

Public Opinion and American Foreign Policy Makers' Preferences

Luke M. Perez

University of Texas at Austin

Abstract

The consensus of scholarship on the link between public opinion and public policy shows a weak link between the electorate and policy makers on foreign policy issues. Jacobs and Page (2005) find that instead, it is business leaders, followed by foreign policy elites whose preferences are correlated with the preferences of policy-makers. This paper challenges that conclusion, arguing that under times of foreign policy crisis and high issue salience, policy-makers will take their cues from the public. An updated model of Jacob and Page using data beyond the years included in the original study. However, null findings were found supporting the view of Jacob and Page that business leaders's preferences have the strongest congruence with policy-makers.

Introduction

Conventional wisdom among scholars of public opinion is that a weak link holds the preferences of the general public and the foreign policy outcomes. Whether testing the policy preferences of elites and the public against those of policy-makers (Jacobs and Page 2005) or the internal polling of modern presidents (Druckman and Jacobs 2006, 2001), scholars routinely find that policy-makers are more concerned with elite preferences when shaping policy and general ideological attitudes when framing the policy alternatives to the public. Such conclusions raise potential concerns for democratic accountability because they imply that a potential disconnect exists between the policy preferences of the public and their representatives.

Studies which assert no connection between public opinion and policy run counter

to the findings of international relations scholars who find democracies are unique actors which are often constrained or enabled by the the people who make up the democratic polity. Snyder (1991) argues that democracies are more war prone because the general public often misunderstands how security is achieved, preferring empire when defensive posture would be more stable. Trubowitz (1998) finds that competition between regions within the United States created three blocs; competition and bargaining between these blocs attributed to distinct foreign policy designs. These regional blocs were animated by the interests of the general public and fought by the congressional representatives who elected them. Wagner (2007) argues that international relations is largely a function of bargaining models, not only between states, but between elites within a state and between elites and the masses within a state. These claims imply that publics do, contrary to the above claims, have at least some loose connection which permits them to influence policy outcomes.

At the very least the findings from the international relations field suggest we may have some grounds to doubt the strength of the conclusions found in the public opinion literature. And the findings of each field may not be in complete contradiction with each other. Some conditions, like salience, wax and wane with issue debates. It may be that as foreign policy rises and falls in the public discourse that the linkage strength between public opinion and public policy increase and decrease. In their original study, Jacobs and Page (2005) claim that public opinion had an insignificant correlation to policy-makers. But as I will discuss below, there are reasons to doubt the finding during times of foreign policy crisis. Likewise, the inner workings of foreign policy have a long history of being

“inside baseball,” and are understood only by those partisans who have the time and desire to learn it. As a result, the public writ large may have few developed preferences during most times and only develop them when the foreign policy issues become primary objects of public discourse. Crisis may only occur once in a generation and, even then, the issues may be fleeting. If the public perceives little need to pay close and sustained attention to foreign policy, they may not take the time to develop accurate policy preferences that can be relayed to policy-makers.

The aim of this paper is simple. I attempt to demonstrate that the general public has a much stronger link to the preference of foreign policy-makers when the conditions are right. Two conditions, high salience and foreign policy crisis, are crucial because when either is missing, the structural incentives motivating the public will dissipate. Yet when both conditions are met, the public will have strong incentives to develop policy preferences and policy-makers will likewise have incentives to learn and represent those preferences. One way at testing this hypothesis is to replicate a portion of the model in Jacob and Page (2005), but updated to take account of new polls of the last decade. Their study is noteworthy because they are able to test the preferences not only of elected officials in Congress but also policy-makers in the federal administrations, business leaders, foreign policy experts, and the general public simultaneously.

In the next section I offer a brief review of the literature. Beginning with the findings that focus on public opinion, I survey the findings which show little connection between opinion and policy. I then outline why these findings are both potentially valid but perhaps ill-suited to show the connection in times of crisis. I then survey the literature

that discusses Congress as a foreign policy actor. Understanding the role Congress plays in American foreign policy is crucial because it too oscillates between times of status quo management (stasis) and negotiation (crisis). In the third section I discuss my research design. Using the same data set found in Jacob and Page, I offer my own hypotheses for the expected findings. I then take up the results and discussion in the last two sections. In the end, however, my findings support the null hypothesis and reinforce the findings of Jacobs and Page. Finally, in the last section, I raise and discuss several possible alternative theories and possibilities for future research.

