

# **“How News Media Influences Foreign Policy Through Public Opinion”**

**Helms School of Government Conference (HSOG) 2022 Conference**  
March 24-26, 2022

*Presented By:*

**ATINUKE ELIZABETH AYOWOLE**

**Ph.D. Student in Political Science, Southern Illinois University Carbondale.**

### **Abstract**

The relationship between the media and the government of any country is mostly interconnected and has progressed from what it used to be several years ago. Typically, political leaders use media to communicate the promised benefits of their policies to the public, in addition to other intentions. The public consequently receives information about foreign policy updates from the news media which forms their opinions with respect to foreign policy. In the occurrence of war initiatives abroad, the president's actions represent all of America's, implying, albeit indirectly, that the president's military initiatives abroad must be largely supported domestically. This literature reviews scholarships that argue for a strong relationship between public opinion and a president's foreign policy choices in a democratic military decision making. This paper also explains that news media plays a conveying, yet strategic role in informing public opinion enough to potentially influence foreign policy decisions.

Keywords: *democratic military, public opinion, foreign policy, news media*

The fainting line between domestic and foreign affairs makes it expected that people would now largely hold strong views about foreign policy rather than previous indifference. This is because issues such as migration, human rights violation, climate change, and free trade, now also have a direct impact on job prospects, air quality in neighborhoods, etc. It should therefore appear that these changes would imply that masses now expect that governments should (and will) take their opinions earnestly, including on foreign policy<sup>1</sup>. But these expectations of the government do not go without skepticism. For example, in the past twelve months, trust in governments has sharply declined<sup>2</sup>, and in any democracy, this decline in public support should be a source of concern. Currently, there is a growing body of research on the relationship between foreign policy [process and outcome] and public opinion. Typically, political leaders use media to communicate the promised benefits of their policy proposals to the public and to convey the perceived drawbacks of their political enemies' proposals. However, in the occurrence of military initiatives abroad, the president's actions represent all of America's; making the case for a relationship between public support and a president's foreign policy choices, and more so, how the public perceives these decisions through the media. This breathes a set of questions: is the news media an accurate source of information about American foreign affairs? More so, can public opinion be trusted as coming from highly informed considerations? If yes, why should these opinions be integrated into strategic decisions in foreign policy? This study reviews the literature on the relationship between public opinion and foreign policy and how news media affects that relationship. This literature also reviews foreign policy attitudes as an indicator for the mass public's foreign policy preferences, and moderately addresses the possibility of bias in the way news media conveys the intentions of policymakers in the way the policymakers expect. This study does not attempt to explain foreign policy outcomes but instead seeks to explore multifaceted relationships between the actors in public opinion and foreign policy outcomes.

### **Components of the Foreign Policy Marketplace**

In the foreign policy arena of a democracy, citizens and news media are two equally important and indispensable actors. This literature consistently discusses the interdependent relationship of these actors alongside a third actor: elites/leaders.

**Citizens:** The word 'citizens' is also commonly used interchangeably as masses, the people, or the public. In the early works of Kant, Rousseau, Mill, and more recently in studies on democratic peace, and from contemporary democratic theorists,<sup>3</sup> citizen engagement is considered as important to peaceful and thorough foreign policymaking process. Consequently, the government's responsiveness to the public is depicted as a cornerstone of democratic governance.<sup>4</sup> In contrast, federalists like James Madison and Alexander Hamilton were wary of the impact of public's opinion on constructive political decision making, particularly in foreign policy. Whether or not the public's engagement is or should be relevant to foreign policy discussions, there is a mutual denominator among both sides which entails that the public is an

---

<sup>1</sup> Zerka, Pawel "Why Should Anyone Care? Foreign Policy and Public Opinion." *European Council on Foreign Relations*, April 19, 2021. <https://ecfr.eu/article/why-should-anyone-care-foreign-policy-and-public-opinion/>.

<sup>2</sup> Edelman. "2021 Edelman Trust Barometer." Edelman, <https://www.edelman.com/trust/2021-trust-barometer>.

<sup>3</sup> Habermas, Jürgen. *Between Facts and Norms: Contributions to a Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996.

<sup>4</sup> Zerka, Pawel "Why Should Anyone Care? Foreign Policy and Public Opinion." *European Council on Foreign Relations*, April 19, 2021. <https://ecfr.eu/article/why-should-anyone-care-foreign-policy-and-public-opinion/>.

important factor in foreign policy. In (Page and Boutton 2006)<sup>5</sup>, they corroborated this hypothesis by characterizing public opinion as a “relatively stable and consistent counterweight” that policy makers must, or at least should, take into consideration. Nevertheless, there has not been a consistent and uniform literature review of the citizens’ actual role in the foreign policymaking process of a democratic country.

**Media:** For the purposes of this study, media (news media and mass media) is considered a critical actor and player alongside elites and citizens in shaping public behaviors about, and influence on, foreign policy.

