

## Challenging U.S. Policymakers' Image of an Isolationist Public

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A persisting question in international studies is whether academic research can have an impact on the making of foreign policy. Much research has shown that policy decisions can be greatly influenced by misperceptions, just as much as by objective factors. The article describes an effort by academic researchers to challenge U.S. policymakers' image of an actor in the U.S. foreign policy process—the American public. The study's focus was a widely held assumption in the U.S. foreign policy community that the American public in the wake of the Cold War was entering a renewed phase of isolationism, similar to the interwar years. The study first interviewed policy practitioners on their perceptions of the public, then performed a comprehensive review of existing polling data, and finally conducted new polls with input from policymakers themselves. The net result of the elite interviews and the analysis of public attitudes revealed a significant gap in all areas, which is presented in synopsis. Interviews with policy practitioners reveal two key dynamics that could well contribute to policymakers' misreading the public: a failure to seek out information about the public and a tendency to assume that the vocal public is representative of the general public. Indications that the study did have some impact on the thinking of policy practitioners are discussed in the conclusion.

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A persistent question in the field of international studies is whether academic research can be useful to, or have an impact on, the making of foreign policy. Alexander George suggests that the information-processing capacities of policymakers can be flawed and that academics can play a useful role by identifying and potentially challenging the models or images policymakers hold of various actors in the international system—images that subsequently influence policy decisions (George, 1993). A substantial body of research has demonstrated that policy decisions can be greatly influenced by misperceptions—indeed, just as much as by objective factors such as the distribution of resources (see Jervis, 1976).

This article will describe an effort by academic researchers to challenge U.S. policymakers' image of an actor in the U.S. foreign policy process—the American public. While the American public may not be one of the most prominent actors in the foreign policy process, in a recent review of the

existing literature Powlick and Katz summarize that “few now question that American public opinion has an effect on foreign policymakers” (Powlick and Katz, 1998:30). To this we would add that it is U.S. policymakers’ *image* of the public that has an impact on policy—an image that may be more or less correct.

The focus of this study was a widely held assumption in the U.S. foreign policy community that the American public in the wake of the Cold War was entering a renewed phase of isolationism similar to the interwar years. Anecdotal evidence from the foreign policy discourse, later confirmed by interviews with policy practitioners, showed a widespread belief that, with the Soviet threat gone, the public wanted to see the U.S. generally disengage from international affairs and specifically to cut foreign aid, distance itself from the UN, and not contribute troops to peacekeeping operations. This assumption about the public was also seen as having an impact on U.S. foreign policy—typified by reductions in the international affairs budget, closing of U.S. embassies, cutting foreign aid, holding back on payment of UN dues, and a resistance to committing U.S. troops to peacekeeping operations.

An example of such assertions about the public was one made by President Clinton on June 11, 1995. At an appearance at a New Hampshire town hall meeting Clinton referred to how “isolationist” the new House Republicans were and said, “I think they’re only reflecting the views of their constituents. That is, people want us to tend to our problems here at home. They don’t want us to waste any money overseas. Nothing is more unpopular than doing that now.”<sup>1</sup>

Based on a comprehensive review of existing polling data, as well as polling and focus groups the authors conducted at the Program on International Policy Attitudes of the Center for International and Security Studies at the University of Maryland, there was little evidence to support this image of the public.

We thus undertook a research project designed to challenge this image of the public. Rather than simply conducting this research in an academic environment, we sought to engage policy practitioners directly in the research process. We did this by first interviewing policy practitioners on their perceptions of the public. This served to determine whether the image of the isolationist public was indeed as widespread as the foreign policy discourse implied and to determine more fully how this image had formed. More significant, we also conducted a series of workshops with policy practitioners interviewed, presenting them with the existing polling data and asking them to propose new poll questions that might reveal the isolationist attitudes they believed existed. These suggestions then became the basis for a new poll. As we will see, even when policy practitioners participated in the development of the poll questions, the image of the public as isolationist was not sustained.