Literature Review

Jacobs and Page (2005) find that policy-makers's preferences are influenced by business leaders, followed closely by elites. Drawing on extensive use of the Chicago Council of Foreign Relations (CCFR) quadrennial polls of the general public, business leaders, and policy-makers, Jacobs and Page argue that policy-maker preferences share the strongest congruence with business leaders. Foreign policy elites also show a strong congruence, however, it is unclear whether those preference (of foreign policy elites) are themselves influenced by business.

The findings track with research within the international political economy literature. Bilateral trade agreements have, counter-intuitively, thrived even when multilateral institutions are supposedly constructed for the same purpose of promoting free trade (Elkins, Guzman, and Simmons 2006). Often this is the result of corporate lobbies seeking access to cheaper labor or property rights protections as a hedge against

the risk associated with international investment. These findings are consistent with the logic of collective action (Olsen 2009). Concentrated interests (business) are more strongly incentivized to influence the foreign policies that will benefit their own economic self-interest. The general public, being more diffuse, is both weakly incentivized to lobby and organized around ideological and party coalitions (which at times can hinder policy influence). The logic of collective action is, by itself, insufficient to explain the influence of business on foreign policy. Yet it does suggest a possible explanation for the causal pathways for the phenomenon.

Despite the robustness of Jacob and Page's (2005) findings, the research design is open to three lines of criticism. First, by grouping the years together, some of generational effects of different foreign policy issues may cancel each other out. Americans over the years have shown radical degrees of fluctuation in how they view the importance of foreign policy issues. One series of polls, emphasizes this point: Foreign policy rises and falls over those decades as Gallup's Most Important Problem. In the 1974 and 1978 polls, foreign policy was viewed as the Most Important Problem (MIP) by 0.7 and 2.5 percent (respectively) of Americans (see Table 1, below).¹ The general lack of interest and decline of foreign policy is partly explained by the distaste for foreign involvement after Vietnam and the detente established with the Soviet Union. In the 1982, 1986, and 1990 poll, foreign policy was the MIP by 5.8, 22.13, and 2.59 percent.

1. It bears mentioning that defense MIP peaked just a few years earlier. In 1972, national defense was considered the Most Important Problem by over a quarter of Americans. Even this number, however, was much lower than in the years following the end of World War II and the beginnings of the Cold War.

The rapid increase of the MIP percentage of 1986 fits with the buildup of military spending under the Reagan administration. Yet, the peak of 1986 would dissipate as quickly as it had appeared. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, Americans quickly forgot about foreign affairs. In the 1990s, defense never exceeded more than a few percentage points. In the 1994 and 1998 polls, defense was considered the MIP by 0.1 and 0.34 percent of Americans. The end of history no longer necessitated the general public to be concerned with international affairs.

These attitudes changed dramatically after the terror attacks of September 11th, 2001. Defense unsurprisingly was considered *the* most important problem facing the United States in 2002. Not since before the Chicago Council on Foreign Relations began its surveys has defense been consistently so highly ranked as the MIP. In the 2002 and 2004 poll, defense was ranked as the Most Important Problem by 27 percent of Americans.² (Though, in early years of the Cold War, MIP was considerably higher than in the decade after 9/11.) The result of these numbers suggest that the logic of pooling opinion polls across decades, especially when they are conducted quadrennially, may have considerable weakness. Moreover, even in the decades in which defense issues ranked high in the MIP, the particular contexts of the defense, trade, and foreign relations issues make cross comparisons difficult. We cannot expect the general public and elites in

2. In 2004 the Chicago Council on Foreign Relations renamed itself the Chicago Council on Global Affairs and began polling citizens in other countries. While they continued to poll Americans and policy-makers on foreign makers, as far as I can tell, they stopped interviewing policy-makers in the 2008 study. They also ran a second follow up poll in the fall of 2008 after the financial crisis reached its peak in September-October of that year.

the 1986 to have similar views about foreign affairs as they did in 2002.

