

Preface to the First Edition

Ours is appropriately called the “age of polling.” Few aspects of contemporary life have eluded the public scrutiny of the survey. Polls are regularly conducted to determine what the general public thinks about issues, parties, candidates, presidents, institutions, and other countries, to say nothing of products, pastimes, and popular personalities. As this is being written, the public is being asked whether the Miss America Pageant should continue to judge contestants in bathing suits and how retired general Colin Powell would fare as a presidential candidate in 1996. Other surveys rely on expert opinion to answer some variant or another of America’s favorite question: “Who is number one?” Which college football team is the best this week in the opinion of sports-writers and coaches? How do academic specialists rank graduate programs in their disciplines?

Foreign affairs, once considered the private preserve of small groups of knowledgeable and interested elites, have also been the subject of repeated surveys. Although those surveys have consistently revealed that the average American is poorly informed about international affairs, opportunities for the public to become engaged in foreign policy have increased. For example, new communications technologies permit the public to observe important events as they unfold. The Cable News Network (CNN) brought the Persian Gulf War into the world’s living rooms in real time, and it did the same with the mission of Jimmy Carter, Sam Nunn, and Colin Powell to persuade Haiti’s ruling junta that stepping down voluntarily was the only way to avert an American military invasion to force it out of power. These technologies can also make the public a quasi participant in such episodes by almost simultaneous polling to determine reactions to and assessments of events as they take place.

The impact and consequences of these developments are not

free of controversy, but many of the issues that have surfaced are in fact variants of venerable debates about the role of the public in international affairs. Is foreign policy “different” from other aspects of public policy? How can a poorly informed public make any coherent sense of the complex issues that constitute international relations? Can it make any constructive contribution to foreign policy? Can great powers in the nuclear age afford to take public sentiments into account when the consequences of policy choices may determine the continued existence of the country, or perhaps even of the human race? Can they afford not to? Has the end of the Cold War increased the likelihood that public passions will drive governments into well-meaning but hopeless undertakings that have little relationship to the national interest? Conversely, will a public suffering from “compassion fatigue” insist that an agenda of domestic problems be given priority over the vision briefly articulated by former President Bush—a “new world order” in which the United States would play a leading role?

More basically, what is the proper role of public opinion in the conduct of foreign affairs in a democratic polity? What do we know about the nature and impact of public opinion on foreign and defense policy? Philosophers have debated the first question for centuries, but twentieth-century conflicts have played a crucial role in framing the key questions and research agendas in the search for answers to the second one. World War I transformed the question of public participation in foreign affairs from a theoretical issue into a practical one that many postwar leaders had to confront. World War II was equally significant. For many leaders and public opinion analysts, a key question arising from that conflict was whether the public would permit the United States to play a constructive leadership role in the postwar international order. Answers to many of the normative and empirical questions that emerged from extensive research during the two decades following World War II came to be reexamined as a consequence of the long and failed U.S. effort in Vietnam. The end of the Cold War has raised new questions, including the extent to which our understanding of American public opinion and foreign policy may need to be modified in the light of a world that has in many ways been transformed since the late 1980s. The chapters that follow will attempt to examine and evaluate some of the theory and evidence concerning these issues.

John Zaller (1992) has appropriately argued that our knowledge

about public opinion has suffered from a tendency to organize research around policy issues, including foreign policy. While this book is focused on opinions about international affairs, I have also made some effort to draw upon theory and evidence from other issues and such related aspects of political behavior as voting.

In the course of writing this book, I have received invaluable help from many persons and institutions. John Aldrich, Ronald Hinckley, Layna Mosely, and Jim Rosenau read the entire manuscript in draft form and provided many helpful comments, cogent criticisms, and constructive suggestions for improving it. Peter Feaver did the same for the final chapter. Jim Rosenau has also been a collaborator for more than two decades on a related project concerning the political beliefs of American opinion leaders. This book, which originated in a suggestion by John Aldrich, is far better than it would have been without their help.

I am also indebted to those who read and commented on an earlier and much briefer effort to review the literature on public opinion and foreign policy: Stephen Earl Bennett, Bill Chittick, Thomas Graham, Jon Hurwitz, Ben Page, Mark Peffley, Philip Powlick, Bruce Russett, and Gene Wittkopf. Many stimulating conversations with Gene Wittkopf about most of the topics discussed here have invariably been enlightening.

Four National Science Foundation (NSF) grants made it possible for me to conduct surveys of American opinion leaders in 1980, 1984, 1988, and 1992. Some of the resulting data are reported in chapters 4 and 5. The NSF also provided a Research and Training Grant (RTG) in political psychology to the Mershon Center at the Ohio State University. The frequent meetings of faculty and doctoral students under the auspices of the Mershon RTG have provided an exceptional interuniversity, multidisciplinary, and cross-generational setting in which to further my education.

The Duke Arts and Sciences Research Council provided a grant to undertake the initial survey of opinion leaders in 1976, and since that time it has frequently provided additional support for my research on American public opinion and foreign policy.

Any reader will quickly come to appreciate that this book could not have been written without the efforts of many people who have written about public opinion and foreign policy. It is thus appropriate for me to express my gratitude to all of the authors cited in the bibliography. Three of them—Ronald Hinckley, Alan Kay, and Steven Kull—also have generously shared the results of their own surveys with me.

For many years I have relied on the expert programming skills of Daniel F. Harkins. As the entire computing system at Duke has undergone immense changes on an almost annual basis, Dan's patience and ingenuity have been almost as important as his immense technical abilities. The many drafts of the manuscript and tables were skillfully typed by Rita Dowling. Not even the most daunting table ever caused her to lose her excellent sense of humor. Layna Mosely and Elizabeth Rogers provided outstanding assistance in searching through memoirs and biographies of presidents and secretaries of state for materials related to public opinion. Justine Lapatine diligently checked the quotations and citations.

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All those who have so kindly contributed to this book are, of course, absolved from blame for any remaining deficiencies.