://usinfo.state.gov/xarchives/display.html?p=pubs-english&y=2007&m=November&v=20071126194140asifa0.9158747 [accessed 4 January 2008 2007].


they the public who ultimately pay the price and suffer the most.\textsuperscript{11} The theory of ‘democratic peace’ argues that liberal democracies never fight between themselves. President Bill Clinton stated in 1994 that ‘democracies don’t attack each other’. The empirical evidence supports this theory since no war has been waged between states which have democratically elected governments over the last two centuries.\textsuperscript{12} Nevertheless, liberal democracies do go to war with non-democratic states - though again the public provide the soldiers regardless of the decision process - particularly when national interests are at stake.

**International relations theories and public opinion**

Since realism emphasises that survival, necessity, and power are paramount and that the international system is a dangerous place characterised by uncertainty, it is argued that state behaviour is examined from the perspective of that background; external rather than internal forces to the state are considered to be the main determinants of foreign policy.\textsuperscript{13} From a neorealist perspective, ‘a state is an egoistic actor attempting to survive under the anarchy problematic. All else pales into insignificance in the face of this imperative’.\textsuperscript{14} According to the former U.S. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger ‘statespersons are constrained by two sets of influences: politics, power, and actions of other states; and domestic constraints, ranging from public opinion to the attitudes of the government and bureaucracy’ therefore ‘a foreign policymaker must understand these constraints, master them, and transcend them, bending them to his or her will’.\textsuperscript{15} It is widely accepted by both scholars and the policymakers that the rational choice is the dominant approach to foreign policy-making. This approach involves the following steps, (1) Problem recognition and definition (2) Goal selection (3) Identification of alternatives (4) Choice.\textsuperscript{16}


\textsuperscript{12} Kegley with Wittkopf, World Politics; Trends and Transformation (2006), p. 68.

\textsuperscript{13} White, ‘Analysing Foreign Policy: Problems and Approaches’ (1989), p. 11.

\textsuperscript{14} Chris Brown with Kirsten Ainsley, Understanding international relations, third edition (Palgrave, Basingstoke, 2005) p. 75

\textsuperscript{15} Kissinger quoted in Bruce Russett and Harvey Starr and David Kinnella, World Politics; The Menu for Choice, Sixth ed. (Bedford /St. Martin’s, Boston, 2000), pp. 116, 117.

\textsuperscript{16} Kegley with Wittkopf, ‘World Politics; Trends and Transformation’ (2006), pp. 69, 70.
During the foreign policy making process, the decision-maker is no different to any rational individual who after evaluating the case often choose those actions, which most likely would achieve the best outcome. However, Michael Clarke argues that in the ‘concept of rationalism’ the “rational” is often confused with “right”. If a foreign policy goes wrong we often say that the decision-makers acted irrationally. But whether right or wrong, if the decision was an act of analysis it can hardly be irrational. Others argue that decision-makers act rationally in circumstances when they are under pressure particularly during crisis, since in these situations they are bound to be cautious of their actions.

The issue of public opinion and its influence in foreign policy making has been a matter of dispute both during and since the cold war between realists and liberals. Arguments in support of realist view can be found back in the 18th century. Edmund Burke a political philosopher contended that “[A representative’s] unbiased opinion, his mature judgment, his enlightened conscience, he ought not to sacrifice to you, to any man, or to any set of men living... Your representative owes you, not his industry only, but his judgment; and he betrays, instead of serving you, if he sacrifices it to your opinion”.

Further, Lippmann argued that slow public reaction to events and the lack of information causes the foreign policy decision-maker to respond too late. This is because the opinion deals with a situation which no longer exists.

The unhappy truth [he wrote] is that the prevailing public opinion has been destructively wrong at the critical junctures. The people have imposed a veto upon the judgments of informed and responsible officials. They have compelled the governments, which usually knew what would have been wiser, or was necessary, or was more expedient, to be too late with too little, or too long with too much, too pacifist in peace and too bellicose in war, too neutralist or appeasing in negotiation or too intransigent. Mass opinion has acquired

21 Walter Lippmann, Essays in the Public Philosophy, 1st ed. (Boston: Little Brown, 1955) p. 21,
mounting power (...) [and] has shown itself to be a dangerous master of decisions when the stakes are life and death.\textsuperscript{22}

