



Public Opinion on Foreign Policy: The Multilateral Public that Perceives Itself as Unilateral

Alexander Todorov, Department of Psychology and the Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs, Princeton University and Anesu N. Mandisodza, Department of Psychology, Princeton University

Do Americans favor unilateral or multilateral foreign policies? And do Americans know their own foreign policy preferences? In the aftermath of the U.S.-led war on Iraq—executed without the backing of the United Nations—questions arise as to whether the unilateralist policies of the current Administration accurately reflect the public's preferences.

Alexander Todorov, assistant professor of psychology and public affairs at Princeton University's Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs, and Anesu N. Mandisodza, research assistant in the department of psychology at Princeton University, have addressed two important, interrelated questions about U.S. foreign policy and public opinion in a new paper, "Public Opinion on Foreign Policy: The Multilateral Public that Perceives Itself as Unilateral." These two important questions are: do Americans misperceive public opinion on U.S. foreign policy? And do such misperceptions result in increased support for policies that are actually endorsed by the minority of Americans?

Studying misperceptions of public opinion is very important because such misperceptions have implications for both an individual's attitudes and behaviors, as well as policymakers' decisions. For example, previous studies have shown that people can change their attitudes and behaviors in the direction of misperceived social norms. In the case of foreign policy attitudes in America, people who misperceive the public opinion as preferring unilateral views could be more likely to support specific unilateral policies than people who correctly perceive the public opinion as preferring multilateral views. Furthermore, policymakers could base important policy decisions on perceived public opinion rather than on actual public opinion.

Study Description

Todorov and Mandisodza conducted a nationally representative survey of persons 18 years or older in telephone households across the U.S. In the current study, a total of 1,539 people were contacted. The

survey completion rate was 68% giving a final sample size of 1,044 people. All respondents were asked to report their own opinion on a number of questions related to foreign policy. In addition, a subset of respondents was asked to estimate the percentage of Americans who agreed or disagreed with the positions expressed in these questions. The survey was conducted between February 14 and February 24, 2003, a few weeks before the beginning of the war with Iraq.

Study Findings

The authors found that only 16% of Americans agreed that in solving international problems "the US should continue to be the preeminent world leader," while more than two-thirds of Americans (71%) agreed that "the US should do its fair share." Another 13% agreed "the US should withdraw from most efforts to solve international problems." In contrast to the actual public opinion, Americans estimated that 35% of other Americans believed that "the US should continue to be the preeminent world leader" and that only 45% believed that "the US should do its fair share." Similarly, while only 23% of Americans believed that the more important lesson of September 11 is that the US needs to act on its own to fight terrorism rather than to work with other countries, Americans estimated that about 49% of other Americans endorsed this view. Thus, as in

Agreement with a Presidential Decision to Invade Iraq Without the Approval of the UN Security Council as a Function of Respondents' Attitudes and Beliefs that the Foreign Policy Reflects the Opinions of the American Public.

Attitude	Administration's foreign policy is representative		
	A great deal	Somewhat	Not very much
Unilateral			
I would agree with the President's decision	76.3% (78.6)	43.7% (45.7)	27.4% (23.7)
I would disagree, but I would still support the President	17.8% (18.5)	35.9% (37.9)	21.9% (23.7)
I would disagree with the President's decision	5.9% (2.9)	20.4% (16.4)	50.7% (52.6)
N	173	269	76
Multilateral			
I would agree with the President's decision	46.6% (43.4)	18.4% (16.6)	2.7% (4.4)
I would disagree, but I would still support the President	34.2% (38.2)	48.3% (47.8)	15.7% (14.3)
I would disagree with the President's decision	19.2% (18.4)	33.3% (35.6)	81.6% (81.3)
N	76	253	182

Note. The percentages are weighted to reflect population estimates. The raw sample percentages are presented in parenthesis

previous representative surveys, Americans show a strong preference for multilateral policies. At the same time, Americans underestimate public support for such policies and overestimate support for unilateral policies.