**Elites/leaders:** In the discussion on foreign policy in political communication, elites are often described and used interchangeably as the political leaders such as the president, the president’s cabinet, members of Congress, and other influential leaders in the U.S. to the foreign policy debates at any given time. In a democratic government, elites are both elected and appointed (depending on the nature of pontification) to carry out the preferences of the majority public. The elites are consequently accountable to the masses for their policies and its effectiveness thereof. More often, the system of accountability from the elites to the masses is through information from the news media as it shapes public opinion about foreign policy – in a large way. This creates another relationship of dependency between the media and the elites as the elites are also wary of the degree to which news media conveys their (elites) intentions and information to the public. For example, in 2003, the Bush administration and members of Congress complained that media bias was turning public opinion against the administration’s foreign policy on war following the invasion of Iraq during the Persian Gulf War. Thus, buttressing (Brody and Shapiro 1989) that the extent of public support for a president’s foreign policy is dependent on the mix of elite rhetoric about the president’s foreign policy for which citizens are exposed<sup>6</sup>.

#### **Understanding Public opinion: Political Attitudes**

In foreign policy matters, citizens come to hold opinions on, and become more responsive to, what information is made available to them from political elites. Public opinion is the primary driver behind the extensive and excessive counterterrorism efforts undertaken since 9/11, and officials and elites are more nearly responding to public fear than creating it. The logic that “fear sells” according to James Risen – an American foreign policy journalist – does not necessarily mean that the fear would find a receptive audience. However, some political writings suggests that fear is likely to be serviced by news media than countered if the fear of terrorism persists among the public. Yet, he admits that the public is not as manipulable on salient issues<sup>7</sup>.

Political attitudes of the masses are an important factor in understanding public opinion. What are attitudes and how do political attitudes affect public opinions on political inquiries? Attitudes in this context refers to “an organized and consistent manner of thinking, feeling, and reacting with regard to an event in one’s environment.” Therefore, during political inquiries, attitudes are viewed as either existing, non-existent, or existing but easily manipulated. This is because people’s thoughts about politics are generally disorganized,

---

<sup>5</sup> Page Benjamin, and Marshall Bouton. *The Foreign Policy Disconnect: What Americans Want from Our Leaders but Don't Get*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006.

<sup>6</sup> Brody, Richard, and Catherine Shapiro. "Policy Failure and Public Support: The Iran-Contra Affair and Public Assessment of President Reagan." *Political Behavior*, 11, no. 4 (December 1989): 353-69.

<sup>7</sup> Mueller, John. "Public Opinion on War and Terror: Manipulated or Manipulating?" *Cato Institute*, August 17, 2021. <https://www.cato.org/white-paper/public-opinion-war-terror>.

inconsistent, ambivalent, and/or ignorant.<sup>8</sup> Early works on public opinion and its nature of volatility and lack of coherent structure support these findings. They associate how the public forms understanding of complex and distant events such as foreign policy initiatives with news stereotypes – now commonly called frames of reference. They identify many of these news stereotypes as being values that emerge from permanent characteristics of culture, such as election cycles.<sup>9</sup><sup>10</sup> Public opinion analysts are well abreast of the ideological inconsistencies in citizen's responses to different issues.<sup>11</sup> In trying to measure public opinion on a myriad of issues, they have consistently found that majority of the public have many different attitudes to both the same issues and to different issues. For example, at the most intense period in the Gulf War, public opinion vacillated greatly across the different questions used by different polling organizations trying to measure the same attitude. Depending on how questions are framed, support for a difficult issue can be as low as 40 percent to 50 percent or as go as high as 80 percent.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, sampling problems such as selection biases and representativeness are important factors to consider when measuring credibility of public opinion. The resultant effect of surveying uninformed masses on their opinions of topics they have limited information, or little to no previous thoughts are rough and superficial statements. In Zaller (1992), he employed four axioms for modelling the relationship between information flow (news) and attitude changes on the public and discussed the implications of his findings from public's statements/opinion on political preferences.

Axiom 1: Reception Axiom: *"The greater a person's level of cognitive engagement with an issue, the more likely he or she is to be exposed to and comprehend or receive political messages concerning that issue."*<sup>13</sup>

Axiom 2: Resistance Axiom: *"People tend to resist arguments that are inconsistent with their political predispositions, but they do so only to the extent that they possess the contextual information necessary to perceive a relationship between the message and their predispositions."*<sup>14</sup>

Axiom 3: Accessibility Axiom: *"The more recently a consideration has been called to mind or thought about, the less time it takes to retrieve that consideration or related considerations from memory and bring them to the top of the head for use."*<sup>15</sup>

Axiom 4: Response Axiom: *"Individuals answer survey questions by averaging across the considerations that are immediately salient or accessible to them."*<sup>16</sup>

The vacillating nature of reports on people's political attitudes over time constitutes a major source of concern for the empirical findings of modern survey research. If people are exposed to a shifting balance between conservative and liberal news communications, the balance of judgments or considerations in their mind consequently changes, bringing about systematic attitude changes in their survey reports. On the other hand, if people are exposed to a steady flow of news communications, the ambivalence in considerations for each given issue on each person's

---

<sup>8</sup> Grant, Tobin. 2021. "Does Public Opinion Matter?" Lecture delivered at the Introduction to American Politics Class, October 23, 2021.