Lippmann feared that mass opinion is volatile, lacking in structure and coherence. Thus, its role in the conduct of foreign affairs is irrelevant; suggesting public influence in the foreign policy making should be limited. According to Lippmann the public is a dangerous and irrational force\textsuperscript{23} - The public can elect the government he argued and ‘they can remove it. They can approve or disapprove its performance. But they cannot administer the government … A mass cannot govern’.\textsuperscript{24}

Going further Morgenthau argued that the government is the ‘leader’ of public opinion, not its ‘slave’ according to him ‘the rational requirements of good foreign policy cannot from the outset count upon the support of a public opinion whose preferences are emotional rather than rational … This is … particularly true of a foreign policy’ which usually involves trade-offs.\textsuperscript{25} Neorealists such as Mearsheimer have similar assertions. He views that, when it comes to national security issues public opinion is ‘notoriously fickle and responsive to elite manipulation and world events’.\textsuperscript{26} In the U.S. in particular, Mearsheimer says that policymakers employ ‘liberal talk, realist thinking’. He contends that, public dialogue regarding foreign policy in the US is more often than not couched in the language of liberalism, despite the fact that behind closed doors ‘the US acts in the international system according to the dictates of realist logic. In essence, a discernible gap separates public rhetoric from the actual conduct of American foreign policy’\textsuperscript{27}

Even though public opinion occasionally does influence foreign policy and sometimes has caused difficulties for the policy decision makers, realists conclude that elites either lead the public to support their policies or ignore their preferences altogether.\textsuperscript{28} The realist view that public opinion has little if any influence at all on

\textsuperscript{22} Ibid., p. 20.
\textsuperscript{23} Lippmann, Essays in the Public Philosophy, (1955), p. 20.
\textsuperscript{24} Ibid, p.14.
\textsuperscript{26} Mearsheimer quoted in Douglas C. Foyle, Counting the Public In: Presidents, Public Opinion, and Foreign policy(1999), Chapter one, p. 5.
\textsuperscript{28} Douglas C. Foyle, Counting the Public In: Presidents, Public Opinion, and Foreign policy (1999), p. 4.
international affairs was strongly supported by Cohen quoting one official in the State
department as saying ‘To hell with public opinion … We should lead, and not follow’.  
Finally, realists reached a consensus with the conclusion that public opinion is volatile 
and emotional, lacking coherence and structure, and has little if any influence on foreign 
affairs.

However, not everyone agrees with the realist stance. The evidence suggests that 
public opinion has coherence, structure, and influence on foreign policy making in a 
‘reciprocal relationship’. Besides, the research taken since the 1970s supports the 
conclusion that public opinion on foreign affairs is often stable, sensibly structured, and 
rational. Wilsonian Liberals, for instance, argue that public opinion should influence 
foreign policy making because of ‘democratic norms and the public’s moderating affect 
on possibly adventurous and overambitious elites’. Woodrow Wilson believed that only 
popular opinion could offer a direction to a wise foreign policy since ‘only a free people 
could hold their purpose and their honor steady to a common end and prefer the interests 
of mankind to any narrow interest of their own’.

Wilsonian liberals assume that public opinion affects foreign policy making by 
discouraging the decision maker from taking risky actions from fears that the government 
might loose public support and therefore persuade them to select policies preferred by the 
public. Moreover, liberals note, public opinion affects foreign policy when decisions 
develop slowly since in cases where decision need is swift the government has no time 
for response to the public. However, in those cases public opinion could constrain the 
decision maker over its range of action, and as a result choosing the foreign policies 
favoured by the public. As Russett suggests, ‘public opinion sets broad limits of 
constraint, identifying a range of policies in which decision makers can choose, and in

29 Bernard Cohen quoted in Ibid., p. 6.
30 see Douglas C. Foyle, Counting the Public In: Presidents, Public Opinion, and Foreign policy (1999), chapter one; see also Ole R. Holsti, ‘Public 
Quarterly 27.3 (1997)
34 Ibid.
36 Ibid.
which they must choose if they are not to face rejection in the voting booths’.\textsuperscript{38} Hence public opinion more often then not acts as a rough first cut at policy options, since policymakers believe that a ‘successful policy needs to have public support or at least a lack of public disapproval’.\textsuperscript{39}