The events of 9/11, I argue, effected both the salience of foreign policy and called into question the status quo presumptions of American foreign policy. It was no longer a viable position to advocate for a strong reliance on diplomacy and foreign aid. The sharpness of this transformation is most evident in the rhetoric of President George W. Bush. As a candidate, he had claimed that the United States should not be in the nation building business. His public rhetoric—indeed, his policies as well—changed so dramatically after September 11th, 2001 that few remember a time when the former President was not advocating for promoting democracy abroad as part of America’s grand strategy.

Year	1978	1982	1986	1990	1994	1998	2002	2004	2008
% MIP	2.5	5.8	22.1	2.59	0.09	0.34	27.159	27.274	14.301

Table 1: Gallup Most Important Problem, annual averages 1974-2008

Second, according to Jacob and Page, their model examined a summation of all policy preferences. However, after reviewing the data, I learned that the polling of the CCFR asks a battery of questions, from economics to security policy. Collapsing these issue areas are problematic because respondents may view the significance of each issue area in varying degrees of importance. Immigration may be a primary issue for voters in border states or among ethnic-demographics with significant interest in the issue. But the broader electorate, and their elected representatives may not. Likewise, other policy domains and issue areas may not be perceived as entirely foreign policy related. Policy

issues like the economy and international trade are closely linked to the American foreign policy regime, but the complexity and interconnectedness with the domestic economy may obscure the issue, preventing the public from forming clearly defined preferences. As a result, the policy preferences of the general public on economic, immigration, and related policy domains could be weakening the correlation between their preferences on defense.

Third, the logic of Congressional reelection implies that the link between public opinion and policy should be stronger than the current evidence indicates. If the findings of Jacobs and Page hold under a variety of conditions, we need a stronger theoretical explanation for the empirical observation. Congress members are nothing else if not single minded seekers of reelection (Mayhew 1974). As such it seems unusual that policy-makers both in Congress and the federal administrations would defy the public so consistently. Perhaps this is because Congress, according to some scholars, failed to fulfill its constitutional obligation in matters of foreign affairs. These arguments claim that Congress is often not considered a major foreign policy actor because the role of the presidency is so dominate. While this holds true most of the time, under times of crisis, Congress will move away from the status quo policies and begin to negotiate between the parties in Congress and between Congress and the Presidency (Henehan 2000). Yet, the potential weakness of the design is, by itself, insufficient for warranting a fresh look at the data. If the public is going to have any influence on foreign policy, it will be felt in Congress where the electoral incentives are strong indicators of behavior (Mayhew 1974).

Third, and finally, there are “second image” lines of research in international politics which further imply a role for domestic constituencies.³ General public attitudes, when sufficiently strong, have shaped the outcome of American foreign policy. Trubowitz (1998) shows for example how the attitudes of the particular regions within the U.S. form blocs which cooperate with each other against other blocs. If nothing else, regional blocs within the U.S. might account for the variety of preferences among the electorate. Voters in southern Florida are more likely to be concerned with Cuba and the Caribbean while those in the north Atlantic are interested in relations in Europe and Canada. Indeed, given the breadth of the variety of public preferences in the electorate, it is hard to see how the general public does not participate in major foreign policy debates like NAFTA, the Iraq, and responses to a rising China.

Together, these literatures make the case for a reconsideration of the original study. a new research design which attempts to account for these weaknesses should either demonstrate the conditions under which the public has a stronger link to policy representation, or will act as a robustness test to the original studying by showing how the original findings hold under updated conditions.