### **The Gap Between Elite Perceptions and Public Opinion**

In the first stage of the project, 83 members of the policy community were interviewed. These included members of Congress, congressional staffers,

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<sup>1</sup>*Weekly Compilation of Presidential Documents*, June 19, 1995, p. 1032. See Steven Kull and I. M. Destler, *Misreading the Public: The Myth of a New Isolationism* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 1999), pp. 12–20 for many more examples, as well as evidence that these assumptions had an impact on policy.

executive branch officials dealing with foreign policy, foreign policy journalists, and members of nongovernmental organizations that deal with foreign policy. These policy practitioners were asked about their perceptions of public attitudes on the question of America's role in the world, U.S. relations with the United Nations, the U.S. role in UN peacekeeping, U.S. foreign aid policy, and U.S. defense spending. We also asked about their perception of the impact of these attitudes on U.S. foreign policy.

The second stage of the project was a full-scale review of the existing polling data. Analyzing data from all publicly available sources, we sought to determine whether policymakers were perceiving the public correctly and—to the extent that there was a gap between elite perception and public attitudes—whether there were any dynamics in public attitudes that could help account for the elite perception.

The net result of the elite interviews and the analysis of public attitudes did indeed reveal a significant gap in all areas. What follows is a brief synopsis of this gap. A more complete analysis can be found in the book *Misreading the Public: The Myth of a New Isolationism* by Steven Kull and I. M. Destler. In addition, this article's notes provide additional findings that post-date the book, thus indicating the continuity of public attitudes.

#### *America's Role in the World*

When asked what they thought the majority of Americans felt about the U.S. role in the world in the wake of the Cold War, approximately three out of four respondents interviewed said that most Americans want the U.S. to disengage from the world. The recurring theme was that this is a result of a resurgence of isolationism in the wake of the Cold War and a shift back to parochialism in American thinking. This view was especially strong among members of Congress and their staffs. It was less strong among Executive Branch officials, but was still a majority.

Polling data, however, indicate clearly that the majority of Americans do not want to disengage—nor has the proportion who do increased significantly since the end of the Cold War. Trend line poll questions that have been asked for decades show no substantial change since the fall of the Berlin Wall. At least two out of three Americans still say the U.S. should take an active part in world affairs and in response to some questions the majority supporting this view rises to 90%.<sup>2</sup>

Some features of American public opinion, however, may contribute to the perception that the public wants to disengage from the world. Very strong majorities do want their nation to move away from the role of dominant world leader—or “world policeman.” They also believe that the U.S. does more than its fair share in international efforts. But on further questioning, it becomes clear that these sentiments do not reflect a desire to disengage. To shift out of the role of dominant world leader, most Americans want the U.S. not to withdraw, but to put more emphasis on working together with

<sup>2</sup> For example, in numerous polls both before and after the end of the Cold War, by a more than 2 to 1 margin Americans have said the U.S. should “take an active part in world affairs,” while rejecting the statement that the U.S. should “stay out” of world affairs. Most recently, in a December 1998 poll by the Chicago Council on Foreign Relations, the balance was 61% to 28%. When simply asked whether they agree that the U.S. should take an active part in world affairs, nine out of ten said that the U.S. should. See also Kull and Destler, 1999:42–45.

other countries, especially through the UN.<sup>3</sup> And the view that the U.S. does more than its fair share is founded, in many cases, on extreme overestimations of how much the U.S. actually does. Asked to specify how much the U.S. should do internationally, most Americans specify an amount greater than the actual amount. When told how much the U.S. does do, most do not find it objectionable.

### *The United Nations*

A substantial majority of practitioners believed that the American public is either negative or ambivalent about the United Nations. Less than a quarter of those interviewed said that the majority of Americans have positive feelings toward the UN. Less than a fifth believed that Americans would like to see a stronger UN. Only one in ten thought that the majority of Americans feel the U.S. should pay its UN dues in full. An overwhelming majority of practitioners thought that, in a situation requiring the use of military force, Americans would prefer acting through NATO to acting through the UN. The negative view of public attitudes toward the UN was markedly stronger among congressional members and staff.

