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Public Opinion and the Media's Impact in U.S. Foreign Policy

The very basis that the United States was formed on was that the colonists wanted representation and the voices of the country to be heard when making laws or taxes. This influenced the American Revolution to fight for their independence from Great Britain because their voices were not being heard. The primary reason the U.S. fought for its independence was because they believed in no taxation without representation, thus one would believe that in order to maintain this idea, the future government would need to listen to the people. Representation being a founding philosophy and reason to fight for independence, it was crucial to include in The Constitution of the United States, with the first three most influential words being “We The People”, meaning the people of the United States, are defining how they want to be represented. This confirms that the U.S. government was founded to serve the people and listen to their opinions. The fact that public opinion is still present in today's society, and still has just as large of an impact on foreign policy as it did in 1776, proves that the representative democracy it was founded on is still functioning well. The book written by Glynn and colleagues emphasizes that, “The US Declaration of Independence states that governments ‘deriv[e] their just powers from the consent of the governed.’ That assertion implies that if citizens withdraw their consent, the government has no legitimate powers” (5) emphasizing that without public opinion, our very government means nothing and does not exist. The government shapes and derives all of its powers from the constituents, thus this would lead one to believe that the public's opinion on

foreign policy is heard by the government. Due to the fact that the government shapes policies by looking at how public opinions are formed around the issues, it confirms that “opinion changes are important causes of policy change” (Hartley and Russett, 905). It’s important to note that without opinion changes, our government would not know where to go with policies because the people are what shape our government. Despite the general thought that public opinion has no bearing on the government when it comes to foreign policy implementation, I argue that instead, public opinion has a heavy impact on foreign policy in the United States and proves that representative democracy in the United States is still being carried out today.

The fact that foreign policy is influenced by public opinion is true when you see how the government represents the public's voices in their foreign policies. In a study done by Myrick at Stanford, she emphasizes that the democratic citizens hold the leaders accountable when they disapprove or approve of policies and thus help shape the foreign policy (829). Typically when a policy is being introduced to the Congress of the United States, it is because the people have voiced they want a change. This is because the leaders who have public support and know what the people want, and agree with those ideas, are sure they will be reelected if they represent the public through their proposed policies. When the politicians listen to the public opinion, the representative democracy the nation was founded on is being honored, even if it is for a selfish reason such as to get re-elected. Even so, Gravelle and colleagues emphasize that “foreign policy attitudes are important because there is strong evidence for an electoral connection between public opinion and foreign policy” (758). They also emphasize that the posture citizens in the U.S. have that inform their views are ultimately what shape the specific views on foreign policy issues and therefore are the key part. When a crisis emerges, the public will fall towards a similar “posture” on the issue which is ultimately what guides the policies that get suggested (Gravelle

et al, 758). A posture that is current today is the support for Ukraine during their war with Russia, when the media began reporting on it, a lot of American citizens began to fly Ukrainian flags and support the idea “We Stand with Ukraine”. With public opinion being so widely used in the creation of foreign policies, it emphasizes my opinion that the representative democracy the United States was founded on is still prospering and functioning as it should, which is a positive when determining the benefits that public opinion has. A major benefit of the public telling the politicians of their opinions is, what the public wants is now being represented in Congress.

Hartley and Russett discuss that even when there is no majority opinion being presented, we still inherently expect that the U.S. government will pay attention to how the public opinion changes like “when support for future increases in military spending drops... the government should respect this shifting preference.” (906). Ultimately, as U.S. citizens, we do see the government respect the public opinion shifts and accommodate them. This is important because as a society, the U.S. citizens should continue to voice their opinions because it is being heard when discussed at Capitol Hill, and the politicians are representing the opinions of the people in their policies.

The public’s opinion is heard by politicians and they typically will implement it into their policies, especially when it comes to foreign policy because of the representation that gets them re-elected and continues to have public support (Gravelle et al, 757). The fact that the government does ultimately listen to its constituents especially when it comes to foreign policy proves against the general viewpoint that our opinion is moot. In a representative democracy, the voices of the people are most crucial when determining policy, and the U.S. government exemplifies this. With foreign policy thought to “be foreign” to most Americans (Myrick 828), it is generally thought that our opinion matters less, when in reality the government and politicians

listen and utilize the public's opinion on certain foreign policy positions to shape the new policies.

The media also plays a large role in displaying that the public's opinion is seen by the politicians, especially surrounding foreign policy. This proves that the idea that the public is not being heard is largely untrue when looking at the data that is provided by news outlets and polls. The media helps broadcast the opinions that the people have, both the good and the bad, and the politicians use it as a tool to get a consensus surrounding certain foreign affairs issues that could be created into policies. The Chicago Council of Global Affairs did a poll in 2022, at the beginning of the war between Ukraine and Russia, to understand how public opinion was feeling with the aid that was being sent to Ukraine and discovered that "58% of Americans are willing to continue to support the country as long as it takes" (Barton). With these findings, they are emphasizing that because Americans are continuing to display their support for Ukraine, the U.S. government continues to support them, because the U.S. government listens to its constituents and ultimately shapes the policies and actions around what the people want. One can see that following the poll, the U.S. government continued to send aid and support the war on Ukraines side, and installed further sanctions against Russia (Hussein and Baldor). The news article is helping broadcast the public poll done about how the opinions are stacking up to the current actions of the government, and because politicians are able to access this data because of this media outlet, it allows for them to act on it and change policies or actions to better fit what the people want. But the same can be said that policies sometimes do not represent what the people want like during the Vietnam War when American citizens protested against it yet the U.S. government stayed involved. However, primarily the policies do represent the majority opinion of the people. When politicians can easily identify how the public feels by utilizing the media, it