<sup>9</sup> Lippman, Walter, and Wertz, Charles. *A Test of the News*. New York: New Republic, 1920.

<sup>10</sup> Almond, Gabriel, *The American People and Foreign Policy*. New York: Harcourt Brace, 1950.

<sup>11</sup> Converse, Phillip. *The Nature of Belief Systems in Mass Publics*. New York: Free Press, 1964.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Zaller, John 1992. *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

mind will, on average, remain roughly consistent at any point in time. Possibly, the Response Axiom (Axiom 4) provides the most explanation for this instability.

Another problem in trusting the authenticity of public opinion is a concept called “response effects.” unrelated to the response axiom, Response Effects “refers to cases in which seemingly irrelevant features of questionnaire design affect the responses given.”<sup>1718</sup> This explains that many respondents make up their responses on the survey as they confront each question. The Accessibility Axiom (Axiom 3) may well explain this pattern as it implies that the more recently a consideration or an idea has been called to mind, the more readily available it is for use in answering questions. Nevertheless, not all people are affected by this effect. It is found that unaffected people have judgments and considerations that are highly consistent in their support of a side of an issue that the reception of additional considerations barely influences them.

Furthermore, the effects of “priming” on a sample population can affect political significance of public opinion. Priming is described as a different but equally consequential version of agenda setting, whereby media attends to some problems and ignores others.<sup>19</sup> The public takes their political information from the mass media (especially television programs), thus giving them the insidious power to control what people think about. Experimental evidence shows that news organizations have the capability to alter the public’s standard of evaluating presidents through priming. If candidates for a particular political office are not taken seriously by news organizations, they are most likely not going to be taken seriously by the public, leaving some presidential candidates more advantaged than the others.<sup>20</sup> Similarly, people’s evaluation of a president will significantly affect their attitudes on – defense spending, for example – if they have just watched a broadcast on defense spending than if they have not.<sup>21 2223</sup> With priming, media therefore alters the standards by which people evaluate a president’s general performance in government, and this alteration is more possible among less-informed people (novices) than it is among well-informed people (experts).<sup>24</sup> Like the Accessibility Axiom 3, novices tend to be overwhelmed with the imbibement of large amounts of new information while well-informed citizens on politics can examine information more deeply and critically because their knowledge of national problems is denser and better organized.

The nature of political attitude reports makes measuring public opinion in any way difficult to defend as a neutral process. Nonetheless, the filtering procedures in sampling representation

---

<sup>17</sup> Schuman, Howard, and Presser Stanley. 1981. "The Attitude-Action Connection and the Issue of Gun Control." *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 455 (1981): 40-47.

<sup>18</sup> Tourangeau, Roger, and Rasinski Kenneth. "Cognitive Processes Underlying Context Effects in Attitude Measurement." *Psychological bulletin*, 103, no. 3 (May 1988): 299.

<sup>19</sup> Iyengar, Shanto, Donald Kinder, Mark Peters, and Jon Krosnick. "The Evening News and Presidential Evaluations." *Journal of personality and social psychology*, 46, no. 4 (April 1984):778.

<sup>20</sup> Iyengar, Shanto, Mark Peters, and Donald Kinder. 1982. "Experimental Demonstrations of the “Not-So-Minimal” Consequences of Television News Programs." *American political science review*, 76, no. 4 (December 1982): 848-58.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Iyengar, Shanto, Donald Kinder, Mark Peters, and John Krosnick, "The Evening News and Presidential Evaluations." *Journal of personality and social psychology*, 46, no. 4 (April 1984): 778.

<sup>23</sup> Iyengar, Shanto, and Donald Kinder. *News That Matters: Television and American Opinion*. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1987.

<sup>24</sup> Zaller, John, and Stanley Feldman. 1992. "A Simple Theory of the Survey Response: Answering Questions Versus Revealing Preferences." *American Journal of Political Science*, 36 (August 1992): 579-616.

and the elimination of common sampling problems discussed above increases the political significance of the public opinion and places a demand on political leaders to pay attention to the public's true feelings. From this analysis, we also find that values (e.g., individualism, limited government, equality, moral traditionalism, etc.), and not merely ideologies (conservative or liberal), best explain what shapes people's political attitudes in a general way.<sup>25</sup>

### **The Relationship and Importance of Public Opinion to Foreign Policy**

Baum and Potter (2008) argue that news media influences nearly all aspects of the relationship between public opinion and foreign policy<sup>26</sup>. Therefore, any study that seeks to synthesize the disparate literatures on the relationship between public opinion and foreign policy must analytically incorporate public opinion, elite preferences, and mass media as unitary but strategic actors each with their own incentives and preferences. The causes and consequences of public support for foreign policies on war are continuing debates among scholars.<sup>27,28</sup> To incorporate arguments from fifteen literatures, this interdependent relationship is best described as: "media influence public opinion, public opinion influences the media, public opinion influences decision makers, decision makers influence public opinion, decision makers influence the media, foreign policy influences public opinion, decision makers influence events, and the media influence foreign policy."<sup>29</sup> Following these underpinnings, understanding how the media responds to market pressures is important to understanding the phenomenal process of foreign policymaking.