Public attitudes diverge sharply from these perceptions. A strong majority reports positive feelings about the UN, while an overwhelming majority supports the U.S. participating in the UN as an active member. An overwhelming majority would like to see the UN strengthened.<sup>4</sup> The worry that this could threaten U.S. sovereignty is only a minority concern. A majority supports full payment of U.S. dues to the UN.<sup>5</sup> Majorities even support some forms of international taxation—generally in the form of user fees—to bring revenue to the UN, and creating a standing UN peacekeeping force made up of volunteers.<sup>6</sup>

Support for the UN is especially strong when it comes to the use of military force. When offered a choice of using U.S. military force unilaterally

<sup>3</sup> For example, in a June 1996 PIPA poll, respondents were presented with three options for America's role in the world. Just 12% chose the option that "the U.S. should withdraw from most efforts to solve international problems." Similarly, only 13% embraced the idea that "as the sole remaining superpower, the U.S. should continue to be the preeminent world leader in solving international problems." However, an overwhelming 74% endorsed the view that "the U.S. should do its fair share in efforts to solve international problems together with other countries." Similarly, in September 1997, Pew asked what kind of leadership role Americans would like to see the U.S. play in the world. Consistent with PIPA's 1996 results, only 11% embraced the isolationist position that the U.S. "shouldn't play any leadership role." Similarly, only 12% favored the United States being "the single world leader." However, an overwhelming majority of 73% favored the U.S. playing "a shared leadership role." See also Kull and Destler, 1999:47–50.

<sup>4</sup> A November 1998 poll by the Chicago Council on Foreign Relations found that 84 percent felt that strengthening the UN should be a somewhat (39%) or very important (45%) foreign policy goal, with only 11% saying it should not be. In its October 1999 poll, PIPA offered respondents a list of four international organizations, including the UN, telling them: "Some say that because of the increasing interaction between countries, we need to strengthen international institutions to deal with shared problems. Others say that this would only create bigger, unwieldy bureaucracies." They were then asked, for each institution, whether "you think it needs to be strengthened or not." Sixty-seven percent thought that the UN needs to be strengthened, while only 30% thought that it did not. See also Kull and Destler, 1999:71–74.

<sup>5</sup> Most recently at time of writing, Zogby found 62% agreeing that "the United States should pay all its back dues" to the UN (December 1998). See also Kull and Destler, 1999:74–77.

<sup>6</sup> Most recently, Harris found 64% saying "there is a need for an international army. . . that can respond to problems in such countries as Bosnia, Kosovo, East Timor or Rwanda . . ." (not needed: 29%; November 1999). In October 1999 PIPA found 53% in favor of a more specific proposal in which "soldiers . . . had independently volunteered to be part of the UN force." See Kull and Destler, 1999:71–74.

or as part of a UN operation, the public opts overwhelmingly for the latter. In some cases, the public would even prefer a UN operation to a NATO operation. Concurrent with this strong support for the UN, however, is significant public criticism of UN performance, especially the passivity shown by some UN peacekeeping operations. However, this frustration tends to evoke majority support for strengthening these operations, rather than discontinuing them.

### *UN Peacekeeping*

Only about one in ten of the practitioners interviewed thought that a majority had positive feelings about UN peacekeeping. Half thought that most Americans take a negative view of UN peacekeeping in general. Another quarter thought that Americans could support a specific UN operation only if certain conditions were met—such as high potential for success, no use of American troops, or a direct connection to U.S. national interests.

On the question of contributing U.S. troops to UN peacekeeping, the majority of practitioners thought most Americans were opposed: members and staff on Capitol Hill were nearly unanimous on this point. Almost three quarters also felt that the majority of the public was opposed to placing U.S. troops under a non-American commander in a UN operation. Finally, a plurality of policy practitioners thought that any U.S. casualties would generate strong public pressure for immediate withdrawal from a UN peacekeeping operation. Almost three quarters, including all media interviewees, said a majority of the public had favored immediate withdrawal from Somalia after the death of eighteen U.S. Rangers in October 1993.

In fact, UN peacekeeping in principle garners strong majority support from the public, while counterarguments (based on cost or lack of connection to U.S. national security) do poorly in polls. Support derives both from peacekeeping's potential for burden-sharing and from humanitarian and moral concerns, especially in situations in which genocide is a factor.<sup>7</sup> At the same time, very large majorities have had reservations about UN peacekeeping performance, most notably in Bosnia, where the operation was perceived as too passive and generally unwilling to use force.