Research Design

For this study I relied on heavily on the design of Jacobs and Page (2005) including

3. The “second image” model is found in Waltz (1959). There he offered three paradigms for conceptualizing international relations theories: the individual, “first image,” of presidents and great statesmen, the particular type and domestic politics of the state in the second, and the “third image,” of the international system which forms the structure of world politics.

their dataset—the Chicago Council of Foreign Relations perennial studies—and their dependent and independent variables. The *dependent variable* for this project is the same as in Jacob and Page (2005), the percentage of policy-makers who favor or oppose a given policy alternative. I made two modifications to the original study. First, I excluded policy-makers who worked in administration positions in order to test only those preferences by elected officials. If the logic outlined earlier holds, we should expect to find a stronger correlation between the public and members of Congress. Dropping federal administration policy-makers gives us the best conditions possible to test the relationship between Congressional preferences and the general public. If the findings support a rejection of the null hypothesis, we can rerun the tests with administration officials included in the dependent variable as a robustness check. Second, I ran the model only on the years 2002 and 2004 because as shown with the Most Important Problem data, the general public were acutely aware of foreign policy issues, especially defense, in the years immediately following the September 11th, 2001 terror attacks. The events of 9/11 clearly constituted a foreign policy crisis. As such, we can expect that congressional members moved out of a status quo status into a period of negotiation as Henahan (2000) argued should be the case. To review, when commonly held policy positions are up for debate, elected policy-makers should be incentivized to respond to the preferences of the general public equally as much as elites since failure to do so could the potential loss of reelection for elected officials.

The data is available freely from Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research (ICPSR). Most of the early studies through 2004 are available only in

plain text formats and needed to be converted into a contemporary file format. Once the data was converted I thoroughly reviewed the data and the code book provided by ICPSR to ensure that I tested the same policy preferences across each year the poll was taken. This proved to be a good approach because in some instances, the question numbering was different. The CCFR asked questions that were common to both policy leaders and the general public, but also asked questions that were unique to each group. The result is that in most cases, “question 530A1,” for example, is the same for both groups, but might be “question 540A1” for the general public but “question 540A1” for policy elites. Once the selected number of questions were determined, the questions in one dataset could be recoded to match consistently other data set before appending one dataset on the other.

When the datasets for each group were appended, I created variables that took the median response for each policy alternative that was consistent across the polls. I then transposed the data so that each variable column was a group (member of Congress, business leaders, general public, etc.) and each observation was the median response given by that group.

I followed the model outlined by Jacobs and Page using all the same independent variables they listed. The CCFR includes results for 12 unique groups, with House Representatives, Senators, and policy administration officials as distinct groups. Also included were religious and labor leaders, as well as educators and university faculty. In the results section the ones of most interest to us are those preferences held by business leaders, foreign policy elites, and the general public. In each there are sound reasons to believe a relationship of influence exists. We have already sketched the reasons for the

public. Business leaders have economic motives since the outcomes of policy making effect their bottom line. Moreover, in some policy domains, the actual policy outcome may permit or prohibit a specific business policy like foreign direct investments. Lastly, foreign policy experts have both an incentive to influence policy and are well positioned to be courted by policy-makers looking for a way to distinguish themselves. International politics is a dynamic and complex issue area. And since the demands on time and attention for any individual Congress member are effectively infinite, relying on the advice of the epistemic communities involved in foreign policy could serve as a reliable short cut when policy positions and preferences are needed on short notice.

From the literature review, I derived three hypotheses to be tested with this model, the null plus two more. The *null hypothesis* is a finding that supports the original thesis of Jacobs and Page (2005). Significant and meaningful coefficients will be found not between the public and policy-makers but between business and policy-makers. Second is the *democratic influence hypothesis*: a significant link between policy-makers and the general public will be found—and the link between business and policy-makers will be weakened. This hypothesis presumes that the electorate will continue to hold different views of business leaders but that since the status quo had been called into question, policy-makers are incentivized to take their position cues from those who elect them rather than those who lobby them. The third hypothesis is the *elite framing hypothesis*. It presumes that both the electorate and business leaders will have strong connections to the preferences of policy-makers. Yet, unlike the democratic influence hypothesis, the thinking goes that in times of crisis or foreign policy salience, the public takes their cues

from business leaders and foreign policy elites. A finding for this third hypothesis would cut against my own logic and indirectly support the findings the Jacobs and Page.

- *Null Hypothesis*. Business leaders hold strongest correlation to policy-maker preferences
- *Democratic Influence Hypothesis*. General public has strong correlation to policy-maker preference.
- *Elite Frame Hypothesis*. Both the elites and general public are correlated with the preferences of policy-makers.