***Relationship Between Leaders, Public, and Media:*** Typically, demand for foreign policy news might be low because of low public attention and information gap. However, the media plays a mediating role between the citizens and the elites. Consequently, leaders are incentivized to be involved in the flow of information that news media publish for citizens' consumption.<sup>30</sup> On the other hand, the public's reliance on the media for news information on foreign policy creates an informational disadvantage as news becomes susceptible to "framing" by elites and through news media. Framing refers to the "process by which a communication source such as a news organization defines and construct a political issue or public controversy."<sup>31</sup> Therefore, news media (and elites) can shape public opinion in the way that they "frame" issues. An elite-centric perspective on public opinion believes that the public is barely informed and indecisive about foreign policy issues and the vacillating nature of public opinion makes

---

<sup>25</sup> Grant, Tobin. 2021. "Does Public Opinion Matter?" Lecture delivered at the Introduction to American Politics Class, October 23, 2021.

<sup>26</sup> Potter, Philip, and Matthew Baum. "Democratic Peace, Domestic Audience Costs, and Political Communication." *Political Communication*, 27, no. 4 (October 2010): 453-70.

<sup>27</sup> Lippman, Jacob. "Constitutionality of the Securities Exchange Act of 1934." *John's Law Review*, 9 (1934):1.

<sup>28</sup> Holsti, Ole. *Public Opinion and American Foreign Policy*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2004.

<sup>29</sup> Baum, Matthew, and Philip Potter. "The Relationships between Mass Media, Public Opinion, and Foreign Policy: Toward a Theoretical Synthesis." *Annual Review of Political Science*, 1, no. 11 (June 2008): 39-65, 41.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Nelson, Thomas, Clawson Rosalee, and Oxley Zoe. "Media Framing of a Civil Liberties Conflict and Its Effect on Tolerance." *American political science review*, 91, no. 3 (September 1997): 567-83.

it unreliable.<sup>32 33 34 35</sup> Entman (2003) characterized this elite-centric framing agenda as “culturally congruent frames” – that is, frames congruent with patterns of behavior habitually employed by most citizens.<sup>36</sup> For example, when former President Bush post 9/11 identified Osama bin Laden and the al Qaeda group as “evil doers,” such culturally congruent framing makes it difficult for the media to challenge as the public’s informational disadvantage is made worse by the one-sided tone in news coverage. On the other hand, when leaders are divided on a foreign policy issue, the media can take advantage of the conflict and offer multiple frames on any given elite debate to citizens.<sup>37</sup> Through this, news media ameliorates the information gap between leaders and the citizens, increasing the potential significance of public opinion on that foreign policy. Realist theory of International Relations bases this elite-centric argument as a justification for limiting foreign policy decision making to what constitutes national interest, rather than exploring preferences and attitudes of the public.<sup>38 39</sup> So, since an uninformed electorate cannot inform or evaluate a president’s decisions, scholars have long expressed doubts on the masses’ ability to process information or produce consistent opinions<sup>40 41</sup>, especially on foreign policy issues.<sup>42</sup> Alternatively, other scholars propose that although the masses may be at a significant informational disadvantage, the public can remain informed and active in foreign policy discussions (Aldrich et al. 1989, Destler 2001) if they intentionally seek information.<sup>43</sup>

---

<sup>32</sup> Lippman, Walter. *Essays in the Public Philosophy*. Boston: Little, Brown, 1955.

<sup>33</sup> Almond, Gabriel. "Public Opinion and the Development of Space Technology." *Public opinion quarterly* 24, no. 4 (January 1960): 553-72.

<sup>34</sup> Converse, Phillip. *The Nature of Belief Systems in Mass Publics*. New York: Free Press, 1964.

<sup>35</sup> Mearsheimer, John. "Back to the Future: Instability in Europe after the Cold War." *International security*, 15 (1990): 5-56.

<sup>36</sup> Entman, Richard. *Projections of Power: Framing News, Public Opinion, and U.S. Foreign Policy*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003.

<sup>37</sup> Baum, Matthew, and Philip Potter. "The Relationships between Mass Media, Public Opinion, and Foreign Policy: Toward a Theoretical Synthesis." *Annual Review of Political Science*, 1, no. 11 (June 2008): 39–65, 41.