The majority has consistently favored contributing U.S. troops to peacekeeping operations in principle. Support for contributing to specific operations varies, however, according to a number of variables, including whether the operation is clearly perceived as multilateral, whether the U.S. is perceived as contributing its fair share, whether the operation is perceived as likely to succeed, whether the U.S. leadership is acting coherently and decisively, and whether the operation could mitigate widespread civilian suffering.<sup>8</sup> Another concern is whether the U.S. soldiers want to be part of the

<sup>7</sup> PIPA's October 1999 poll found 77% agreeing that "[i]f a government is committing atrocities against its people so that a significant number of people are being killed, at some point the countries of the world, including the U.S., should intervene, with force if necessary, to stop the killing." Similarly, in November 1999 Harris asked, "If a government commits atrocities against its own people, do other countries have a duty to intervene, not just a right to do so?" Seventy-one percent said other countries have such a duty (do not have duty: 25%). See Kull and Destler, 1999:95–96.

<sup>8</sup> An example current at time of writing was the UN operation in East Timor. Seventy-one percent approved U.S. contributing 200 troops to the operation, while 25% disapproved. See Kull and Destler, 1999:100–106.

operation. A majority also shows willingness to put U.S. troops under a non-American UN commander.<sup>9</sup>

Finally, on the question of U.S. fatalities, in response to a variety of hypothetical scenarios only a small minority says it would favor withdrawing U.S. troops in response to a significant number of U.S. fatalities. In response to the actual fatalities in Somalia in October 1993, numerous polls showed that only about four in ten responded by favoring immediate withdrawal. Indeed, in the short run a majority of Americans favored *greater* involvement to reinforce U.S. troops. A majority did want to withdraw eventually, but this was true before the fatalities. In retrospect, strong majorities have continued to approve of the U.S. having undertaken the humanitarian operation in Somalia. Finally, a poll conducted in the spring of 1998 revealed that nearly two out of three Americans mistakenly believed that the U.S. had suffered substantial fatalities as part of the NATO operation in Bosnia over the last year, but this did not lead to calls for withdrawal.

### *Foreign Aid*

A very strong majority of practitioners believed that Americans have a negative attitude toward foreign aid in principle, feeling the money should be spent on domestic priorities. A substantial minority—and a large majority of those members of Congress interviewed—said that most Americans would like to eliminate foreign aid entirely. Nearly every interviewee said that the public overestimates the amount spent on foreign aid, but less than a tenth cited this misperception as a primary source of opposition. Only a small minority cited dissatisfaction with the performance of U.S. foreign aid programs as a major reason for the public's negative attitude.

In fact, polling data show that an overwhelming majority of Americans embraces the broad principle of giving foreign aid to the needy. Only a tiny minority wants foreign aid eliminated. When asked to prioritize, Americans rank domestic needs higher; but when asked to distribute funds, most Americans assign more to foreign aid than is currently allocated. Support derives from both altruism and self-interest. Majorities embrace the ideas that giving foreign aid helps the U.S. to develop trading partners,<sup>10</sup> preserve the environment, limit population growth, and promote democracy. But overwhelming majorities reject the idea that the U.S. should only give aid when it serves the national interest.

A strong majority feels that the U.S. gives too much foreign aid. But contrary to practitioners' perceptions that this is because Americans prefer to spend the money at home, polls suggest that this feeling is largely due to extreme overestimations of the amount of foreign aid given by the U.S., both as a percentage of the federal budget and relative to what is given by other countries. When Americans are asked what percentage of the federal budget would be appropriate, they set an amount far higher than the actual level.

<sup>9</sup> At time of writing, the most recent finding shows higher support, with 75% saying they "generally approve of American troops participating in peacekeeping forces under the United Nations command" (disapprove: 24%; CNN/U.S.A Today, June 1999). In earlier polling this level of support was only evident when the poll question specified that the U.S. would be contributing a minority of troops. See Kull and Destler, 1999:109–10.

<sup>10</sup> In October 1999 PIPA asked what the effects would be if "developing countries do become stronger economically." Large majorities thought this would have a positive impact on the U.S. economy (70%); on jobs in the U.S. (62%); and on U.S. business opportunities (74%). See also Kull and Destler, 1999:120–22.



Only a small minority finds objectionable the actual amount—1%. A very strong majority said that the U.S. should give the same amount as other countries as a percentage of GNP—considerably more than the U.S. gives in reality.

