DOES PUBLIC OPINION AFFECT FOREIGN POLICY DECISION-MAKING?

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ABSTRACT

Under the influence of traditional theory, the discipline of International Relations has, for most of its history, paid little attention to societal factors when it comes to explaining international politics. Recognising the need for more multi-causal explanations, the field of Foreign Policy Analysis has attempted to introduce sub-state actors and individual-level variables. Research on public opinion's impact on foreign policy has progressively increased over the past several decades, with findings suggesting that there is a significant correlation between the two. This paper aims to address some of the absolutist claims made regarding the nature of public opinion, before attempting to establish its links to foreign policy decision-making in various historical and contemporary settings. While this influence is evidently significant, it should be ultimately viewed as one of many variables in our attempt to analyse policy and politics.

Keywords: *foreign policy, public opinion, pluralist model, elite model, democracies, war, Foreign Policy Analysis, International Relations*

INTRODUCTION

In democracies, the public is generally expected to wield significant influence on all levels of statecraft and elected leaders are expected to be held accountable for their actions. Under the influence of systemic theories such as Realism, the discipline of International Relations has, for most of its history, paid little attention to societal factors when it comes to explaining international politics. The phrase 'politics stops at the water's edge' has been used to describe the marginal impact of domestic society on foreign policy decision-making and the withdrawal of political competition in favour of the national interest.

Such claims are too reductionist to capture the complexity of the social world. Recognising the need for more multi-causal explanations, the field of Foreign Policy Analysis has attempted to introduce sub-state and individual-level factors as variables. Research on public opinion's impact on foreign policy has progressively increased over the past several decades and it has yielded findings that suggest a significant correlation between the two. While public opinion may not be the sole driving factor in foreign affairs, it is a consistently influential variable affecting foreign policy. Moreover, its influence is especially visible in times of crisis and conflict, particularly (although not exclusively) in democracies. This paper aims to address some of the absolutist claims made regarding the nature of public opinion, before attempting to establish its links to foreign policy decision-making in various historical and contemporary settings.

PLURALIST AND ELITE MODELS

The lack of consensus on the issue is marked by the debate between two opposing perspectives. The pluralist model argues that power is spread across society, that no single group is dominant and that the public can impose significant restraints upon its leaders, while the elite model suggests that power is concentrated in the hands of a few elite groups which manipulate and control public opinion and mobilise public support for their policies (Robinson, 2016:187). The latter approach has been embraced by Realism, the traditionally dominant IR theory, which claims that sub-state actors are ultimately irrelevant in international politics and subservient to the state, the only important international actor (Foyle, 1997:142; Robinson, 2016:198-199). Critical IR theories, aiming to highlight the inequalities of global politics, agree that the public is dominated and manipulated by elites (Robinson, 2016:201).

On the other hand, Liberalism, which holds a less pessimistic view of the world, places domestic society in a more influential role, acting as a restraining factor against the more war-prone policies of elected leaders. This view is a key component of the democratic peace theory, which posits that democracies are unlikely to wage war against one another (Holsti, 1992: 440; Foyle, 1997: 142; Robinson, 2016: 199-201). Realism's traditional arguments have not remained static under the pressure from its critics, and some of its absolutist claims have been challenged, even from within. A newer strand of realist thought, labelled Neoclassical Realism, has sought to include domestic and individual-level factors in its analysis of state behaviour, which marks a stark departure from the past (Brown, 2019: 42; Schmidt, 2004: 429-430).

The elite model features a particular oxymoron. Arguing that elites aspire to control and manipulate the public in order to mobilise support for their policies presupposes that public opinion has an inherent significance and that control is important for policy success while leaving it unchecked might prove problematic. If public opinion were entirely irrelevant in foreign affairs, it would make no sense to dedicate effort and resources to manipulating it and the elite should be largely free to ignore it. Yet, there is extensive research on the resources employed to raise support from the public. The US government has spent billions of dollars on organised persuasive communication in recent years. Prior to the invasion of Iraq, the Bush administration presented controversial intelligence in order to convince its allies, the United Nations Security Council and public opinion that Saddam Hussein was in possession of Weapons of Mass Destruction (Robinson, 2016:203). In a similar vein, aid from exile communities, namely Iraqis and Cubans, was enlisted in order to market the invasion of Iraq and the embargo policies against Cuba, respectively (Vanderbush, 2009). It is worth noting that Cuban Americans are not only an influential interest group, but also an important voting bloc in the key state of Florida that both Democrats and Republicans have to court in elections – and US-Cuba relations are an important issue to them.