<sup>38</sup> Kennan, George. *American Diplomacy*. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1951.

<sup>39</sup> Morgenthau, Hans. *Politics among Nations, Revised*. New York: Knoph, 1978.

<sup>40</sup> Campbell, Angus, Philip Converse, Warren Miller, and Donald Stokes. *The American Voter*. New York: Wiley, 1960.

<sup>41</sup> Zaller, John, and Stanley Feldman. 1992. "A Simple Theory of the Survey Response: Answering Questions Versus Revealing Preferences." *American Journal of Political Science*, 36 (August 1992): 579-616.

<sup>42</sup> Holsti, Ole. *Public Opinion and American Foreign Policy*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2004.

<sup>43</sup> McGuire, William. "Personality and Attitude Change: An Information-Processing Theory." *Psychological foundations of attitudes*, 171, (January 1968): 196.

In contrast, public opinion on international events and policies can be significant to foreign policy decision making.<sup>44 45 46 47 48 49</sup> In fact, these studies prove a significant and closer connection between public opinion and foreign policy choice (more than domestic policy areas).<sup>50</sup> <sup>51</sup> Moreover, revisionist studies contend against the elite-centric model and assert that public opinion – when well conducted – has the potential to influence foreign policymaking.

Furthermore, event-based explanations are one way to understand the relationship between, and importance of, public opinion and foreign policy. The event-based explanations assert that a president's ability to sustain public support for a foreign policy on war highly depends on its degree of success,<sup>52 53</sup> number,<sup>54</sup> trend,<sup>55</sup> rate,<sup>56</sup> and framing,<sup>57</sup> relative to U.S. casualties. Jentleson (1992) argues that public opinion in America is likely going to favor military actions perceived as imposing restraint on an adversary than it is to be in favor of military actions aimed at imposing internal political change in an adversary state.<sup>58 59</sup> The rally'-round-the-flag phenomenon<sup>60 61</sup> did not find significant evidence to this argument. Political observers have

---

<sup>44</sup> Kusnitz, Leonard. "Public Opinion and Foreign Policy: America's China Policy, 1949-1979." *Praeger*, 114 (1984).

<sup>45</sup> Wittkopf, Eugene. *Faces of Internationalism: Public Opinion and American Foreign Policy*. Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1990.

<sup>46</sup> Holsti, Ole. "Public Opinion and Foreign Policy: Challenges to the Almond-Lippman Consensus." *International Studies Quarterly*, 36, no. 4 (December 1992): 439-66.

<sup>47</sup> Jentleson, Bruce. "The Pretty Prudent Public—Post Post-Vietnam American Opinion on the Use of Military Force." *International Studies Quarterly*, 36, no. 1 (March 1992): 49–74.

<sup>48</sup> Mayer, Richard. *Thinking, Problem Solving, Cognition*. New York: WH Freeman/Times Books/Henry Holt & Co., 1992.

<sup>49</sup> Page Benjamin, and Robert Shapiro. *The Rational Public: Fifty Years of Trends in American Policy*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Monroe, Alan. "Public Opinion and Public Policy, 1980-1993." *Public opinion quarterly* (1998): 6-28.

<sup>52</sup> Kull, Steven, Clay Ramsey. *The Myth of the Reactive Public*. Edited by P Isernia ed. PP Everts, In *Public Opinion and the International Use of Force*. London: Routledge, 2001.

<sup>53</sup> Eichenberg, Richard. "Victory Has Many Friends: U.S. Public Opinion and the Use of Military Force." *International security*, 30, no. 1 (July 2005): 140-77.

<sup>54</sup> Milstein, Jeffrey, and William Mitchell. "Dynamics of the Vietnam Conflict: A Quantitative Analysis and Computer Simulation." Paper presented at the Peace Research Society (International) Papers, 1968.

<sup>55</sup> Gartner, Scott. "The Multiple Effects of Casualties on Public Support for War: An Experimental Approach." *American political science review*, 102, no. 1 (February 2008): 95-106.

<sup>56</sup> Slantchev, Branislav. "How Initiators End Their Wars: The Duration of Warfare and the Terms of Peace." *American Journal of Political Science*, 48, no. 4 (October 2004): 813-29.

<sup>57</sup> Boettcher III, William, and Michael Cobb. "Echoes of Vietnam? Casualty Framing and Public Perceptions of Success and Failure in Iraq." *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 50, no. 6 (December 2006): 831-54.

<sup>58</sup> Jentleson, Bruce. "The Pretty Prudent Public—Post Post-Vietnam American Opinion on the Use of Military Force." *International Studies Quarterly*, 36, no. 1 (March 1992): 49–74.

<sup>59</sup> Oneal, John, Brad, Lian, and James Joyner. "Are the American People 'Pretty Prudent'? Public Responses to Us Uses of Force, 1950–1988." *International Studies Quarterly*, 40, no. 3 (June 1996): 261-79.