### **Letting the Policy Practitioners Ask the Questions**

Although the evidence for a gap between elite perceptions and public attitudes was derived from an exhaustive review of polling data, there was still the possibility that policy practitioners' image of the public could generate insights that might be confirmed by further poll research. The third stage of the project was a series of workshops in which policy practitioners were presented the findings from the interviews of policy practitioners and the contrasting polling data. We then asked them to challenge the notion that policymakers are misreading the American public by proposing ideas for poll questions that might reveal underlying trends toward disengagement and to predict the outcomes. These proposals were developed into a questionnaire that was reviewed by workshop participants, as well as a Democrat and a Republican pollster. The questionnaire was then used in a poll with a random sample of 2,400 Americans. As the poll was conducted in two waves, the group was also reconvened and presented the preliminary findings to see if this prompted any new ideas for poll questions.

Overall, what was most striking was that the policy practitioners were not good at predicting public responses. Virtually all of the predictions they made as part of their challenges to the finding of a gap were not sustained by the polling data. The challenges, and the subsequent tests, can be divided into four broad areas.

#### *Challenges Based on Dynamics of the Electoral Process*

One challenge, frequently repeated, was that even if most Americans say in a poll that they support engagement, they actually prefer candidates who support disengagement. (It might be conjectured that this challenge springs from a model of the public according to which broader, more altruistic attitudes can be expected to get lip service from a majority, while motivations derived from narrow self-interest are actually more potent underlying attitudes.) To test this notion, different samples were asked about a position in terms of their own opinion, and in terms of a hypothetical candidate's position. In fact, there was little difference in results between the two samples. Even on a question with a complex design that sought to factor out social desirability effects in favor of pro-engagement candidates, the pro-engagement candidate did better.

Another frequent challenge was that an incumbent who voted in favor of pro-engagement policies would be highly vulnerable to attacks from an electoral challenger, especially if the policies involve spending taxpayer money. With the help of political consultants, we created political ads in which hypothetical challengers attacked hypothetical incumbents for supporting foreign aid and paying UN dues—and we also created rebuttal ads from the incumbents. Responding to these ads, a majority preferred the pro-engagement incumbents over the challengers by robust margins.

Among other challenges, one held that even if the majority says it favors engagement, it does not like to see elected officials spending a significant

portion of their time on foreign policy. However, when asked in a poll how much time was appropriate for the president or a member of Congress to spend on foreign affairs, the median respondent allotted a substantial portion—30% for the president and 25% for a member of Congress.

*Challenges Based on Assumptions About the Effective Public*

Numerous workshop participants declared that support for engagement is weak and fragile, while opposition is intense and resilient; thus opposition is more relevant politically. But responses to survey questions indicated that, overall, supporters of engagement held their views as strongly as opponents. And when presented with strong counterarguments, pro-engagement respondents proved slightly less likely to change their positions than anti-engagement respondents.

It was also argued in the workshops that in foreign policy the public that matters is an attentive, active minority, and that this group wants to lower the level of U.S. involvement in the world. But among those who declared themselves attentive and those who said they are active, support for international engagement was found to be, if anything, a bit higher than in the general population. These groups were somewhat less enthusiastic toward the UN, however, and more critical of government performance.

*Challenges Based on How the Public Makes Trade-offs with Domestic Programs*

A key challenge from practitioners stated that even if the majority of Americans embrace an internationally engaged U.S. foreign policy *in principle*, in practice they are not ready to spend the money required when faced with making trade-offs against domestic priorities. (Here again, such a challenge may spring from a model of the public held by policymakers that predicts that underlying motivations based on narrow self-interest will in practice trump any motivations based on a broader outlook.) Thus, when members of Congress cut international spending in favor of domestic items they are doing what members of the public *would do* if they were voting on the federal budget. The prevailing view was that members of Congress were also reflecting their constituents' wishes by maintaining the current level of defense spending.

To test this assumption, a budget exercise was developed in which respondents were asked to allocate money among major items in the discretionary federal budget: four international spending categories—the State Department, the UN and UN peacekeeping, military aid, and humanitarian and economic aid; defense spending; and seven purely domestic items. Contrary to the practitioners' predictions, the majority chose to maintain or increase every category of international spending. Instead, respondents cut defense severely. On average, international spending was dramatically increased and fared better than many domestic items. Thus the view, expressed in the workshops, that respondents would cut international spending in favor of domestic items while also sparing defense turned out to be the exact reverse of the majority's actual choices.