Results and Discussion

Once the data was prepared, I ran a simple OLS regression. The results support the null finding, supporting the findings of Jacobs and Page (see Table 2, below). Even when removing policy-makers who work in the administration and focusing only on the preferences of policy-makers, business leaders are the only group with significant results. Controlling for the public and the foreign policy elites, a one unit change in the preferences of business leaders results in a .76 unit change in the preferences of members of Congress (significant at $p < .05$).

Table 1: OLS Regression for policy preferences

Source		SS	df	MS	Number of obs = 63
-----+-----					F(3, 59) = 114.31
Model		10.9744559	3	3.65815197	Prob > F = 0.0000
Resid		1.88811735	59	.032001989	R-squared = 0.8532
-----+-----					Adj R-squared = 0.8457
Total		12.8625733	62	.207460859	Root MSE = .17889

moc	Coef.	Std. Err.	t	P> t	[95% Conf. Interval]	
bizz	.7633417	.231795	3.29	0.002*	.2995209	1.227162
forPol	.2183929	.2017666	1.08	0.283	-.1853411	0.622127
public	-.0945849	.0952075	-0.99	0.325	-.2850947	0.0959248
_cons	.0399228	.0902431	0.44	0.660	-.1406533	0.2204989

DV~ Member of Congress Preferences, * = P < .05

The findings here raise an interesting question: if public preferences do not influence the preferences of policy-makers, how do square the literature which argues that the public does influence American foreign policy? One possibility is that the thermostatic model may be ill suited to the complexity of foreign policy. While it is true that budgetary issues capture the public-preferences/policy-representation cycle, foreign policy spending is obscured and rarely spent in ways that the public can “see.” The public can see a bridge being built, but cannot see the new fighter jet purchased. And even if they could, it is hard to determine how each new defense program contributes to the personal well-being of each individual. Also, despite the massive spending expenditures inherent to defense policy, public discourse over defense and other foreign policy issues are largely non-material. Raising the level of the minimum wage \$1 per hour, for instance, is something that can be measured by each individual citizen. Deterring Russia or offering assistance to a foreign nation cannot be measured in the same way. Or to put it more clearly, how can the public perceive and grasp a \$1 (or \$1billion) increase of fighter jet or Russian deterrence?

The findings here are not yet definitive. Whatever preferences policy-makers hold,

it does not mean they will pursue those policies in practice. The logic of the principle-agent model suggests that although elected officials and administration officials are incentivized to pursue their own interests against those of the principles (i.e., the electorate), the amount of latitude they have are contained by the parameters given by their principles. One way to test this is to look at what policy-makers do. Testing this possibility can be accomplished by looking at the actual roll call votes on foreign policy issues in Congress. Using the data in the Chicago Council of Foreign Relations we could develop an estimate for the average Congressional vote on policy alternatives in defense, economics, trade, and immigration. Then we could run a two-stage least square regression using the estimate as one independent variable. Controls for party and ideology can be easily incorporated to capture these effects. This would allow us to test the difference between preferences and actual policy voting.

The second line of research which is needed is to consider if the public influences foreign policy in long-term, generational outlooks. The works of Sparrow (1996) and Trubowitz (1998) could be read in this way. Territorial expansion, regional economic and foreign relation issues work their way through the political system not on individual policies but on “grand strategy”. Consider, for instance, Braumoeller (2010) who argues that America’s isolationist attitudes in the inter-war period is a myth. Many Americans—and policy-makers—were quite responsive to the events happening in Europe. The relevance for his finding suggest the potential for a long-term view of strategy design not incremental policy output. This idea is only a suggestion and requires much more theoretical rigor before an empirical model can be devised to test it. Nevertheless, it is

worth mentioning because the potential for a finding of a stronger link between opinion and policy would be of value to future scholars.

Two more possibilities may explain the relationship found. The effects of safe districts may insulate members of Congress from the need to develop closely aligned preferences of their constituents on foreign policy issues. Since the partisan and ideological make up of districts and the politicians who represent them are already aligned, voters may not be fully aware—or may not care—that their representatives do not share similar foreign affairs views. It may only be sufficient that their domestic policies are aligned. Also, it may be the model, by emphasizing the percentage of policy makers who support or oppose a given policy alternative, misses smaller change on more narrow foreign policy issues. Thus, after 9/11 national security spiked in issue salience. The effect of that salience may only have effected a handful of issues, like the use of military force and the war on terrorism. If the other policy alternatives remained unchanged, the effects of business preferences would still be stronger than the general public.