<sup>60</sup> Baum, Matthew. "The Constituent Foundations of the Rally-Round-the-Flag Phenomenon." *International Studies Quarterly* 1, no. 45 (June 2002): 263-98.

<sup>61</sup> Baum, Matthew, and Philip Potter. "The Relationships between Mass Media, Public Opinion, and Foreign Policy: Toward a Theoretical Synthesis." *Annual Review of Political Science*, 1, no. 11 (June 2008): 39–65, 41.

long noted that public perceptions concerning the offensive or defensive nature of military engagements abroad are often visceral to the political circumstances surrounding citizens at 'home', including elites' rhetoric primarily intended for their own advantage.<sup>62</sup> <sup>63</sup> In the same vein, presidents who lose public support for their foreign policy typically find it extremely difficult to sustain the policy initiatives. As described in former President Bill Clinton's 1997 document on National Security Strategy: "one...consideration regarding the central role the American people rightfully play in how the United States wield its power abroad: the United States cannot long sustain a commitment without the support of the public."<sup>64</sup> Likewise, former President George W. Bush's in his foreign policy initiative during the Persian Gulf War corroborated this argument by acknowledging that the "continued support of the American people... [is one of the six] ...conditions for victory" in the war.

Knecht and Weatherford (2006) counterargues that public's attention and level of information for foreign policy issues vary systematically across the issue areas (crises or non-crises) and a president only needs to pay attention to public attentiveness to both national and foreign policy issues to know how to respond on foreign policy decision making.<sup>65</sup> For the intents of this review, crises issue areas are defined according to the International Crisis Behavior Project (ICBP) as "a situation in which three conditions, deriving from a change in a state's external or internal environment, are perceived by the highest-level decision makers of the state: (a) a threat to basic values, (b) an awareness of finite time for response, and (c) a high probability of involvement in military hostilities."<sup>66</sup> Examples are the Cuban Missile Crisis/Bay of Pigs invasion and the Gulf War. On the other hand, non-crisis issue areas refer to cases where the use of military force as an option is highly unlikely and/or the time span to make a policy decision alongside implementing the policy is comparatively long. Examples include foreign aid, nuclear arms control, and international economic agreements. However, regarding public opinion, crises and non-crisis issues areas are differentiated from one another based on the duration and intensity of the public's interest.<sup>67</sup>

As alluded above, the media, alongside the public and its leaders, strategically shapes public attitudes about political inquiries as well as shapes the influence of public attitudes on foreign policy. Despite the outlying outcome of public opinion on the Bush administration's invasion of Iraq, most political science literature insists that news media is a conveyor belt for messages from the elite to the public.<sup>68</sup> The conflict in Iraq is considered an outlier in this argument because every justification by the Bush administrations about the war eventually exceeded the realities of casualties that Americans could generally be in favor of. The consequences of the public's disapproval reflected in the president's rapidly low approval ratings

---

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Entman, Richard. *Projections of Power: Framing News, Public Opinion, and U.S. Foreign Policy*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003.

<sup>64</sup> United States President. *National Security Strategy of the United States*. White House, 1995.

<sup>65</sup> Knecht, Thomas, and Stephen Weatherford. "Public Opinion and Foreign Policy: The Stages of Presidential Decision Making." *International Studies Quarterly*, 50, no. 3 (September 2006): 705-27.

<sup>66</sup> Brecher, Michael, and Jonathan Wilkenfeld. *A Study of Crisis*. Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1997.

<sup>67</sup> Graber, Doris. *Mass Media and American Politics*. 6th edition ed. Washington, DC: CQ Press, 2017.

<sup>68</sup> Baum, Matthew, and Philip Potter. "The Relationships between Mass Media, Public Opinion, and Foreign Policy: Toward a Theoretical Synthesis." *Annual Review of Political Science*, 1, no. 11 (June 2008): 39-65, 41.

and – perhaps the reason for – loss by his party in the 2006 midterm Congressional election.<sup>69</sup> For presidents, the salient part of political support is “approval rating.” presidents who can maintain high approval ratings aim at such to gain leverage vis-a-vis Congress. It can further be argued that presidents in democracies are interested in public opinion and reactions when making foreign policy decisions because they are held accountable in election contexts.<sup>70</sup> If the media presents foreign policy initiatives as involving traditional military operations (forceful coercion of an aggressive enemy adversary of the U.S. or its allies), the public will most likely support the policy initiative even at a significant cost to the U.S. However, when the media conveys foreign policy decisions involving aggressive military mission abroad (like humanitarian interventions or efforts to depose tyrannical foreign leaders), the public will most likely support only if the costs are kept low.<sup>71</sup>

In contrast, some scholars argue otherwise. They claim that the public will support a military mission abroad regardless of casualties if it finds other countries supporting the policy initiative.<sup>72 73</sup> Feaver and Gelpi (2004) take a slight bent on this argument and assert that public tolerance for casualties depends on the probability that the foreign policy initiative will be successful.<sup>74</sup> An emerging concern about this argument<sup>75</sup> holds that public opinion is not as uniform as the above studies infer.<sup>76</sup> For example, in Gartner and Segura (1998, 2000)’s evaluation of the implication of race on public opinion, they observed a disproportionate correlation between the rate of casualties from respondent’s home region and political attitudes towards the war. Yet, they find no evidence that racial composition of casualties can influence political attitudes.