bridges a connection between the public and the politicians at Capitol Hill. This can be seen when Soroka emphasizes that the media plays a significant role in helping the public see the foreign affairs, and thus make a decision and have a stance on the issues to influence foreign policy. He even goes on to say that media has a magnitude of effects on foreign affair issues, which is cohesive with the evidence that suggests public opinion affects foreign policy making (42-43). The media helps to show politicians what the public is thinking, like the Chicago Council article, finding that data and presenting it in the media sphere helps the politicians understand what the public wants. The media helps connect the public opinion to the politicians (Soroka 28) and allows the politicians to make the best choices that represent their constituents. Bremmer, the writer of a Time Magazine highlighting policy with public opinion, says that “for decades American foreign policy has rested on a consensus view” (17), meaning that when the media highlights what the consensus is about a particular foreign affair, a policy typically follows that consensus. With the media helping tie the public opinion to the politician’s policies, it demonstrates that the voices of the people are being heard and represented not just in policy but also in the media, making the general idea that public opinion is useless in today's politics, not true. Public opinion plays a crucial role in foreign policy creation and implementation due to the fact that it is easily accessed through the media by the politicians who can better represent the voices of the people.

Arguably, there are also negatives to the media and social elites within public opinion broadcasting and representation which are important to discuss. Even though the media allows for the politicians to see the public's opinion more clearly, it still can be misguided or inaccurate information swayed by biased sites or social elites within certain communities. Media in particular has a strong negative impact towards public opinion, which was researched in the

paper by Huang and colleagues specifically surrounding China foreign relations. They discuss that social elites, who are typically incumbent politicians or social media influencers, in particular that converse and directly influence the public have a huge effect on public opinion (2), which leads politicians to not take certain policies presented by constituents seriously due to the biased nature of where they are receiving their information. However, it should be noted that when something begins to trend in the media, especially surrounding public opinion, it does increase the likelihood the politicians will see it, which then spurs a movement towards certain policies. So while the impact may be that the public is more easily swayed, which is highlighted also in Kertzer and Zeitoffs paper about public opinion in foreign policies (551) with people being likely to take cues from both peers and social elites, it is important to note that individuals shape their beliefs not entirely around what they are being shown, but also around their own interpretations and knowledge. Even though the media may impact what the people see depending on what networks they watch or papers they read, ultimately, as defined in Kertzer and Zeitoffs paper, “individuals do carry substantively meaningful orientations toward foreign affairs around in their heads” (554) regardless of what they are exposed to. People have an inherent set of beliefs that they typically abide by, and will generally stick to this idea regardless of the influences they are surrounded by. They form their own opinions and ideas and merely feed off of and educate themselves with what it is they read, making the opinions still valuable for the politicians to create policies off of the public opinion being represented. Additionally, the media allows for a large broadcast of the opinions of the citizens, as mentioned when looking at the data that the Chicago Council was able to obtain surrounding the current foreign policy issue of the aid in the war with Ukraine and Russia. Politicians can then continue to base new policies to help with the war with Ukraine and Russia off of what public opinion data is gathered by the

media. Ayowole talks about the positives that the media also brings for foreign policy, citing the fact that the public were the driving cause for counterterrorism efforts, and the social and official elites utilize the media's reporting to respond to it and change the policies (4). The media is able to educate the public about foreign affairs and inform politicians of the public opinion, which inherently will also sway the public opinions due to the nature of journalism, however it should not be seen as a negative which is the common belief. Ultimately, while it may seem that the media has negatives towards public opinion, the overwhelming positives prove that the public's opinion is being used in foreign policy creation as mentioned in Soroka's paper about the connection it bridges between the public and the politician.

The fact that the United States government listens to its citizens and responds by creating policies that resemble the opinions of those citizens is crucial to how the government functions. Without the opinions of the people, there would be no government because they legitimately derive their power from the people (Glynn 5). The common idea that as citizens or even as college students our opinions are moot and have no impact on any policies has been disproven through this paper, and in fact, I argue that our opinions are the foundation of this government and without it, there would be no United States of America. This research paper has provided several instances and examples of how impactful the opinions of the people are in regards to foreign policy in several different instances. The opinions of the people, especially when it comes to foreign affairs, are critical in the government and creation of policies regarding foreign policy because of the history the U.S. has with foreign affairs. The public should never shy from explaining their opinion to their politicians, participating in polls, and being a part of groups that help voice their opinions so that the government is accurately representing all voices in the foreign policy affairs. One can see how effective this has been with the war in Ukraine and

Russia, and how some of the citizens of the U.S. are in support of the defending of Ukraine's sovereignty and our government mirrors that with the aid and weapons being sent. The same can be said for a majority of foreign affairs. If the people stop voicing their opinions the government will begin to fail. So in the instance of the argument that the voice of the people does not matter when it relates to foreign policy, it is my opinion that has been backed by several scholarly articles and papers that the voice of the people is the most crucial part of the creation of foreign policies. The continuation of the people voicing their opinions will continue to shape the foreign policies that represent the United States, and are of critical importance to the government. Based on the research presented in this paper and of my analysis of the information, my argument that public opinion has a heavy impact on foreign policy, has been defended and I believe no citizen in the United States should shy away from expressing their opinion to help shape the policies. It is the very core of the United States government to hear from its constituents and represent it in the policies, especially regarding foreign policy.

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