The impact of public opinion on foreign policy outcomes according to Foyle is ‘determined by the interaction between a decision maker’s beliefs about the proper role of public opinion in foreign policy formulation and the decision context in which a foreign policy choice must be made’.\textsuperscript{40} Wittkopf argues that while political realism is often ‘compelling’, as a theory it fails to recognise the changes in the world by ignoring the ‘dynamics of systemic transformation’ such as technological change and the public opinion that dwell ‘in the attributes of the actors, not the system’.\textsuperscript{41} He maintains that in a democracy leaders are at the end of the day responsible to the public’s will, however ‘ill informed and fickle it may seem to be’.\textsuperscript{42} The American people, writes Wittkopf ‘are not fickle; they may be ill informed, but they are still capable of holding coherent, stable beliefs about the role of the US in world affairs. [In any case] it is so self-evident that public opinion matters to policymakers, especially so in an age of increasingly sophisticated electronic media, that to argue otherwise is silly’.\textsuperscript{43}

**Empirical evidence and public opinion**

Liberals have challenged the realists’ belief that the mass is uninterested in and ill informed about foreign policy.\textsuperscript{44} - The evidence, however, suggests that in 1979 only 23 percent of the adult population in the United States knew the two countries involved in the SALT (Strategic Arms Limitation Talks) negotiations; or that in 1985 less than two-thirds of the public knew that the United States supported South Vietnam in the Vietnam War, which cost some 58,000 Americans their lives.\textsuperscript{45} Further, evidence suggests that in

\textsuperscript{38} Bruce Russett, quoted in Ibid., p. 7.
\textsuperscript{39} Philip Powlick in Ibid., p. 7.
\textsuperscript{40} Douglas C. Foyle, Counting the Public In: Presidents, Public Opinion, and Foreign Policy (1999), pp. x, xi.
\textsuperscript{42} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{43} Ibid. pp. 219, 220.
\textsuperscript{44} Eugene R. Wittkopf, Faces of Internationalism: Public Opinion and American Foreign Policy (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1990), p. 13
\textsuperscript{45} Ibid., p.13.
1970 only 7 percent of the American people favoured an invasion of Cambodia. On the other hand, it is obvious that in today’s world with advanced information technology the public is better informed on issues concerning both domestic and foreign affairs.

In contemporary era, analysts emphasise the connection between the external and internal politics. Bill Clinton for example during his visit to China in 1998 had to satisfy the domestic opinion by publicly criticising the Chinese government’s poor record on human rights, at the same time making sure that he was not going to upset his hosts. The former Secretary of State Madeline K. Albright stated that ‘as Secretary, I will do my best to talk about foreign policy not in abstract terms, but in human terms and in bipartisan terms … I consider this vital because in our democracy, we cannot pursue policies abroad that are not understood and supported here at home’. When in 1991 Saddam Hussein began a massive military action in order to crush the Kurdish rebellion, it was the public sympathy for the plight of the Kurds, which forced Britain and the US to do something and ultimately intervene. But this is not always the case, Bush Sr. for instance did admit in a mid 1991 interview on Air Force One that, although he did not ignore polls, he did not take them into account when making foreign policy decision. ‘From time to time I look at them [the polls], but I don’t live by them or make decisions by them’.

Similarly, Regan for example ignored public opinion when it came to the Strategic Defence Initiative and the withdrawal of the marines from Lebanon, although the polling data were available at the time of the Beirut bombing. The New York Times after his passing in 2004 wrote ‘Mr. Reagan’s decision to send marines to Lebanon was disastrous, and his invasion of Grenada pure melodrama’. Bill Clinton on the other hand reacted to

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46 Ibid.
47 Bruce Russet and Harvey Starr and David Kinnella, World Politics: The Menu for Choice, Sixth ed. (Bedford/St. Martin’s, Boston, 2000), p. 122.
51 Ibid., pp. 259, 265
public opinion in both the Somalia\textsuperscript{53} and Bosnia cases.\textsuperscript{54} Clinton speaking at a September 1994 press conference emphasised that although he did not believe that opinion polls could dictate foreign policy, nevertheless public support over the long term is important. He stated: ‘I don’t believe that the president, that I or any other president, could conduct foreign policy by a public opinion poll, and I would hope the American people would not wish me to . . . Any sustained endeavor involving our military forces requires the support of the people over the long run’.\textsuperscript{55} This is particularly reflected in one of the most controversial wars in American history - the war in Iraq.