*Challenges Based on Confidence That Members of Congress Reflect Their Constituents*

It was frequently stated in the workshops (and in interviews) that individual members of Congress are good mirrors of attitudes in their districts, and



thus the aggregate legislative behavior of Congress forms a good mirror of national attitudes, more reliable than national polls. The fact that Congress has taken legislative steps limiting U.S. international engagement was seen as clear evidence that the public must be in harmony with these steps.

To test this challenge, we set out to determine if the constituents of strongly anti-engagement members of Congress were indeed also opposed to engagement. We began with the fifteen co-sponsors of the 1995 legislation calling for the U.S. to withdraw from the UN (H.R. 2535), examined their voting records for consistent opposition to international engagement, and interviewed their aides on the telephone about how calls and letters were running on international issues and how they perceived majority views on these issues in the district. Through this process, we selected four geographically dispersed districts, in each of which the congressional aide had taken the unequivocal position that the majority of constituents would favor *withdrawing from the UN* and *eliminating foreign aid*.

We polled 500 randomly selected adults in each district (total 2,000). In all districts polled, only one in five respondents favored withdrawing from the UN and only one in twelve favored eliminating foreign aid. Strong majorities favored strengthening the UN. Overall, these four districts not only were supportive of U.S. international engagement, but on most questions were indistinguishable from the national sample.

### **Why Do Policy Practitioners Misperceive the Public?**

Why have U.S. policy practitioners come to believe Americans want to withdraw from the world? Why have they persisted in believing this despite substantial survey evidence to the contrary? While there are numerous ways this problem can be analyzed,<sup>11</sup> one key approach is to evaluate how policy-makers gain (or fail to gain) information about the public. In the interviews with policy practitioners we asked how they arrived at their conclusions about the public. These interviews reveal two key dynamics that could well contribute to policymakers misreading the public: a failure to seek out information about the public and a tendency to assume that the vocal public is representative of the general public.

#### *(1) Failure to Seek Out Information About Public Attitudes*

Overall, in the interviews policy practitioners indicated that they put little effort into gaining information about public attitudes on international issues. This was particularly marked in Congress. In virtually every case, members of Congress said they did not do polling on international issues. Nor did they show much interest in it. A congressional staffer, speaking of his boss, said, "I'm trying to think, the last time—I can't remember the last time he's asked for a poll, and I can't remember the last time I've actually seen one." Explaining this low level of interest, another member said, "Foreign affairs just doesn't win elections or lose elections."

Some congressional interviewees dismissed the value of polls altogether. For example, a member of Congress said, "I don't read polls. I don't take

<sup>11</sup> See pp. 205–65 of Kull and Destler, 1999, for a more comprehensive analysis that includes an examination of the political process as well as the information processing of the policy practitioner.

polls in my district . . . I think people lie in polls.” Journalists also showed a dismissive attitude toward polls. One reporter, speaking of journalists as a whole, said, “We are down on polls.” A prominent columnist said, “I personally don’t have much interest in polls.”

Members of the executive branch also described a low level of effort to find out about public opinion. Asked in an interview about “how, when you were in office, you got information on public opinion,” a former high-level executive branch official responded, “Haphazardly . . . a great deal of it is anecdotal. I mean there would be a poll here or a poll there . . . or a congressman would call in and say, my constituents are writing five to one about this . . . but it’s largely anecdotal. And how you respond depends on what your philosophy is.”

A current NSC staff member discussed an inhibition against trying to find out about public opinion because doing so is “viewed as sort of spying on the American people, you know, and you wouldn’t want the CIA or the USIA to do domestic polling. They would consider it inappropriate. So we don’t have a mechanism for it.”

A number of policy practitioners emphasized that they discounted polls because of their seemingly contradictory results. In some cases this was described as an inadequacy of the polls, but in as many cases respondents expressed frustration and bewilderment with their own efforts to make sense of the welter of numbers. For example, a high-level congressional staff member said that there are “just so many polls out there.” On reading one, “you think you might have a good idea of what people might be thinking,” but shortly “there’s another one that comes out that could point out a different trend.”