Other scholars discuss the importance of framing on the heterogeneity of public opinion as well-informed individuals on politics are more resistant to elite framing than political novices.<sup>77</sup> According to (Zaller 1992), he supports that the key to political awareness is consumption of political communications in ways like media exposure, political participation, self-identified interest in politics, and education. He defined political awareness as an “intellectual or cognitive engagement with public affairs as against emotional or affective engagement or no

---

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> Knecht, Thomas, and Stephen Weatherford. "Public Opinion and Foreign Policy: The Stages of Presidential Decision Making." *International Studies Quarterly*, 50, no. 3 (September 2006): 705-27.

<sup>71</sup> Jentleson, Bruce. "The Pretty Prudent Public—Post Post-Vietnam American Opinion on the Use of Military Force." *International Studies Quarterly*, 36, no. 1 (March 1992): 49–74.

<sup>72</sup> Chapman, Terrence, and Dan Reiter. "The United Nations Security Council and the Rally 'Round the Flag Effect." *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 48, no. 6 (December 2004): 886-909.

<sup>73</sup> Kull, Steven, Clay Ramsey. *The Myth of the Reactive Public*. Edited by P Isernia ed. PP Everts, In *Public Opinion and the International Use of Force*. London: Routledge, 2001.

<sup>74</sup> Feaver, Peter, and Christopher Gelpi. *Choosing Your Battles: American Civil-Military Relations and the Use of Force*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004.

<sup>75</sup> Eichenberg, Richard. "Victory Has Many Friends: U.S. Public Opinion and the Use of Military Force." *International security*, 30, no. 1 (July 2005): 140-77.

<sup>76</sup> Baum, Matthew, and Philip Potter. "The Relationships between Mass Media, Public Opinion, and Foreign Policy: Toward a Theoretical Synthesis." *Annual Review of Political Science*, 1, no. 11 (June 2008): 39–65, 41.

<sup>77</sup> Druckman, James. 2001. "The Implications of Framing Effects for Citizen Competence." *Political Behavior*, 23, no. 3(September 2001): 225-56.

engagement at all.”<sup>78</sup> Indeed, public support for foreign missions tends to be precarious when it is politically unaware of the initiative and therefore requires access to substantial information.

***How News Media Affects Public Opinion – Media as a Strategic Actor:*** While the relationship between leaders, citizens, and the media is an interdependent one, the media plays a strategic role. It collects, frames, and distributes information (a salient market commodity) to the masses. From the discussions above, it can be inferred that the influence of public opinion is driven by a supply of and demand for information. That is, the influence of the public on foreign policy initiatives seems low when it is informationally disadvantaged (typically at early stages of conflicts abroad) and grows substantively in longer periods of conflicts as the information gap blurs out.<sup>79</sup> On the supply side, the media depends on leaders for access to information and under that circumstance, can be compelled to preserve elites’ preferred framing of information. Since the public are the consumers [of news information], news media is obliged to their demand for “objective” news information.<sup>80</sup> <sup>81</sup> Partisan preferences as well as institutional and professional preferences may influence the transmission processes in media coverage.<sup>82</sup> As the middleman between two competing actors (leaders and the public) whose interests often conflict, the media delicately strives to balance their trade – maintain access to government information by respecting elites’ interests and maintain public interests in the way they communicate their reporting. In the study on the formation of public opinion, Entman (2003) employs the “cascade model” to explain this strategic relationship. Although the government interacts with the media which subsequently tells people what to believe and both actors then receive feedback from the public, public attitudes are extremely volatile. With variations in such cultural congruence, government strategy and power, the media-government relationship can move from loyally communicating the administration’s message to being critical and even spotlighting an opposing frame.<sup>83</sup> Hence the most likely times that political leaders will manipulate media messages communicated to the public seems more likely during times of national crisis.<sup>84</sup>

This contradicts studies that advocate that public opinion can/should be a salient part in foreign policymaking. Powlick and Katz (1998) addresses that public opinion is inconsequential and public attention to foreign policies are low, thus contending that this creates the flexibility for political leaders to decide on foreign policy as they deem

---

<sup>78</sup> Zaller, John 1992. *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992.

<sup>79</sup> Baum, Matthew, and Philip Potter. "The Relationships between Mass Media, Public Opinion, and Foreign Policy: Toward a Theoretical Synthesis." *Annual Review of Political Science*, 1, no. 11 (June 2008): 39–65, 41.