What is the public attitude towards the war in Iraq? According to Ipsos-MORI poll conducted in May 2007, public opinion in Britain was very critical of their prime minister and the American president George Bush over their Iraq policies. ‘Only 17 per cent of respondents approve of the way Tony Blair was handling the situation in Iraq, and just nine per cent feel the same way about George W. Bush’.\textsuperscript{56}

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\textsuperscript{53} ‘Following the deaths [of 18 American soldiers in Somalia where on October 3, 1993], 69 percent [of Americans] thought the U.S. troops should be pulled out and 43 percent thought they should be removed right away. The public’s approval of Clinton’s handling of the situation dropped from 51 percent in June to 41 percent in September before falling to an average of 31 percent in October’. Douglas C. Foyle, Counting the Public In: Presidents, Public Opinion, and Foreign Policy (1999), p. 220.

\textsuperscript{54} Douglas C. Foyle, Counting the Public In: Presidents, Public Opinion, and Foreign Policy (1999), p. 263.

\textsuperscript{55} Ibid., p.195

Don't know 6% 13% 11%

Which, if any, of the following statements comes closest to your own view about the war in Iraq?

I supported the war and I support it now 11%
I supported the war but do not support it now 22%
I did not support the war but I support it now 3%
I did not support the war and I do not support it now 61%

Source: Ipsos-MORI
Methodology: Telephone interviews with 961 British adults, conducted from May 11 to May 13, 2007. No margin of error was provided.57

Similarly, according to a NBC News/Wall Street Journal Poll conducted in December 2007 only 33 percent of the American public approve of the way George Bush is handling the current situation in Iraq, although there is an increase of five percent since January 2007, public disapproval remains significant.

In general, do you approve or disapprove of the job that George W. Bush is doing in handling the situation in Iraq? Half sample, MoE ± 4.4 (Form B)

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Source: NBC News/Wall Street Journal Poll conducted by the polling organizations of Peter Hart (D) and Bill McInturff (R). Dec. 14-17, 2007. N=1,008 adults nationwide. MoE ± 3.1 (for all adults).58

57 Angus Reid Global Monitor: Polls and Research, ‘Britain Blast Blair, Bush for Iraq.’
Does this mean that the United States should withdraw its military forces from Iraq? President Bush speaking at a Press Conference in July 2007 (when his rating was lowest), said ‘When we start drawing down our forces in Iraq it will be because our military commanders say the conditions on the ground are right, not because pollsters say it will be good politics’. He added ‘My concern with that strategy … is that just getting out may sound simple, and it may affect polls, but it would have long-term, serious security consequences for the United States’. 59 When he was asked ‘How hard is it for you to conduct the war without popular support? Do you, personally -- do you ever have trouble balancing between doing what you think is the right thing and following the will of the majority of the public, which is really the essence of democracy?’ 60 Bush stated,

I know this … if our troops thought that I was taking a poll to decide how to conduct this war, they would be very concerned about the mission …[hence] … they … need to know that I am making decisions based upon our security interests, … and that a poll is not going to determine the course of action by the United States. What will determine the course of actions is, will the decisions that we have made help secure our country for the long run” 61

This was a clear indication that President Bush Jr. does not take the polls into account when making foreign policy decisions.

A further example where foreign policy decision-makers ignored public opinion is related to the prospect of Turkey joining the EU. Although the opinion polls suggested that the vast majority of the EU population opposed Turkey’s accession into the EU, with opinion polls running as high as 80 percent the EU foreign policymakers signed the accession talks. Opinion polls in Austria show

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60 Ibid.

that more than 80 percent of the participants opposed Turkish membership and only 10 percent supported it. The Eurobarometer survey (figure 1.1) showed that the opposition in Germany, France and Greece is over 70 percent. However, in Britain, Portugal, and Spain the opposition is less than 50 percent, while in the new EU counties the support of Turkish membership is above 50 percent.  

The Eurobarometer survey indicates that leaders of Austria, France and Greece ignored public opinion and opened the EU–Turkey accession talks despite popular opposition.  

Conclusion  

The debate between realists and liberals outlines the importance of public opinion in foreign policy making. However, its impact remains limited. Realists disregard assertions that foreign policy making is affected by public opinion, arguing that leaders either ignore public opinion or lead the mass to support their position. In contrast, liberals consider that public opinion plays a constructive role in constraining decision makers, believing that mass support is a necessary factor for successful foreign policy. Nevertheless, evidence suggests that the influence of public opinion on foreign affairs varies from case to case.  

In sum, the above indicates the limitations of public opinion in influencing foreign policy, using recent references and examples. Further study on how public opinion is expressed, such as in media, polls, and focus groups may yield more detailed influence.  

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