The pluralist model was challenged by critics (the "Almond-Lippmann consensus") arguing that public opinion is too ill-informed, disinterested and inconsistent to be an influential source of foreign policy (Alden and Aran, 2012: 72; Holsti, 1992: 439; Robinson, 2016: 188). Influential studies, particularly in the US after the Vietnam War (the work of political science Professors Robert Shapiro and Benjamin Page is widely referenced), came to the opposite conclusion that public opinion on foreign policy is as stable as on domestic issues, coherent and event-driven – with reasonable patterns of decreasing public support when war casualties occur (Eichenberg, 2016; Foyle, 1997: 142; Alden and Aran, 2012: 72; Holsti, 1992: 446-448). Moreover, researchers have shed further light on how the public approaches and engages with foreign policy issues. While foreign affairs are generally complex and require much information and knowledge, people often employ their personal values and ideologies as filters that allow them to form coherent and stable opinions (Rathbun et al., 2016; Eichenberg, 2016: 11-12; Holsti, 1992: 450). Access to basic information and news has also become easier over the last few decades. Matthew Baum (2002), in his study of soft news, argued that the selective and highly sensationalist framing of political matters by American soft news media has significantly exposed the inattentive public to prominent foreign policy issues as a by-product of entertainment seeking.

The aforementioned misconceptions and contradictions have obscured the phenomenon of public opinion and have reduced the ongoing debate to mostly absolute and reductionist terms. Having rejected the view that public opinion is a "non-entity" in foreign affairs, this paper attempts to examine whether it wields substantial influence. After exploring a large number of historical and contemporary cases, the available literature indeed suggests that the public has, on numerous occasions, impacted leaders' decision-making.

US FOREIGN POLICY CASES

The United States' status as an interventionist superpower is reflected on the rich literature that can be found regarding the public's views and impact on foreign policy. Certain patterns that emerge concern interactions between war support and casualties, as well as polarisation between interventionism and isolationism. Systematic studies of public opinion that were carried out during the Cold War found that in the majority of cases, foreign policy outcomes corresponded to public preferences (Holsti, 1992: 452-453). The Vietnam War has been regarded as a watershed in this regard. Labelled America's first televised war, it was deemed by many to have been lost due to the exposure of atrocities, which significantly boosted the anti-war sentiment (Robinson, 2016:189-191). As the casualties mounted, public support for the war dropped, inflicting significant political damage to President Lyndon Johnson. Opposition to the war in the US Senate was partly attributed to public opinion (Burstein and Freudenburg, 1978). More recently, during the first Gulf War, Saddam Hussein hinged his entire strategy on the expectation that the US would be forced to withdraw under public pressure if he managed to inflict "10,000 casualties" (Pape, 1996: 252; Hallion, 1992: 142). In Kosovo, the Clinton administration was limited by the perception that public support could be lost if casualties were to occur and opted to wage an air war against Serbia, consistently discounting the possibility of a ground invasion (Robinson, 2016:189; Lake, 2009:91-92). Following the 2003 Iraq invasion, former Bush administration officials publicly spoke about how the White House marketed the war in order to mobilise public support (Vanderbush, 2009:290).

The intersection between economic and foreign policy is another angle that can offer insight into the effects of public opinion. Shifts in the American economy during the 1960s led to a regional struggle over national priorities.The "manufacturing belt" in the Northeast (now called the "rust belt") suffered from economic stagnation, migration of jobs to the "sun belt", low growth rates, the decline in competitiveness and in industrial goods' sales (Trubowitz, 1992). By attributing those shifts to the expansion of American firms overseas, the rise of other markets, such as Europe and Japan, and the increased mobility of capital, protectionist and isolationist policies became more attractive for the electorates of the manufacturing belt. Trubowitz's analysis is particularly relevant after Donald Trump's victory in 2016. Trump unexpectedly defeated Hillary Clinton in the traditionally Democrat rust belt states of Michigan, Wisconsin and Pennsylvania. His success in those states has been partly attributed to his anti-globalist rhetoric of economic nationalism and his vocal opposition to international trade agreements (while the Clintons were seen as traditional proponents of free trade), such as the Trans-Pacific Partnership and NAFTA (Skonieczny, 2018; LSE US Centre, 2016).

BRITISH AND EUROPEAN FOREIGN POLICY CASES

Relevant research has not been as extensive outside the US and the West in general. British foreign policy has also been widely studied, mainly due to its imperial legacy and the joint military operations with the US – with similar patterns emerging. Paul Dixon (2000) argued that British public opinion, especially military families, placed significant restraints on the country's international interventions and pacifying missions. The experience of Palestine-Israel, as well as the American experience in Vietnam, acted as precedents, which British policymakers took into serious consideration, going into great lengths to manipulate public opinion in future conflicts (Dixon, 2000: 99-100). In Palestine, the British forces were forced to withdraw under public pressure, following deadly attacks carried out by Jewish groups against British soldiers (Dixon, 2000: 99). During the Falklands campaign, the British government censored television coverage for fear of the effects on military personnel, their families and public opinion (Dixon, 2000: 107-108). In Northern Ireland, the intervention against IRA militants (who hoped that enough British casualties would trigger the same outcome as in Palestine) was

only sustained because of the considerable support from the local population, which identified with Britain, despite the formidable public pressure for withdrawal (Dixon, 2000: 99-100). The fear of soldier casualties was also prevalent during the military intervention in former Yugoslavia, as the British government was initially reluctant in its involvement (Dixon, 2000: 100). More recently, following the experience of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, the British Parliament voted against military action in Syria, with Prime Minister Cameron acknowledging that the vote reflected the views of the people (YouGov, 2013). Other NATO members exhibited similar concerns in recent cases of international intervention. Fears of casualties and long-term ground forces' commitment led NATO to wage solely air campaigns in Kosovo and Libya (Dixon, 2000: 121; Anrig, 2014: 15; Etzioni, 2012: 46-47). The influence of military families in particular can be seen in multiple settings, especially in countries with mandatory conscription – in Europe and elsewhere (Dixon, 2000: 118).