<sup>80</sup> Hallin, Daniel. *The “Uncensored War”*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986.

<sup>81</sup> Zaller, John, and Dennis Chiu. *Government’s Little Helper: U.S. Press Coverage of Foreign Policy Crises, 1946–1999*. In *Decisionmaking in a Glass House*. Edited by R.Y. Shapiro ed. B.L. Nacos, and P. Isernia, In *Decisionmaking in a Glass House*. New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2010.

<sup>82</sup> Bennett, W. Lance, Regina Lawrence, and Steven Livingston. "None Dare Call It Torture: Indexing and the Limits of Press Independence in the Abu Ghraib Scandal." *Journal of Communications*, 56, no. 3 (September 2006): 467–85.

<sup>83</sup> Entman, Richard. *Projections of Power: Framing News, Public Opinion, and U.S. Foreign Policy*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003.

<sup>84</sup> Baum, Matthew, and Philip Potter. "The Relationships between Mass Media, Public Opinion, and Foreign Policy: Toward a Theoretical Synthesis." *Annual Review of Political Science*, 1, no. 11 (June 2008): 39–65, 41.

appropriate.<sup>85</sup> Yet, they warn that foreign policy outcomes can arouse public attention when news media and expert commentators rather emphasize frames consistent with public interests - what Entman (2003) refers to as “culturally congruent frames”. When this happens, the government is compelled to rally for public support by engaging the public or else they lose their ability to effectively manage public opinion on the foreign policy issue.<sup>86</sup>

***Possibility of Bias in News Transmission:*** This paper has discussed news media as both a linkage mechanism between elite and public, and as an independent, strategic actor in the foreign policymaking process. Indeed, some scholars hold that media coverage comprises more of elite rhetoric.<sup>87</sup> Several non-political-science researchers, however, argue that news media holds more potential than that to be a neutral arbiter. They claim that journalists decide on news content and headlines based on their newsworthiness, demonstrating that media can alternatively publish unrepresentative preferences of elite rhetoric.<sup>88 89 90</sup> Whether biases may exist in certain types of news coverage (from elite to the public), or this bias is increased with the proliferation of partisan media outlets, research is inconclusive but still developing.

### Conclusion

This paper focused on examining the relationship between public opinion and foreign policy and how news media affects this relationship. Because this literature is centered on the American context, this review primarily focused on the United States. This paper sought to generate a clearer understanding of the way public opinions increases or reduces pressure on the president to substantially consider the public – in addition to Congress and national advisers – in its foreign policy making process. In as much as public opinion is important to foreign policy decision making process in democracies, extra thought must be given to the effects of response reliability both on the policy issues and on the president's approval ratings on the issue. Respondents answer questions based on particular considerations most immediately salient to them if they usually have no fixed attitude on the issues or are internally conflicted on the issues. Thus, bringing about a certain degree of response instability over time. This study finds that public opinion is highly ambivalent and more so, sustaining public support for a foreign policy on war is extremely difficult.

News media is an important intermediary between the citizens and their elites, especially regarding foreign policy. The *supply* of information is central when accounting for *demand* in policies which consequently affects public attitudes of citizens. News media are partly responsible for variance in difficulty level in public support for presidential foreign policy. Whether or not the public will support a president's foreign policy on war depends in part on the strategic preferences

---

<sup>85</sup> Powlick, Philip, and Andrew Katz. "Defining the American Public Opinion/Foreign Policy Nexus." *International Studies Quarterly*, 42, no. 1 (May 1998): 29-61.

<sup>86</sup> Baum, Matthew, and Tim Groeling. *The Causes and Consequences of Public Views of War*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2010.

<sup>87</sup> Bennett, W. Lance, Regina Lawrence, and Steven Livingston. "None Dare Call It Torture: Indexing and the Limits of Press Independence in the Abu Ghraib Scandal." *Journal of Communications*, 56, no. 3 (September 2006): 467-85.

<sup>88</sup> White, David. "The Gatekeeper. A Case Study in the Selection of News." *Journalism Quarterly*, 27, no. 4 (September 1950):383-90.

<sup>89</sup> Galtung, Johan, and Mari Ruge. "The Structure of Foreign News." *Journal of Peace Resolution*, 2, no.1 (March 1965): 64-91.

<sup>90</sup> Patterson, Thomas. 1993. *Out of Order*. New York: Knopf, 1993.

of the news media. Research on the possibility of bias in the way that news media sometimes convey the intentions of policy makers is inferred but inconclusive.

From this review, public opinion influences foreign policy decision making - although to varying degrees and sometimes indirectly – to the extent that leaders are continuously interested in whether and how the public will react to their foreign policy initiatives both in the short and long term. This study does not explore this relationship in autocracies, although there may be a possibility that the findings in this paper have tremendous applications in the foreign policymaking process in autocracies.