These misperceptions of public opinion were especially pronounced for those who held unilateral foreign policy views, i.e. the minority of Americans. In fact, this group perceived itself as the actual majority, substantially overestimating public support for its unilateralist views. For example, the 16% of Americans who believed that in solving international problems "the US should continue to be the preeminent world leader" estimated that about 54% of Americans shared their view. In contrast, while the majority did perceive itself as the majority, it consistently underestimated public support for its multilateralist views. For example, the 71% of Americans who believed that "the US should do its fair share" estimated that 49% of Americans shared their view. That is, the minority estimate of its own group size was larger than the majority estimate of its own size, even though the minority group was more than 4 times smaller than the majority group.

Notably, not only did respondents misperceive public opinion, but also these misperceptions affected their support for specific policies. For example, relative to respondents who correctly perceived the unilateral view as the minority view, Americans who falsely perceived this view as the majority view were almost twice more likely to support a presidential decision to invade Iraq without the support of the U.N. Security Council.

Misperceptions of Public Opinion and the Idea of Legitimacy

Todorov and Mandisodza found that misperceptions of public opinion were also associated with the belief in the legitimacy of the current foreign policy, namely the belief that it reflects the opinions of the American people. Respondents who falsely perceived the unilateral view as the majority view believed that the current foreign policy is more representative of public opinion than respondents who correctly perceived the unilateral views as the minority view. The idea of legitimacy is extremely important because if people believe in the legitimacy of specific policies they will support those policies, even if these policies are inconsistent with their attitudes. In other words, people are willing to accept outcomes and policies that do not favor them to the extent that they perceive these outcomes and policies as legitimate.

In fact, the belief in the legitimacy of the foreign policy was as strong a predictor of support for specific unilateral policies as respondents' attitudes. Both respondents with unilateral and multilateral attitudes were more likely to support an invasion of Iraq, and the shift in the defense strategy of the US from deterrence to preemptive action, to the extent that they believed that

the foreign policy of the administration reflects the opinions of the American public. For example, respondents who believed that the foreign policy of the administration reflects public opinion were over three times more likely to support a presidential decision to invade Iraq without the support of the U.N. Security Council at the end of February 2003, than respondents who believed that this policy reflects the public "somewhat" (see table). And the latter respondents were over six times more likely to support this decision than respondents who did not think that this policy reflects the American public. For comparison, respondents with unilateral attitudes were over three times more likely to support the decision to invade Iraq than respondents with multilateral attitudes.

Policy Implications

Public opinion is an important input to policy decisions. However, there might be wide differences between actual and perceived public opinion, and policymakers could react to *perceived* rather than to actual public opinion. In the case of foreign policy attitudes, perceived public opinion serves a unilateralist agenda. A vocal minority that favors a unilateralist American foreign policy - represented by the actions of major political actors and extensively covered in the media - could easily feed into misperceptions of public opinion, misperceptions that could lead to support for specific unilateral policies. Policymakers who pursue a multilateralist agenda could prevent this circle of misperception by disseminating information about actual public opinion and highlighting its differences with perceived public opinion.

Individual attitudes predict support for specific foreign policies and this is not surprising. What is remarkable is that the belief in the correspondence between policy and public preferences is as strong, if not stronger, a predictor of support for such policies. Moreover, this is the case for both people whose attitudes favor these policies and people whose attitudes do not favor these policies. Thus, rather than attempting to change people's attitudes, policymakers who are against specific policies might be more successful if they attempt to show the discrepancy between the agenda underlying the policy and public preferences.

A copy of the policy brief can be found at:
http://www.wws.princeton.edu/~policybriefs/todorov_opinion.pdf

The website for the Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs:
<http://www.wws.princeton.edu>

For a copy of the complete paper or media inquiries, please contact Steven Barnes, (Ph.) 609.731.5094, email: sbarnes@princeton.edu