Perhaps most significant for the institutions where foreign policy is hammered out, some respondents said they did not seek out information about public opinion because they believed that it could be a distraction from making effective policy. Several members of the National Security Council staff explained that the current NSC has a policy of not paying attention to polls and is explicitly forbidden from receiving polling data from the Democratic National Committee. As one official put it, “There’s some inhibition in the foreign policy part of the government about studying the domestic opinion. . . . And the polling that gets done for the president . . . is not supposed to inform foreign policy. . . . Memos from the National Security Advisor to the president don’t refer to domestic politics. If you put it in, somebody takes it out, saying, ‘That’s not supposed to be our business.’ . . . The legitimate way it gets discussed is in terms of the Congress, rather than in terms of the public.” Another NSC staff member told a similar story: “There’s a Chinese wall, where there’s a basic policy that the foreign policy apparatus should be immune from political polling . . . on occasions when people have proposed to show us specific polling numbers . . . our basic policy is, ‘We don’t want to see them.’ . . . [The view is] we should not somehow pervert our attempt to gauge what the real interests [are].”

This pattern of giving little attention to polls was also reflected in a recent Pew study that interviewed 81 members of Congress, 98 presidential appointees, and 151 senior civil servants, titled “Washington Leaders Wary of Public Opinion.” Asked, “What is your principal source of information about the way the public feels about issues?” public opinion polls were mentioned by only 24% of the members of Congress, 21% of presidential appointees, and 6% of senior civil servants (Kohut, 1998:28).

*(2) Responding to the Vocal Public As If It Were the Majority*

Consistent with their widespread negative attitudes toward polls, most policy practitioners, especially in Congress, explained that their primary means of getting information about public attitudes is through informal contacts with self-selected and outspoken citizens—the vocal public. A high-level congressional staffer explained how he got his understanding of public opinion:

You get it from constituencies. You get it from public interest groups. You get it from tons of junk that comes in your in-box every day from half the interest groups in the country. You get it from talking to people . . . [who] come in here all the time [and say] they need this, they need that, do this for me, do that for me. So you get a constant feel for this stuff.

This orientation was also reflected in the above-mentioned Pew study: when members of Congress were asked about their “principal source of information about how the public feels,” by far the most frequently mentioned (by 59%) was “personal contacts,” while the second most common (cited by 36%) was “telephone or mail from citizens.”

In the interviews there seemed to be a widespread assumption that the contacts from the vocal public reflect majority thinking better than polls. A former congressional staff member explained that in efforts to understand the public, “polling data doesn’t come up all that much.” Rather, there is an assumption that “links up political pressure with popular beliefs.”

Many characterized the contacts with the vocal public as generally negative in tone, which presumably contributes to the sense that the overall public is negative about whatever international effort the United States may be engaged in. A congressional staff member described how when members of the vocal public call, “They rant and rave about something that they like or don’t like. You hear it loud and clear there.” Another staff member said, “Most of the time, they’re writing in against something. . . . There are very few people that contact your office to thank you for something.”

Respondents stressed that the vocal public tends to express opposition to international engagement much more than support. A former congressional staff member described “a constant . . . stream on anti-engagement things and we got that constantly, be it on the UN, on peacekeeping, on foreign aid.”

Respondents described attitudes among the vocal public that were clearly at odds with majority attitudes expressed in polls. A congressional staff member said that 90% of contacts were negative about forms of international engagement such as the intervention in Somalia. He went on to say that even in the initial stages of the Somalia operation opposition was “overwhelming . . . because there’s no real defined national interest in those situations.” In fact, in the early stages of the Somalia intervention support for the operation was extremely strong.<sup>12</sup>

While some respondents described an active constituency that initiates contacts specifically to denounce international engagement efforts, others

<sup>12</sup> Sixty-six percent of Americans approved of “Bush’s plan to send American military forces to assure the distribution of relief” in a Gallup poll during December 1992. Seventy-five percent of respondents approved of the plan in a Harris poll that same month. A *Los Angeles Times* poll in the middle of January 1993 registered an overwhelming 84% approving (53% strongly) of the president’s decision to send U.S. troops.

implied, quite plausibly, that more contacts were initiated by concern about some other domestic program that the constituent feared would be underfunded. Attacking spending on international efforts was a way to rationalize increasing spending on the domestic program. For example, a congressional staffer said, "Usually people are saying . . . 'Medicare is going bankrupt. Why don't we just cut foreign aid and give all the money to Medicare?'"