Lastly, grouping all Americans into one foreign policy model may miss the trees for for the forrest. Mead's (2001) history of American foreign policy sketches out four typologies of American foreign policy. Each placing relative weight on (a) integration into the world economy, (b) assistance to foreign nations with their own democratic development, (c) protecting the American regime at home and involving the U.S. as little as possible, and (d) biasing American policy toward isolationism unless or until provoked and then responding with the full weight of the American military. Supporters of these

typologies may have periods or issues of weaker and stronger influence in the policy-making process. The link between opinion and policy may be found by testing these typologies as distinct models across different times and under different circumstances.

My null findings call into question scholarship which places an emphasis on democratic accountability. For as these results seem to indicate, the policy preferences of the American public have little influence in the foreign policy making process. Nevertheless, the findings here are instructive. The original study by Jacobs and Page was open to criticism on the grounds that foreign policy was not a salient issue for most of the years included in their study. Updating the research design to include 2002 and 2004—when foreign policy was a much stronger salient issues—and dropping unelected policy-makers from the dependent variable presented a unique chance to demonstrate empirically the weakness. The findings may be disheartening for advocates of democratic theory. But they do support the original claims about the weakness of the links in policy preferences.

Bibliography

Braumoeller, Bear F. "The myth of American isolationism." *Foreign Policy Analysis* 6, no. 4 (2010): 349-371.

Chicago Council on Foreign Relations, and German Marshall Fund of the United States. *American Public Opinion and U.S. Foreign Policy*, 2002. ICPSR03673-v1. Ann Arbor, MI: Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research [distributor], 2004. doi:10.3886/ICPSR03673.v1

_____. *GLOBAL VIEWS 2004: AMERICAN PUBLIC OPINION AND FOREIGN POLICY*. ICPSR version. Menlo Park, CA: Knowledge Networks, Inc. [producer], 2004. Ann Arbor, MI: Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research [distributor], 2005. doi:10.3886/ICPSR04137.v1

Druckman, James N., and Lawrence R. Jacobs. "Lumpers and Splitters The Public Opinion Information that Politicians Collect and Use." *Public Opinion Quarterly*. 70, no. 4 (2006): 453-476.

_____. "Segmented Representation: The Reagan White House and Disproportionate Responsiveness" in *Who Gets Represented?*. Enns and Wlezien, eds. 2011.

Enns, Peter K., and Christopher Wlezien, eds. *Who Gets Represented?*. Russell Sage Foundation, 2011.

Elkins, Zachary., Andrew T. Guzman, and Beth A. Simmons. 2006. "Competing for Capital: The Diffusion of Bilateral Investment Treaties 1960-2000." *International Organization*. 60 (4): 811-846.

Henehan, Marie T. *Foreign policy and Congress: An international relations perspective*. University of Michigan Press, 2000.

Jacobs, Lawrence R., and Benjamin I. Page. "Who Influences U. S. Foreign Policy?." *American Political Science Review*. 99, no. 1 (2005): 107-123.

Mayhew, David R. *Congress: The Electoral Connection*. New Haven: Yale University

Press, 1974

Mead, Walter Russell. *Special providence: American foreign policy and how it changed the world*. Routledge, 2013.

Olson, Mancur, and Mancur Olson. *The logic of collective action: public goods and the theory of groups*. Vol. 124. Harvard University Press, 2009.

Snyder, Jack. *Myths of empire: Domestic politics and international ambition*. Cornell University Press, 1991 [2013].

Sparrow, Bartholomew H. *From the outside in: World War II and the American state*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996.

Trubowitz, Peter. *Defining the national interest: conflict and change in American foreign policy*. University of Chicago Press, 1998.

Wagner, R. Harrison. *War and the State: The Theory of International Politics*. University of Michigan Press, 2010.

Waltz, Kenneth Neal. *Man, the state, and war: a theoretical analysis*. Columbia University Press, 2001.