LEADERS AND DEMOCRATIC ACCOUNTABILITY

By referencing those cases, the purpose, as has been stated above, is not to establish public opinion as the undisputed driving factor in foreign policy decision-making, but rather as a significant variable among others. While public opinion has been evidently influential in many settings, not all leaders react to it in the same manner. Douglas Foyle (1997) argued that the ways in which decision-makers perceive and react to public opinion depend on their personal views on whether it is desirable to accept input from the public and whether it is necessary in order for policies to be successful. Therefore, leaders' beliefs on public opinion can be another significant variable affecting foreign policy outcomes. Foyle's argument is logical and well-argued. Indeed, there have been many cases where leaders chose to ignore public opinion in their foreign policy decision-making. However, the concept of democratic accountability places restraints on elected leaders who ignore or dissatisfy their constituents.

The impact of public opinion may not be as direct in this case, but it can still be significant. Decision-makers who do not take public opinion into consideration risk being removed from power and replaced with others who can reverse their unpopular policies. Furthermore, democratic leaders may not often have the capacity to ignore public opinion based on their beliefs, as they may face institutional constraints, such as approval by legislative bodies (declarations of war, military funding etc.), which are generally more receptive to constituents' opinions than the executive branch (Tomz and Weeks, 2013: 850).

The 2003 war in Iraq is an indicative case exhibiting the consequences of ignoring public opinion. As the war became increasingly unpopular during George Bush's second term, Barack Obama benefited greatly from the general distaste for it and from the unpopularity of the President and his party – and went on to preside over a supermajority in 2008 (Jacobson, 2010). Donald Trump became the second consecutive President (claiming) to have opposed the Iraq War, arguing that it was ultimately a waste of resources (Edwards, 2018: 189). Incidentally, both Obama and Trump faced and defeated Hillary Clinton, who had voted in favour of the war. In the UK, Tony Blair, one of the most popular post-war Prime Ministers during his first term, had become one of the most unpopular ones by the end of his third term (Denver and Garnett, 2012:59-60). While not the sole cause, the unpopularity of the war in Iraq is widely viewed as the main reason for his tarnished political legacy and as a significant factor for the breakup of the New Labour coalition (BBC, 2016; Heffernan, 2011). The Labour Party has not won a general election since 2005.

A recent example of democratic accountability that does not relate to a war or a major crisis can be seen in the 2019 elections in Greece. After settling the Macedonia naming dispute with Greece's northern neighbour (now renamed North Macedonia) in early 2019, the leftist SYRIZA government was defeated in two consecutive elections for the Greek and European Parliaments. The agreement between the two countries was

unpopular among the Greek public and is widely considered one of the factors that led SYRIZA to electoral defeat (Reuters, 2019; The Guardian, 2019; Lorencka and Leonidi, 2019: 18; Chryssogelos and Stavrevska, 2019: 439). The negative reaction was triggered by the perception that the government's concessions offended Greek national heritage, which was seen as being appropriated by the neighbouring nation.

AUTHORITARIAN REGIMES

As noted above, the topic has received less attention outside Europe and the US. While this paper's conclusions may not be as surprising with regard to democratic countries, establishing links between public opinion and foreign policy in authoritarian states would strengthen and solidify the overall argument even further. Despite the lack of democratic institutions, recent studies have suggested that there are no public opinion vacuums in authoritarian countries, whereas interdependence and accountability exist between the elite and a core part of the population that is needed for the legitimacy and survival of a regime (Alden and Aran, 2012: 15-16). In that context, authoritarian leaders often make use of foreign policy narratives with strong nationalist undertones in order to mobilise public support, provoke sentiments of patriotism and unity, curb dissent, depict national security threats and generate polarising "rally around the flag" effects (Alden and Aran, 2012: 16-17). Studies on China have observed increased patterns of regime sensitivity towards public opinion, as well as rising nationalist fervour, exhibited by inciting aggression in the East China Sea with the support of the public (Alden and Aran, 2012: 16-17; Bell and Quek, 2018: 232). Similar practices have been observed in other regions, promoting greater narratives (pan-Arabism, pan-Africanism etc.) of common culture and heritage (Alden and Aran, 2012:17).

CONCLUSION

References to historical cases may have been long, but empirical evidence provides reliable strength to

the paper's argument and establishes safe correlations regarding public opinion's impact. Research findings on authoritarian regimes further strengthen this argument, highlighting that the public is not a potent entity only within democratic regimes, but a vital political element pervading the fabric of all societies. While the influence of public opinion on foreign policy decision-making is significant, it is only one of many variables that foreign policy analysts have to consider in their attempt to explain international politics and provide meaningful contributions to a more robust discipline.

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