When we probed about whether there were some contacts that were supportive of engagement, these were recognized but brushed off as being unrepresentative of the general population with comments like, "Those are just your World-Affairs-Council types." A former congressional staff member said that in contrast to the anti-engagement voices that they took as representative, "There were also university and religious affiliates who wrote on the other side to balance that. That stuff was part of the terrain." However, he went on, "we basically paid no attention to it." What really mattered, he said, were surges of negative calls and letters: "That sent up red flags."

A key question is why the vocal public is so easily regarded as representative of the general public and why this impression is not effectively contradicted by the polls. In some cases it seemed that interviewees got their first impression of public attitudes through informal contacts and this would crystallize for them a certain image of the public. This image became so salient that poll results were viewed as a secondary source of information and were then either integrated into the image or discounted. To "write off" the poll results, it was common to simply regard them as an artifact of the questions' wording. One member of Congress remarked, "The reaction, and I think this is pretty universal to most everybody I've talked to up here, the reaction we get from the folks back home is exactly the opposite of what the polls say. And I don't know why. You know, it's polls. If I ask you a question, I can ask you six different ways and get six different answers. It just matters how I phrase the question."

### Did the Study Affect Policymakers?

There are indications that the study did have some effect on the thinking of policy practitioners. First, of course, are the policy practitioners who participated in the study, especially those who proposed new poll questions and predicted outcomes that were not in fact confirmed by the results. Many reported being surprised by the findings and having "learned a lot" as a result.

The study was then released at an all-day conference that also included commentary by numerous prominent foreign policy analysts in and out of the government as well some prominent journalists. Reports were widely disseminated to the press and to officials in Congress, the State Department, the Defense Department, and the National Security Council.

Overall, the study was well received by the press. A lead editorial in the *New York Times* reported on the findings of the study, saying, "It turns out that Americans crave engagement in the world's crises, but not in the way they are defined by some leaders in Government, academic institutions and the news media. . . . Citizens want the United States to assert its global leadership, but in a more nuanced and coordinated fashion than in the past." Recognizing that this was at odds with the prevailing wisdom, the editorial added, "Americans care more about the world than they are given credit for" (*New York Times*, 1998:sec. 4, p. 10). Three columnists for the *Washington Post*

also devoted full columns to the study, all of them endorsing the findings. The *Chicago Tribune* ran a large front-page spread on the study.

At PIPA we have monitored assertions about the public made by journalists. Since the study was released we observed a decline in characterizations of the public as isolationist, though they have certainly not disappeared.

Perhaps most significant, government officials who make foreign policy have actively sought out information about the study. The State Department requested a briefing for the Deputy Secretary and all Assistant Secretaries and chiefs of staff. The White House requested a briefing for top officials in the National Security Council as well as other officials. The Agency for International Development also requested a briefing for its top officials. Members of the House International Relations Committee were briefed, as were congressional staffers.

Of course, it is difficult to say how much influence these findings have had on policymakers. Those who had firmly held views of the public in the first place are unlikely to change. However, many do not have such highly crystallized views and may in fact be influenced by such input. Indeed, a fair number of policy practitioners stated that they gained new insights from the study, or that the findings confirmed their suspicions that the prevailing wisdom was wrong and emboldened them to express their views (thus breaking what Elizabeth Noelle-Neumann (1984) calls "the spiral of silence").

Obviously, because policymaking is such an overdetermined process, it is impossible to say whether the study had an impact on policy outcomes. Clearly there are many factors that affect policy outcomes over and above policymakers' perceptions of public preferences. However, the fact that policymakers would seek out information that is contrary to the prevailing viewpoint and their own beliefs—in this case by participating in workshops and requesting briefings—suggests that policymakers are at least partially open information gatherers. Thus it does appear that academic research that addresses questions relevant to policymakers can make a meaningful contribution to the process of policymaking by challenging widely held assumptions.

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